

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

This parasha series is dedicated
in memory of Michael Jotkowitz, z"l.
In memory of Raz Mintz, Shoshana Ben Yishai, Meni Regev and Eyal Sela, HY"D.

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

The Bride of Yitzchak

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

The search for Yitzchak's bride didn't take very long. Immediately upon arriving at the well in the city of Nachor (24:10-11), Avraham's servant prays to God and formulates his test. Before he has finished, Rivka appears (24:15). That very evening he is whisked to the house of Betu'el (24:11,23,28,29,32) where the negotiations are conducted and the deal is sealed without even a break for a meal (24:33-53). The very next morning, the servant takes Rivka in hand and returns home to Yitzchak (24:54,61,66). A sum total of maybe twelve hours in Aram Naharaim!

In marked contrast to the actual pace of events, the pace of the text that reports the events is downright leisurely. The Torah devotes a remarkable sixty-seven verses to the full story of "The Bride of Yitzchak," the large majority dedicated to the plans and negotiations of the character termed "the servant of Avraham" (24:10-61). The text is lengthy and at times, even repetitive (see 24:35-52.)

A quick structural sketch should help elaborate this point. The story can be broken down as follows:

- Section one (24:1-9)- Avraham's command to his servant to take a bride for Yitzchak from Avraham's land and birthplace.
- Section two (24:10-26)- Rivka and the servant at the well.
- Section three (27-33)- The offer of hospitality at the house of Betue'l
- Section four (24:34-52)- The negotiations at the house of Betu'el and the repetition of the story until this point.
- Section five (24:53-61)- Parting and the journey home.
- Section six (24:62-67)- The meeting and marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka.

While the story of "The Bride of Yitzchak" and its core action of the servant's search in sections two, three, four and five are certainly important, we may well wonder why it deserves so much space. Couldn't we have made due with a little less detail? In other words: Why does the Torah present us with a near blow-by-blow account of the servant's story, those few brief hours in Aram Naharaim (24:10-61)?

II

Let us begin by thinking about section two, Rivka and the servant at the well. On both the thematic and linguistic planes the story is about kindness. The test is primarily a test of kindness. The servant plans to stand near the well and ask for a drink of water. The first girl who not only offers the servant water but also freely offers to provide drink for the camels will be the one chosen by God (24:13-14).

Likewise, on the linguistic level, the test itself is bracketed by the term "kindness." The servant prays to God to show "kindness" to his master Avraham before stating the test (24:12), and concludes his prayer with another reference to divine kindness (24:14). In sum, the servant demands kindness from both God and the girl. From God, the servant demands the kindness of divine assistance in his mission. From the girl, he demands the kindness of physical assistance, a manifestation of kind character.

At first glance, the servant's test might seem a bit trite. After all, simple manners dictate that one should provide water for a thirsty traveler. Perhaps basic decency alone indicates that one should also offer water for the animals .

In fact this is not at all the case. A thirsty camel after a long journey can drink many gallons of water (up to twenty-five). The servant has brought along ten camels. Without going into the possible mathematics we are talking about a massive amount of water. An intensely arduous task for a young girl equipped with a single pitcher. In fact the Torah specifically emphasizes that Rivka offered to draw water for the camels "until they have done drinking" (24:19), an offer not included in the servant's original test (24:14). Not for naught does the Torah state that the man stood "wondering" until "the camels finished drinking" (24:21).

Not just the scope of Rivka's kindness, but also the method of Rivka's kindness seems strikingly unusual. Despite the abrupt full-speed approach of the servant (24:17), she replies politely, referring to him as "master" (24:18). She "hurries" to give him something to drink. She is once again described as "hurrying" and even "running" when fulfilling her offer to water the camels (24:20). In sum she adopts a "servant" position. She hurries and runs to fulfill the needs of her new "master" and his animals.

A quick look at the next stage of the story, termed above section three, hospitality at the house of Betu'el (24:27-33), should help support this intuition of "difference".

Rivka, in keeping with her character, runs home (24:28) to convey the servant's request of a place to sleep (24:23), her offer of hospitality (24:25) and the fact that the newfound guest is the servant of a kinsman-brother (24:27). At this point, a new character emerges. Like Rivka his sister, Lavan "runs" (24:29) for the purposes of proffering hospitality. Upon arriving at the well and finding the man and his camels he formally invites him in .

Come... Why do you stand outside? I have already cleaned out the house and there is also place for camels. (24:31)

Apparently, Lavan is just as kind and hospitable as his sister .

Or maybe not. In between reporting Lavan's dash to the well (24:29) and his offer of hospitality (24:31), the Torah informs us that:

...when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands and when he heard the words of Rivka...he came to the man. (24:30)

What is the true motivator of Lavan's hospitality? The tale of Rivka, the story of a thirsty, tired servant of a kinsman? Or is it the gleaming gold adorning her hands and face?

Similarly, Lavan's offer is wholly different from Rivka's in language, tone and content. In pointed contrast to Rivka's assumption of a "servant" position vis-a-vis her guest and generous offer of place and provisions for the camels (24:25), Lavan adopts no such posture and makes no such offer. Instead, he gruffly demands to know why the guest is still standing outside with his camels. After all, Lavan has already gone to the trouble of making room in the house and stable. Lavan remains the master.

Finally, once again in pointed contrast to Rivka, Lavan never runs or hurries to provide the proffered hospitality and kindness. In fact, the Torah closes the scene with the statement that "the man came into the house, and he ungirded the camels, and he gave straw and food to the camels." (24:32). On the simple interpretation, Lavan is completely absent. The servant of Avraham is left to fend for himself.

In sum, Rivka is not only kind and hospitable, she is also different. The second part of our story, the story of Rivka and the servant at the well (24:10-26), as well as the third part of our story, the offer of hospitality (24:27-33) primarily teach us about the character of Rivka, the character of kindness and the character of difference .

III

If Rivka is different from her brother, and by implication different from the social grouping in which she dwells, who indeed is she like? The answer is simple. She is like Avraham. A quick review of the opening of Parashat Vayera, the well known story describing Avraham's hospitality (18:1-8), should be enough to confirm this point.

Upon spying the three men, Avraham immediately "runs" to greet them (18:2). In fact he is frenetic throughout the story. He "hurries" to the tent to instruct Sarah (18:6), and then again "runs" to the herd to pick out a choice calf (18:7). As pointed out previously, these are the exact actions of Rivka, later on in Chapter Twenty-Four when providing hospitality and kindness for her guests (24:18,20). Furthermore, and once again foreshadowing the Rivka story, Avraham addresses his guests as "master," refers to himself as their servant and bows down to his guests (18:2-3). In other words, he adopts a "servant" position and makes every effort to please his new masters. Once again, this is the language and attitude of Rivka later on in the scene at the well. (24:18). Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the stories are conceptually parallel. In both cases, sustenance is offered to travelers. In both cases the hospitality extends way beyond the norm, the large feast proffered by Avraham (18:6-8) and the staggering amount of water provided by Rivka (24:19-21 .)

IV

Having realized that Chapter Twenty Four is interested in identifying the character of Rivka with the character of Avraham, let us turn our attention to the segments of the servant's search not dealt with until this point.

As mentioned earlier, section four, the negotiations (24:34-52), seems rather repetitive. The servant recounts nearly the entire story, the command of Avraham, their discussion regarding the possibility that the chosen girl will not be willing to make the journey, his prayer to God at the well, and the kindness of Rivka. On some level, this is understandable. It is all a necessary part of the negotiations. The servant must explain to Rivka's family what he is doing in their home and why he has given jewelry to their daughter. But that is not all he must do. He must also make his case. He must persuade them to consent to the marriage, to send their daughter to a foreign land.

Not surprisingly, in making his case, the servant emphasizes and expands certain details, omits others and even reworks some of the "facts." For example, it turns out that Avraham is a magnificently wealthy man. Previously, in the command section (24:1-9), we were told nothing more than that God blessed Avraham with "everything" (24:1). In contrast, the servant begins his tale with the claim that: "God has blessed my master greatly; and he has become great: and He has given him flocks, and herds, and silver and gold, and servants, and maidservants and camels and donkeys" (24:35). What is more, the servant remembers to insert a new detail. Avraham has already given everything he possesses to his son, the prospective groom (24:36.)

Moreover, in the command section (24:1-9), Avraham focuses on his "land" and "birthplace" as the place to go for a proper bride (24:4). When the servant raises the possibility of the woman's refusing to make the journey, to "go" in the language of the text (24:5), Avraham promises divine assistance. God who took him from his "father's house," "land" and "birthplace" and who swore: "to your seed I will give this land," will assure the servant's success (24:7). Perhaps more accurately, here in the very last dialogue of Avraham reported in the Torah, Avraham waxes nostalgic. Taken collectively, these phrases constitute a precise echo of Chapter-Twelve, the beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha, the story of God's command to Avraham to "go from your land, birthplace and father's house" (12:1). The story in which Avraham goes to another land, regarding which God promises "to your seed I will give this land" (12:7). Perhaps even more accurately, it is not just nostalgia. Here in his last dialogue, Avraham looks to pass the baton. The wife of Yitzchak must be someone like Avraham, taken by God from their land, birthplace and father's house, brought to Canaan to generate a nation.

Not surprisingly, in the servant's summary later on in Chapter Twenty-Four, all the references to Chapter Twelve have disappeared. In his recounting to Rivka's family, the servant claims that Avraham sent him to fetch a wife not from Avraham's land and birthplace but from his "family" and "father's house" (24:38,40,41). Likewise, it is not the God who took Avraham from his father's house, land and birthplace, and promised him a future that assures a successful mission. Rather, it is God whom Avraham has "walked in front of" (24:40), the God who has guided, watched and helped Avraham, that guarantees success. Gone are the references to Avraham the emigrant, the crazy dreamer convinced of his destiny, the abandoner of his family and clan.

In sum, in place of the story of a search for someone like the Avraham of Lekh Lekha, the servant tells a different story. He tells the story of the rich and successful kinsman

who has been granted great wealth by God. He tells the story of the rich man's wish that his son marry within the clan. When he describes the events at the well in a way so that no one can possibly dispute the divine selection of Rivka (24:42-50), he artfully repackages the hidden divine command to follow in the footsteps of Avraham. The implicit divine imperative and challenge of "Lekh Lekha" contained within the providential picking of Rivka has now been wrapped and buried under the bright paper and ribbons of a marriage to a divinely guarded and wealthy kinsman.

V

The negotiations end with the family's acquiescence. They concede (24:50). The servant's efforts have succeeded. Yet all is not yet sealed. Despite the servant's spin, the relatives are not completely convinced. Their agreement already possesses an ominous modifier, another clause hitched onto their submission .

"And Lavan and Betue'l answered...this thing comes from God, we cannot speak bad or good." (24:50)

A striking lack of enthusiasm. Or perhaps their words reflect a darker desire, that they indeed wish they could speak "bad" of the servant's story and God's will.

This reluctance picks up speed in the next section of the servant's search, parting and journey (24:53-61). The servant gets up the next morning and requests his leave (24:54). At this point a crucial dialogue ensues.

And her brother and her mother said, Let the girl stay with us days, (yamim) or a period of ten (asor); after that she shall go. And he said to them, Don't delay me for God has prospered my way; Send me away that I may go to my master. And they said, We will call the girl, and inquire from her mouth. And they called Rivka, and said to her, Will you go with this man? And she said I will go. (24:55-58)

Despite the obvious selection of Rivka by God, the servant's packaging and the lavish gifts (24:53), Rivka's relatives wish to delay. They propose a hazy and non-specific waiting period, days or a period of ten. Based upon Vayikra 25:29, most commentaries (Targum, Rashi, Rashbam) translate the term "yamim," as meaning a year. If so, who knows how long "a period of ten" lasts?

In response to the family's reluctance and the imminent collapse of all his efforts, the servant insistently reiterates that God has guided his success (24:56). It is God's will that Rivka go with him. The directions granted by divine providence must be followed. All subterfuge has now been dropped. The masks have fallen. In a last ditch effort, the family proposes to ask the girl. Does she wish to "go" or not? Rivka's simple and resounding response of "I will go" (24:58) decides the matter. No room is left for delay or refusal. Rivka parts from her family and "goes" (24:61.)

It is of course no accident that the stem "HLKh meaning "go" appears numerous times throughout the scene (24:55,56,58,61). Going or not constitutes the conceptual linchpin of the action. But there is more. Part of the drama of the section is the reemergence of the previously submerged. The servant has done his best to persuade the family, transmuting the challenge of "Lekh Lekha," of leaving family, land, and birthplace, of going

after God to a future in another land, into a proposal of clan marriage. God's providential role in the choice of Rivka is but an additional reason to consent. God has been good to Avraham. Now, through the agency of the marriage, the servant and his gifts, he will be good to Rivka and her family. But here everything is reduced to the brute heart of the matter. Just God's will and the word "go." Going after God or not going after God.

It turns out that section six, "Parting and Journey," like the sections detailing the events at the well and the hospitality at the house of Betu'el is really about the character of Rivka. Just as before it was about possessing the chesed-character of Avraham, this time it is about the character of "Lekh Lekha," to go after God, to part from the known and venture into the unknown. Furthermore, just as before, it is also about the character of difference. Rivka is different from her relatives. She neither delays nor resists. She just goes.

In sum, we can conclude that much of the detail of Chapter Twenty-Four, the story of the "Bride of Yitzchak" is connected to the agenda of the chapter. This can best be realized by returning to our sketch of the problematic parts of the chapter's structure and juxtaposing the sub-text and agenda of each section with the apparent topic.

-Section one (24:1-9) - Avraham's command to his servant to take a bride for Yitzchak from Avraham's land and birthplace. (Agenda: the requirement to find a bride who will be like Avraham in character and experience)

-Section two (24:10-26) - Rivka and the servant at the well. (Agenda: Rivka is like Avraham in possessing the attribute of kindness)

-Section three (27-33) - The offer of hospitality at the house of Betu'el (Agenda: Rivka is different)

-Section four (24:34-52) - The negotiations at the house of Betu'el and the repetition of the story until this point. (Agenda: the presentation and muting of the imperative of "Lekh Lekha," of being like Avraham)

-Section five (24:53-61) - Parting and the journey home. (Agenda: the resistance of the family to divine providence, Rivka is like Avraham in going after God, in her character of "Lekh Lekha," Rivka is different)

The Chapter is really not so much the story of the servant's search but the story of "The Character of Rivka," the character of going after God, of kindness, of difference. The character of Avraham .

VI

Before closing, I would like to try to integrate Chapter Twenty-Four, "The Character of Rivka," into the larger context of "forefather stories" found in Sefer Bereishit.

It is no secret that many of the events of the life of Avraham seem to happen twice. To name but a few of the event pairs, Avraham twice visits a foreign land and claims his wife is his sister. He twice stands engaged with Lot and Sodom, and twice contracts a covenant with God. These pairs can be split and arranged in a chiasmic structure, with the two covenants serving as the turning point.

A- Avraham in a foreign land - Egypt (12:10-20)

B- Avraham, Lot and Sodom - parting, war, rescue (13:1-14:24)

- C- The Covenant of the Pieces - children and land (15:1-21)
- C- The Covenant of Circumcision- children and land (17:1-27)
- B- Avraham, Lot and Sedom - Avraham's prayer (18:16-19:38)
- A- Avraham in a foreign land - Avimelekh and Grar (20:1-18)

While the sketch is rough and leaves out much significant detail, it should make us realize that there are two cycles of Avraham stories .

In fact, each group is preceded by a command from God to Avraham, a command that involves the verb stem HLKh a command to go. Group One begins with the command and story of "lekh lekha" (12:1-9). Group Two begins with the command "hithalekh lefanai," to walk in front of God and be perfect (tamim)(17:1) .

These parallel units delineate fundamentally different themes and challenges. Even without entering into an exhaustive analysis, we can easily note that Group One, all the material up to and including the Covenant of the Pieces is animated by the themes of children, land, wealth, loyalty and future. In other words, Group One is about following after God for the purposes of future national existence. It foreshadows and presents the issues of nationhood, famine, economics war, future, loyalty to land and loyalty to God. It constitutes the journey for nationhood .

Group Two focuses on altogether different themes. This can be discerned in the command prefacing the story cycle. God commands Avraham to walk and journey not as part of a process of becoming a great nation (12:2), but rather as part of a divine demand for the status of "tamim," best translated as "wholeness" or "perfection"(17:1). But what is the content of "perfection?"

The term "tamim" appears in only one other place in Bereishit. Noach is described as "tamim," and as walking in the ways of God. In the context of Noach, the term, and its conjunction with "walking with God" stand in stark opposition to the violent social corruption and sexual perversion of the generation of the flood (6:11-13). In other words, "tamim" is a word connoting righteousness and ethics. These of course are the themes of the second cycle of Avraham stories. From, the implicit symbolism of Brit Mila as sexual limitation, to the hospitality of Avraham, to the prayer for Sedom, to the teaching of hospitality ethics and the power of prayer to Avimelekh, all the stories are about a life of decency, mercy, justice, ethics and prayer. In sum Group Two is about Avraham as the father of religious ethics, a very different kind of journey .

The Akeida opens with a third journey command to Avraham, a marker for a new group of Avraham stories. But here there is only one story. He is commanded:

...Take your son, your only son, Yitzchak, whom you love and GO (lekh lekha) to the land of Moriya and offer him there as a burnt offering... (22:2)

This story represents the negation of all that has come before. This third journey command, the command to sacrifice Yitzchak means there will be no future, no descendants, no land and no nationhood. It negates the entire first journey. Likewise, the command to sacrifice Yitzchak is a moral horror. Murder of one's own flesh and blood for the sake of God. It is the antithesis of Avraham's second journey, a religion of bloody murder rather than a religion of mercy, ethics and prayer. This double negation constitutes the essence of the test. Can

Avraham negate his past, his hopes, his ethics and his religion? Can he negate the essence of his dual journey and his very self? Can he replace it all with complete submission to the will of God?

Avraham passed. On his third journey, the journey of submission, Avraham proved himself capable of negating all. But was Avraham the same afterwards? Did he still think that the journey for future nationhood, its values and concerns were central to the God-Man relationship? Could he still believe in the journey of religious ethics? Was not the lesson of the Akeida that submission and negation constitute the essence and entirety of the God-Man relationship?

Let us leave the murky turf of projective psychology. As readers of the Bible, we may very easily assume the attitude outlined above. The God-Man relation is not about the first journey, a triangle of God, Nation and Land. It is not about the second journey, a triangle of God-Man-Society bound by ethics and prayer. These have all been replaced. It is the third journey of self-negation and private submission to the absolute divine will that constitutes all in the God-Man relation.

This brings us full circle to Chapter Twenty-Four and the character of Rivka, the first real story of the next generation. Rivka is like Avraham. But in which ways? The answer has already been argued for above. Rivka is like Avraham in her character of kindness and in her character of Lekh Lekha, her willingness to leave all behind, imagine a future and mother a nation. She is like Avraham in the ways of the first journey, the journey of future nationhood, and the ways of the second journey, the journey of religious ethics. No hint is given in the Torah that she resembles Avraham in his third journey, the journey of negation and submission.

The story of Rivka is anticipated in the genealogy of Nachor placed at the end of the Akeida (22:20-24) and excepting the death and burial of Sarah (23:1-20) follows immediately after the Akeida. This is no accident. We are meant to realize that the imperatives, themes and character requirements of the first two journeys live on even after the Akeida. They are present and necessary in the next generation. They are even searched for. The story of Rivka reminds us that the Akeida constitutes but one leg of a triad, perhaps the crescendo, but not the total of Avraham's relationship with God, the final version of his inheritance .

To conclude, the reverse is also true. While Rivka embodies the first two journeys of Avraham, Yitzchak embodies the third. Yitzchak and the Akeida are one. He is not just a participant in the Akeida, but the bearer of its religious essence and psychological legacy, the character of negation and submission. All three journeys are meant to continue on.

Further Study

(1)Reread 24:1-10. Compare this with 47:28-31. Think about the events of the first half of Parashat Vayechi. What additional twist does this give to 24:1-67?

(2)See Rashi 24:14 and 24:55. Analyze these comments in light of the shiur above.

(3)Review the chiasmic structure outlined above. As mentioned in the shiur some details have been omitted. Try to integrate Chapters Sixteen and Twenty-one into the structure.

(4)Does Avraham also have a brother he is different from? See 13:1-13, 18:1-8 and 19:1-8 .