

Matchmaker, Deal Maker

A 3.7 K Years Old News Report

Dear readers, I am glad to publish here, for the first time, an article from the Haran Inquirer describing the intriguing events leading to the marriage of Yitzhak and Rivka. The events reported here took place approximately 3,700 years ago, and it is indeed a miracle this newspaper clip was somehow preserved.

Before you read the clip, however, let us consider the following questions (it would be a good idea to do this around the Shabbat table. Brainstorm! Get the Tanakh out and look for clues and answers):

Why did Abraham search for a bride in Haran instead of Canaan?

If Abraham thought that the people of Haran were superior why is he so vehemently opposed to the idea of his son moving to Haran in case the woman does not want to come to Canaan?

Abraham asks his servant to take an oath, but the servant speaks of a curse. Why?

The servant did not search for Abraham's family when he got to Haran, but rather went to the water well. Why?

The servant gave Rivka the jewelry, practically sealing the deal, before he knew anything about her. Why?

If you were Rivka's parents, would you let her travel to a far-flung land with an unknown man?

What did Rivka's relatives receive in return for their agreement to let her go to Canaan?

Why did they change their mind on the morning of her departure and asked her to stay in Haran?

The answer to all these questions, is that the servant misled us, as he did Rivka's relatives, to believe that he was sent to find a bride for Yitzhak from within Abraham's extended family. We were also misled to believe that the cultural and religious atmosphere of Haran was superior to that of Canaan. Rashi even adds, based on the Midrash, that the servant was Eliezer and that he wanted Yitzhak to marry his daughter, only to be rejected by Abraham who tells him that the Canaanites are cursed and the blessed offspring of Abraham will not marry one of them. This Midrash is in stark contradiction to the rabbis' description of Abraham as proselytizer. What is the point of Abraham's efforts, according to the Midrash, to convert people to Monotheism, if he considers them second-class citizens of his religion, worthy of obeying his laws but not of marrying his daughter?

Abraham, then, was not a proselytizer. He understood that the process of spreading the knowledge of Monotheism and its revolutionary concepts, including the image of God, rest on Shabbat, and rejection of idolatry, cannot be promulgated through a mass movement. It had to be an in-depth, one-on-one education, which passes from parent to child and which will be finalized in the Egyptian exile, where the nation will learn the importance of freedom and the possibility of hope and redemption.

Abraham's rationale in sending the servant to Haran was that if Yitzhak marries a local woman, she will be tethered to her parents and family, and will never be able to fully adopt the new religion. Abraham therefore decides to send his servant to a foreign land, so the future bride will have a full immersion in the Abrahamic theology. But finding a woman who will be willing to abandon her family and come to Canaan, knowing that she probably will not see her family very frequently, was not going to be an easy task. The solution was to go to Haran, where Abraham had tribal ties, and where there more chances of convincing the bride to migrate. Abraham tells the servant (24:4):

אֶל-אַרְצִי וְאֶל-מִוְלַדְתִּי תֵּלֵךְ

Go to my land and to my clan...

He does not mention family because it is not of the essence.

Both Abraham and the servant, though, foresaw a possibility of failure. The servant asked if in such a case he could take Yitzhak to Haran, and Abraham forbade him from doing so. It was then that the servant understood the difficult task lying ahead, and realized that he was chosen because of his superb negotiation skills. We can reconstruct this concept by comparing the way the events unfolded with the story the servant told the family at the negotiations table.

Now, Abraham's servant is not mentioned by name, and though it might have very well been someone other than Eliezer, one thing is certain, he was an astute negotiator.

The servant arrives at the water well and devises the famous Kindness Test: who will be the one who offers water to all my camels? He does not ask around for Abraham's family because that will limit his choices. If they say no, he will not be able to approach other people, since they will reason that if Abraham's own family does not want to let their daughter go, they should not trust him.

Rivka now comes to the well. We watch how she is approached by the man, hears his request, and passes the test. The servant showers her with gifts, before asking for her name, to lock in his win. When he finds out that she is a relative he publicly praises God who guided him in his journey, thus making the choice of Rivka at the well a sign of the divine will, which the family, hopefully, will be afraid to ignore.

When the servant arrives at the family's house, he refuses to eat before speaking, thus showing that he is not at the mercy of the host and that he owes them nothing. He describes his master's wealth and prosperity, an obvious sales pitch, and then throws in the first distortion of truth. He says that his master told him (24:38):

אם-לֹא אֶל-בֵּית-אָבִי תֵלֵךְ וְאֶל-מִשְׁפַּחְתִּי וְלִקְחָתְּ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי

You must go to the house of my father and to my family, to take a wife for my son.

When he puts it this way, stressing Abraham's loyalty for and respect of his family, it becomes harder for the family to say no. Now that he softened them by playing the good cop, he turns around and becomes the bad cop, using threats. Originally, Abraham asked the servant to take an oath as a promise that he will follow his instructions, but added that

if the woman refuses to come with him, the oath is nullified. Abraham also admonishes the servant: beware, do not take my son back to that place (24:8).

ואם-לא תאבה האשה ללכת אחריי ונקית משבעתי זאת רק את-בני לא תשב שמה

When the servant reports this exchange to the family, however, he makes three subtle adjustments. He said that his master said:

אז תנקה מאלתי כי תבוא אל-משפחתי ואם-לא יתנו לך והיית נקי מאלתי

You will be absolved of my curse if you come to my family, and if they refuse to give [her to you] you will be absolved of my curse.

The changes are so minute that had the family possessed a recording of Abraham's exact words, the servant could still have defended his version. Let us see what he does:

He omits Abraham's objection to Yitzhak's returning to Haran, since it will hurt the narrative of familial ties and loyalty.

He changes the neutral שבועה – oath, to אלה – curse. It is not a promise that he makes, but a curse which threatens him. But if the family refuses to let the woman go, the implication is that the curse will now dwell on them.

He also moves the yoke of responsibility from the woman to the family. Whereas Abraham said “if the woman refuses to go”, the servant said “if the family refuses to let her go.”

The servant's clever manipulation continues as he recounts the encounter at the well. In his version of events, he first asked for the girl's name, and only after finding out that she is a relative of Abraham, gave her the jewelry. He also alters his expression of thanks and praise. He originally praised God for guiding him to his master's family, but he tells the family (24:48) that he praised God for:

אשר הנסני בדרך אמת לקחת את-בת-אחי אלני לבני

Guiding me in the path of truth to take the daughter om my master's brother [as a wife] for his son...

The Path of Truth is unequivocal. In the servant's narrative, a divine hand pointed at Rivkah, leaving no other possibility. According to him, his proclamation already confirmed that she is the future bride of Yitzhak. The family is not asked to consider a completely novel idea, but rather to add their seal of approval to a deal brokered by God Almighty, the rejection of which, they were told, will have dangerous consequences.

The servant now delivers the final blow, feigning neutrality and innocence (24:49):

אם-יִשְׁכֶּם עֲשִׂים חֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת אֶת-אֲדֹנָי הַגִּידוּ לִי וְאם-לֹא הַגִּידוּ לִי וְאֶפְגָּה עַל-יְמִינִי אוֹ עַל-שְׂמָאלִי
If you wish to show true loyalty to my master tell me, and if not, let me know and I will search right and left...

Her brother and father then respond, acknowledging that they have been cornered and were left no other choice (24:50):

מִיִּי יֵצֵא הַדְּבָר לֹא נוֹכַל דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים רַע אוֹ-טוֹב
It is God's decree! We cannot speak to you evil or good.

Upon hearing that, the servant, after thanking God, finally opens the coveted trunks which he brought with him. The price of the exchange was never discussed, but it was assumed that the family is going to be rewarded, and the servant cleverly directed the negotiation so he gets an approval before setting a price. The family's eyes widened with anticipation of the precious gifts they are going to receive, but to their utter shock and dismay, the gold, silver, and fine garments are given to Rivka, while they receive only pastries and sweets.

This was not because of stinginess. The servant wanted to frame the deal as one of good will and acceptance of God's decree, and not as the sale of a woman to the highest bidder. The family was obviously distraught, and in a last-minute attempt to make some profit, tried to delay the "delivery" date with the hope of more negotiations. The servant rebukes them for interfering with God plans, but they still insist and say that while they have no objection to Rivka's immediate departure, she would probably want to linger with the family. Alas, Rivka, who has already realized that her family was willing to sell her away, decides to go with the servant, who can now sigh relief and declare: Mission accomplished.

We learn several lessons from this intricate narrative:

Abraham wanted to create an influence-free environment for the education of his future daughter-in-law. We sometimes have to alienate ourselves from bad influence.

The servant was a master of communication, and his success teaches us how easily the truth could be manipulated. We have to be careful in our dealings with others and with ourselves, and to try and seek the true intention and details, as much as possible.

Finally, we learn that had the family consulted Rivka before saying yes to the servant, they might have gotten their share. We should be cautious when making decisions for others, to not ignore their will and opinions.

Below you can find the lost newspaper clip from the Haran Bugle. I hope you enjoy reading it and discussing the ideas raised here.

Shabbat Shalom

Mystery Man Picks Maiden at Well

The main water well at Haran, serving the metropolitan Haran area and the meeting place of choice for hundreds of caravan drivers from across the Fertile Crescent, was buzzing yesterday afternoon not with the usual sound of thirsty camels and bustling servants but rather with rumors regarding a mysterious wealthy Canaanite. According to eyewitnesses, the elderly merchant arrived at the well shortly before sunset with a caravan of ten camels. He knelt down and uttered prayers in a strange language, but strangely enough, was not using any idols or statues. Immediately afterwards, he addressed one of the girls at the well with the preposterous request that she give water to all his camels, and when she agreed, he presented her with precious gifts. The man was then whisked to the girl's parents' house, leaving behind a trail of gossip, astonishment, and speculations.

Riqma, a 16 year old shepherdess who saw the exchange, said "like, I wouldn't mind going with anyone giving, like, that kind of jewelry". Her friend Kozbi, 14, vehemently

objected, saying: “what if the prospected groom is an ugly monster, like, why can’t he send a picture or something? Let’s see his Sefer HaPanim page!”

The girl’s father Bethuel and her brother Lavan refused to comment on the rumors, but we were able to speak with one of the Canaanite servants, on condition of anonymity. The servant said that they came to find a bride for the only son of a wealthy Hebrew man. He also added that he was disillusioned by Lavan’s fake hospitality which did not match his promises or the generosity displayed by his younger sister.

Later that night wagons, horses and Camel-limos poured into Lavan’s “Straw and Hay Motel” parking lot. One of the attendees of the long negotiation between Bethuel, Lavan and the wealthy Canaanite merchant would only comment that the whole business seemed suspicious: “The man claims his master is a relative of the girl, but if he really wanted to find his master’s relatives he should’ve asked for them”. Our special reporter in Canaan was able to confirm that the man’s master, Abraham, has abandoned his relatives in Haran decades ago, banished his other son, and now heads a religious monotheistic cult.

The Canaanite merchant also drew harsh criticism from the mayor of Haran, Kesed ben Hazo, who said tonight on **אנא** “We cannot allow her to be taken away; Haran will not become Canaan’s Bride Depot, unless we get our cut of the deal”.

Reported by Rabbi Haim Ovadia for Hittite Associated Press