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Parshat HaShavua sheet**

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Parshat Chayei Sara

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ELIEZER RULES!!

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In this week's portion, there is an amazing characterization of Avraham's servant, Eliezer. The Torah tells us that in finding a wife for his son Yitzchak, Avraham relied upon Eliezer. But the Torah describes Eliezer in conjunction with that event in a very noteworthy manner. It tells us that "Avraham turned to Eliezer, the elder of his household, who ruled over all his possessions," and asked him to go find a wife for Yitzchak (Genesis 24:2). What connection does ruling over possessions have to do with matchmaking? Even a financial guru can be a dunce when it comes to matching the appropriate marital needs of a budding patriarch. After all, Warren Buffet does not run the Fields Agency!

Also the words "ruled over all of Avraham's possessions" needs explanation. Rulers are in complete control as the word rule connotes an imperial role. Why did the Torah use such an expression to depict the function of the administrator of an estate? Further, why would dominion over fiscal matters have any bearing on matters of matrimony? What is the connection between Eliezer's financial finesse and the charge to find a wife for Yitzchak?

I once sat on an overseas flight next to a talkative executive who was skeptical about his own Jewish heritage. During the first hours of the flight, the man peppered me with questions, mostly cynical, about Judaism. Then the meal came. I was served a half-thawed omelet that seemed to be hiding under a few peas and carrots. The half-cooked egg was nestled between a small aluminum pan and its quilted blanket of tape and double-wrapped aluminum foil. Next to me, the executive was served a steaming piece of roast pork on fine china, with a succulent side dish of potatoes au gratin and a glass of fine wine. As if to score big, the executive tucked his napkin into his collar and turned to me. He stared at my pathetic portion and with sympathetic eyes sarcastically professed, "I'd love to offer you my meal, but I'm sorry you can't eat it!" I did not buy into his gambit. "Of course I can eat it!" I smiled. "In fact I think I'll switch with you right now!" His smile faded. He was famished and in no way did he want to give away his portion. But he was totally mystified at my response. I saw the concern in his face. He was looking forward to eating this meal. "I can have it if I want it. And if I don't want it I won't eat it. I have free choice and control over what I eat and what I don't. The Torah tells me not to eat this food and I have made a conscious choice to listen to the Torah. I therefore choose not to eat it." Then, I went for broke "Now let me ask you a question. Can you put the cover back on the food and hold yourself back from eating it?" He smiled sheepishly and said, "you are not allowed to eat it. I, however, cannot not eat it." And with that he dug in.

The Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Lunshitz, a very profound commentator who lived in the 1600s, explains that the criterion for objective and unbiased decisions is the ability to be in total power of any influencing impediment. Eliezer ruled over all of Avraham's possessions. They did not rule over him. That is why Avraham knew that Eliezer would not be unduly influenced in his thought process and decision-making.

He ruled over the mundane, and no money could influence his pure objectivity. He would not be bribed, cajoled or lured with gifts or cash by any prospective suitors. He would make his choice with a clear frame of mind Avraham's.

The question we all must ask is, do we rule over the temporal, or does it rule over us?" Is the desire to get the latest gadget, buy the sleekest car, or acquire the most exquisite piece of jewelry ruling over us and controlling our lives or, like Eliezer, do we approach the beauties of this word with a calm, controlled attitude? Before we set our goals and our rules we must ascertain that we have goals and that we rule!

A Rare Biblical Hespel for a Rare Biblical Personality

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

It says in the beginning of Parshas Chayei Sarah, “Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba which is Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her.” (Bereshis 23:2). The *sefer* Me’orei Ohr makes an interesting observation. In the entire Torah, there are only two *hespedim* (eulogies): One for Sora Imeinu and one for Yaakov Avinu. When Miriam died, a *hesped* is not mentioned. Likewise, when Aharon Hakohen died, the Torah says that “the entire House of Israel cried” but there is no mention of a *hesped*. Similarly, the Torah does not mention *hespedim* for Avraham or Yitzchak when they died. And again, although it says that the “House of Israel cried” for Moshe, there is no mention of a *hesped*. Apparently, it was not such a common practice in Biblical times that *hespedim* were made when a person passed away. What then was so special about Sora that Avraham formally eulogized her?

A famous Gemara in Sanhedrin discusses whether *hespedim* are primarily for the honor of the living or for the honor of those who have departed. Clearly, in a *hesped* we speak of the fine attributes of the deceased – but why do we do that? Is it to honor the dead or perhaps it is because when people hear the *hespedim*, they become inspired to live more meritorious lives themselves? As Shlomo says, “It is preferable to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.” (Koheles 7:2).

At funerals, we hear things about people that we don’t necessarily know about them. Invariably, when I walk out of a funeral after hearing the *hespedim*, I think to myself “You know, I never knew that about this person.” The purpose of *hesped* is to inform the audience who this deceased person was. Chazal say that the *hesped* that Avraham said for Sora was the chapter “A woman of valor who can find?” (Mishlei 31:10-31). That was the *hesped*, because if there was one defining attribute of Sora, it was that “Behold, she is in the tent.” (Bereshis 18:26). She was extremely *tzanua* (private). Therefore, we can assume that people really did not know much about Sora. It was not until her *hesped* that Avraham Avinu let the world know who she was.

The author of Me’orei Ohr cites an incident involving Rav Yeruchem Levovitz. He was once in a *shtetel* and he heard that an old woman who lived by herself passed away. He was told that there probably would not be a *minyán* at her *levaya*. Even though Rav Yeruchem didn’t know the woman, he figured that this was somewhat akin to a *mes mitzvah* (because no one would be at her funeral). Therefore, even though he didn’t know her, the great Mirer Mashgiach went to this lady’s *levaya*. To everyone’s surprise, there was a large gathering of people there. It turned out to be a tremendous *levaya* and even people from other cities came.

Initially, people could not figure out why so many people came. It eventually emerged that unbeknownst to almost anyone, this woman did acts of *chesed* for dozens and dozens of people. Everyone, however, thought that “I am the only one for whom she does this.” So everyone said “She was so good to us, she would take care of us, she would give us money and give us food... so I need to go to her *levaya*.” Rav Yeruchem Levovitz – the great *Mashgiach* – did not want to let this event pass without sharing the *mussar* message within it to his *yeshiva talmidim* (students) in the Mir.

He returned to the *yeshiva* and told them: It is the way of people to not hide things from the public that are not valuable. A person’s everyday silverware and dishes are never hidden away in a closet under lock and key. However, the fine china is stored behind the breakfront. The crystal gets hidden away even further and the gold is kept in the vault. We don’t want anyone to see that.

We hide the things that are most dear and precious to us. The most precious things to this woman were the things she did for other people. As a result of that, she hid them, like people hide gold and silver. This is what Rav Yeruchem learned from that story of the old woman in the *shtetel*. That is why Avraham Avinu felt the necessity to eulogize Sora. Everybody knew Avraham. “You are a prince of Elokim in our midst...” (Bereshis 23:6). Yitzchak was also well known. When Yosef died “he was the ruler throughout the Land of Egypt.” Aharon and Moshe’s greatness were known throughout the “entire House of Israel.” Who needed to, and in fact, who would be able to say *hespedim*, on such great and well-known individuals?

However, Sora Imeinu’s greatness, because of her incredible *tznius* and privacy, was not as well known. Therefore, Avraham Avinu had to let the world know who she really was.

As far as the fact that Yaakov Avinu was also eulogized, the Me’orei Ohr explains that this was because Yaakov Avinu led a troubled life. He had to run away from his brother who wanted to kill him. He had to put up with a cheating father-in-law for twenty-plus years. He had the aggravation of the apparent loss of his beloved son, Yosef. Everyone looked at Yaakov Avinu and thought “*Nebach*, a troubled life.” That is why, this author suggests, there was also a necessity to eulogize Yaakov.

I think that perhaps there may be another reason why they said a *hesped* for Yaakov. The *pasuk* says “They came to Goren Ha’atad...” (Bereshis 50:10) The Gemara says that all the kings of Canaan took their crowns and put them on the coffin of Yaakov Avinu. Who was the *hesped* for? In that case, the *hesped* was for the benefit of the nations of the world. The “Jews” there were just Yaakov’s family, who already knew who he was. The purpose was so that everyone else should know who he was. In either event, there was a special necessity for saying a *hesped* in Yaakov’s case. But the bottom line is that *hespedim* are needed when there is a special reason to let the world at large know who this person was. With Avraham, Yitzchak, Moshe, Aharon, and Dovid, there was not such a need. It was the same with the other Matriarchs. But the world needed to know about Sora: “A woman of valor who can find?” because of her exceptional attribute of *tzniyus* / privacy.

Times A' Wasting

By Rabbi Elisha Greenbaum

This article should have been written and finished hours ago.

Didn't happen. I came home later than I expected, checked my emails, ate a late lunch and then settled down to write. Things weren't flowing right away so I made a quick phone call, chatted a bit with my wife and then headed out to pick up the kids from school. Half a day blown and nothing constructive to show for it.

Happens to most of us at times, instead of doing something useful we putter away our life over a series of inconsequentials. TV, pulp fiction and the internet all compete to distract people's attention from the dramas of real life.

I know that nobody's perfect and that Rest & Relaxation are an essential component of any purposeful existence, but we can all recognize the difference between relaxing and time-wasting. 'Chilling out' between jobs helps you find energy for the next task, but after wasting time there is no second wind or adrenalin rush, just a sad, sinking feeling of depression. Other times I suffer from a malaise of a different disorder. I wake early and get straight into it. Too busy to plan or ponder, I spend all day rushing from job to job. I'm active, but am I productive? At the end of a long day I look back in shame and disbelief; I might have occupied the time, but what has been gained from my scurrying? My day was filled, but was it fulfilled?

Our forefather Abraham is described as being "advanced in days." Commentators explain that every moment of his every day was productive and fulfilling. Even his early years before discovering G-d and inventing Judaism counted towards his heavenly scorecard. Time spent learning or preparing is not wasted, and the trials and tribulations that he had to overcome were really staging points on his journey through life. As long as you're gaining and growing, your *days are advancing*.

But I'm not like that; some of my time wasting is truly purposeless. The mindless tedium, the minutia of misspent days doesn't even qualify to be considered. Nothing ventured, definitely nothing gained.

How and why do I allow myself to squander so many of life's opportunities, and what can I do to bring the dwindling minutes of my life back under my control?

Time wasting is symptomatic of a lack of self-belief. We allow ourselves to waste time because we're not truly convinced that what we do really matters so much. When I postpone for tomorrow that which I could and should be doing today, I demonstrate a lack of appreciation for my mission.

Abraham was starting a religion. He had one life to get it right and he knew that posterity would be the ultimate judge of his efforts. From this perspective, everything mattered. A second saved is a lifetime earned, and future existence depends on filling and fulfilling the present.

Yet in our own lives we allow the insidious charm of laziness to creep under our guard. Because I don't really believe that I'm in the big leagues, I don't practice enough or plan sufficiently in advance, and I allow my attention to wander away from the main game.

The trick is to persuade oneself that life, death and the universe do depend on the decisions I make now. My fate and the future of my community and family hang in the daily balance. My life is teetering on the edge of a precipice, staring down into a chasm of despair. If I relax or surrender, I'll plummet, but if I can stay strong and keep the faith; fill my quota and come back for more, then I justify my existence and might just demonstrate that my time was well spent.

“Avraham rose up from the presence of his dead and spoke to the children of Ches, saying” (23:3)

Rabbeinu Bachya teaches that we learn from Avraham that it is proper to stand when addressing a community as a respectful gesture, just as Avraham rose to speak to the Bnei Cheis. Why does the Torah use the word **קָם** to refer to Sarah if it is a masculine word? Rabbeinu Bachya answers that when a person passes away, only the body dies. The soul lives on and goes to the next world. Thus, it is appropriate to refer to Sarah with a masculine word because only the **נֶפֶשׁ**, a word that is likewise masculine, was left in this world after her passing. The **נִשְׁמָה**, which is a feminine word, was no longer there.

“Now Avraham was old, well on in years and Hashem blessed Avraham **בְּכָל - with everything” (24:1)**

Rashi points out that the word **בְּכָל** has the same numerical value as the word **בֵּן**, son. R' Nissan Alpert asks: If that is what the posuk is referring to, then why didn't the Torah just say that Hashem blessed Avraham with a son? He answered that some people are only concerned about themselves and not others. However, Hashem blessed Avraham that he was involved with the whole world. He was involved **בְּכָל**, with everything in world affairs. But at the same time that he focused on the world, he also remained focused on his son. Avraham never lost sight of both and balanced his communal and personal responsibilities. He was able to be totally involved in the concerns of the world at large without forgetting about his son. To the outsider, he seemed like a world leader, but behind the scenes, he was an equally, if not more, dedicated father. When we ask Hashem in our bentching to bless us like our forefather Avraham with the blessing of **בְּכָל**, we are asking that we should be able to fulfill our communal responsibility while being dedicated to our own children at the same time.

“Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who ruled over all that was his: Please, place your hand under my thigh” (24:2)

Eliezer is not identified by name at any point in this story because he was exceedingly loyal to Avraham and did not consider his own personal considerations at all. Rashi comments that Eliezer had a daughter that he would have liked Yitzchak to marry, but Avraham rejected the idea. Once it was clear that Avraham had a different plan in mind, Eliezer moved on and went on his mission with total focus on achieving the goals of the one who sent him. Today, the term “servant” is often misappropriated by politicians, who like to call themselves public servants even though many of them are just serving themselves. Eliezer was a real servant because he completely negated his own thoughts and carried out the will of Avraham.

“These are the days of the years of Avraham's life which he lived, one hundred seventy-five years” (25:7)

Why is Avraham's lifespan described as “the days which he lived”? Avraham really made every day count and used every moment productively. He truly lived and made the most of each day. In contrast, Chazal say that the wicked are considered dead even while still alive because the days of their lives are wasted. When one is not using his time productively, then he cannot be considered to really be living.

“Avraham's spirit left him and he died at a good old age, elderly and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people” (25:8)

Avraham is described as “satisfied” when he died. What does this mean? Kli Yakar explains that people who run after their desires in this world are never satiated because they will always want more. As Chazal put it, the wicked do not leave this world with half of their desires fulfilled. Avraham, on the other hand, recognized that all material possessions have a purpose and since he was not focused on getting as much as he could in this world, he was satisfied with whatever he did have. Many people leave this world feeling like they are missing something, but the righteous person feels that he has everything he needs.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

There But for the Grace of G-d Go I

By Sheldon Stern

Before "Seinfeld", "Taxi" was my favorite sit-com. In one unforgettable episode, Latka, portrayed by the late, comedic genius Andy Kauffman, had a fling, due to extenuating circumstances, of course, with a co-worker. His wife Simka read the Scarlet Letter on Latka's face when he came home and they visited the local shaman who Paskened that according to their religion, Eastern Orthodox, the two must get divorced. They're devastated, but the Reverend Jim, a drugged out ex-hippie has a solution, "Get divorced and then get remarried." Alex, the cab company's voice of reason tells Jim, "Do you think it's that simple? If they had that option do you think they'd be so upset." With this, Simka and Latka looked at each other grinning from ear to ear, because that loony tune hit on the answer. In this week's Parsha, Avraham sends his aide-de-camp, Eliezer, to his old stomping ground to find a suitable wife for Yitzchak. The question is, "Why did Avraham have to rely on Eliezer when the obvious answer was staring him in the face?" Let's explain this point. At the end of Parshas Vayeira, the Torah states that Avraham was informed that his kinsman Besuel had sired a daughter named Rivkah. As John sang in "Woman", "It was written in the stars." The Torah juxtaposed the Akeidah and our Matriarch's birth. Clearly, this was a match made in Heaven, so why did Avraham impose an oath on Eliezer, to insure that he'd do his utmost to find the right shidduch? He should've just sent Eliezer to Aram Naharaim with documents attesting to Yitzchak's wealth, and told him that no one but Rivkah would do.

Conforming with Jewish tradition, we'll resolve this question by asking another, "When Hashem told Avraham to leave his homeland at the beginning of Parshas Lech Lecha, He didn't reveal the ultimate destination. Rashi tells us that this was done so that Avraham would be rewarded for every step he took. But wasn't it clear where he was headed? Five years earlier, when the founder of Monotheism was 70 years old, he had experienced the Bris Bein Habesarim somewhere in Israel. He was shown the sacrifices that his descendants would bring at this holy site. Logic then would dictate that there was only one place suitable, as Springsteen sang, to be "The Promised Land." And, in fact, that is where he wound up. By the same token Avraham could read the tea leaves and determine that Rivkah was his son's Basherte. So the resolution to both questions is the same. Rabbi Miller called Avraham Avinu the most original thinker to have ever lived. His genius enabled him to intuit the entire Torah, but for all his brilliance, he never allowed intellect to govern his actions. We'll explain with a Moshol, perhaps apocryphal. The Rabbi of a certain town was on good terms with the local gendarme. One morning, on the way to shul, the Rabbi was espied by his friend who asked him where he's going. The Rabbi responded, "I don't know." Thinking the Rabbi misunderstood the question, the alderman asked it again and received the same response. He decided to punish the sage for his impertinence by having him cool his heels for a day in the hoosegow. That night the official returned to release the Rabbi and get some clarity. He was told, "You asked me where I was going and I told you the truth, I didn't know. I intended to go to shul, but as you see, I ended up in jail." This was our Patriarch to a tee. As Carole King wrote, "Where You lead I will follow." Korach's downfall was due to his reliance on pure logic, but Avraham knew that logic has its limits and must be dispensed in the face of G-d's will. Therefore, Avraham didn't "know" that he was going to the Land of Canaan, and he didn't "know" that Rivkah was destined to become his daughter-in-law despite the fact that all the evidence pointed in those directions.

But this leads us to a third query, "Why was it necessary for Avraham to have this attitude?" For this answer, we turn to arguably the two greatest icons of the rock era. "Like a Rolling Stone" is considered Dylan's magnum opus. It features the line, "When you ain't got nothing, you ain't got nothing to lose." The plain Pshat is that the American Bard was Michavin to Hillel in Avos, "Marbeh Nichosim Marbeh Daagos" the more possessions the more worries. According to this understanding, Dylan was arguing that being materially laden isn't necessarily a good thing. But I would posit that the verse has a deeper message, "The key isn't what you have, it's how you look at what you have." To understand this consider what John wrote, "Strawberry Fields, nothing is real, and nothing to get hung about." The Midrash tells us that Avraham was loaded, but it meant nothing to him. He put Eliezer in charge of his holdings and told him not to let these changes bother printing out any spread sheets. Moreover, he likely told his servant not to let his work get in the way of advancing his studies. Perhaps this story that I heard a few years ago will better bring our point across. A certain Gvir was given an audience with Rav Elyashiv ztl and he told the Gadol hador that he had been worth 150 million dollars, but there was a downturn and now he checked in at only 60 (oif mir gezugt.) Hoping for a Brocho, the man was clocked with a proverbial left hook, "Far vus daft a yid aza fil gelt?" (why do you need so much money?) No we're not making light of wealth accumulation. Obviously, there's a tremendous amount of good that one can accomplish if he has the resources. What Rav Elyashiv was addressing, as were Lennon and Dylan, is that one shouldn't make the size of his bank book his raison detre for, as George wrote in "Beware of Darkness," "That is not what we are here for." We'll add another, perhaps more kosher, element to the mix. The Baal Hatanya said, "Ich Vil Nisht Dein Olam Hazeh, in Ich vill ocht nish Dein Olam Habo. Ich Vil nor Di." This is the concept of Bitul self-abnegation, to have absolutely no concern for oneself. And this was Avraham. And this is why he was able to throw himself into the "Fiery Furnace." Nothing stood in the way of Avraham fulfilling G-d's will, because nothing existed for the Patriarch other than G-d's will.

But this leads us to a fourth question. If Avraham proved his mettle at the Kivshon Haeish, why did G-d have to test him again at the Akeidah? Stanley Kubrick's "Paths of Glory" starring the legendary Kirk Douglas was the most gut wrenching film I ever saw. Three French soldiers were court-martialed for abandoning their post during WWI. The charges were false, but the army wanted to make them scapegoats so that other soldiers wouldn't flee when facing attacked. One of the men, in tears, told Douglas, who was defending them, that he had a wife and child at home. In other words, he wasn't afraid to die, his concern was for the family he'd

leave behind. So too, we can't compare Avraham's willingness to surrender his life in face of Nimrod's challenge, to taking Yitzchok and thereby ending the family legacy. But for Avrohom it was all in a day's work. As John said in *Across the Universe*, "Jai Guru Dei Va Om" Nothing's gonna change my world. Avraham's entire existence was serving Hashem.

And this takes us to our fifth and final question, "What can we learn from this?" I met Rabbi Friedman and the Potoker at about the same time. Let me clarify that statement. Growing up on the East Side, I certainly knew who the Potoker was, but I rarely went to his shul and when I did we never spoke. I remember telling my former Rosh Yeshiva, "I know that I have to choose a Rav and it's between you and the Potoker. Now, you're a human being, but he's a Malach and so I'm picking you because I can't relate to a Malach." So the same is true for Avraham. We're in awe of him but how can we hope to emulate him? So Rabbi Miller provides the answer. He explains the concept of Chabad, the acronym for Chachmah, Binah and Daas. Chachmah is intellectual knowledge. We'll give an example. On the Chachmah level every Orthodox Jew knows that he must surrender his life rather than violate the three cardinal sins. However, if that awareness remains as Chachmah it won't translate into action. Daas, on the other hand, means sensory perception. Let me share an amazing story. Rav Moshe arrived at the airport and his flight was scheduled to depart. His Shammas was signaling for him to come, but the Gadol and Posek Hador wouldn't budge. After what seemed an eternity, Rav Moshe joined his attendant. "Why didn't you come when I pointed to you?" the man asked. Rav Moshe told him, "Didn't you see that fellow davening Shemoneh Esreh?" Yes, but I knew we had to make the flight so I passed by him. Rav Moshe then made his point, "For you Halacha is what's written in the Shulchan Aruch. For me it's reality. When I saw that man davening, I saw a wall surrounding him and I can't walk through a wall. So how do we go from Chachmah to Daas? For this we need Binah. We all know that Rabbi Akiva was killed by the Romans in the most horrifying manner. However, our greatest Tanna wasn't fazed. Throughout his life he had prepared himself to be able to love Hashem even when his life was being taken. This is Binah, analyzing the Mitzvos so that they become real. Now none of us can pass any of the tests that Avraham was subjected to, but hopefully Hashem won't challenge us that way. However, we are obligated to work on those areas that are our shortcomings. Let's explain by enlisting the assistance of two true icons. The Vilna Gaon said that each of us is put in this world to correct, at least, one of our Middos. Rav Reuvein Feinstein explained with a Moshol. There's a fellow who comes to the 7:30 minyan every morning at 7:35. No big deal. But he's huffing and puffing because he raced from his house to make it on time. So Rav Reuvein, in his patented folksy style said, "Why doesn't he just leave his house 10 minutes earlier?" The point is we should think about those areas in our Yiddishkeit that need improvement and work on practical solutions. On a personal note, it took me about 15 years to develop my system of Talmudic study and now I learn at least five hours a day and I love it. By making these changes we demonstrate to Hashem that we want to improve and this desire could be just the tonic that Hashem is waiting for to bring Moshiach.

Children of Abraham

By Rabbi Berel Wein

After the death of Sarah, Avraham remarries to a woman named Keturah. Rashi, following Midrash, states that she was Hagar, the woman whom he had married earlier at the behest of Sarah herself and who became the mother of Yishmael. The Torah records for us that Avraham fathered further children with Ketura and that these children left the house of Avraham to found families and clans of their own in the Middle East. There is discussion in halacha regarding these bnei Ketura and their status vis a vis the Jewish people and Avraham's mission in the world. The bnei Ketura adopted many of Avraham's ways including hospitality to strangers and circumcision of males. However, the Torah makes it very clear that in no way are they the true heirs of Avraham in spiritual terms. It is Yitzchak and Yitzchak alone who inherits the blessings of Avraham and the responsibilities of the covenant entered into between Avraham and God, so to speak. Even in his lifetime, Avraham sends the bnei Ketura away from him and from Yitzchak. The bnei Ketura melt into the general milieu of the different tribes that populated the Middle East of that time. They never challenge Yitzchak nor assert any claim to the heritage of their father Avraham. It is almost as if they are satisfied at being ignored in the whole millennia-long struggle, regarding the advancement of Avraham's ideas and ways against idolatry and cruelty. Thereby they are assigned to the very anonymity that they seemingly craved.

I think that the lesson here is an obvious historical one. Many are delighted to claim great pedigree for themselves. But since in Jewish life pedigree comes with great responsibilities, with a binding covenant whose terms are inescapable and immutable, people are willing to renounce their pedigree rather than bear its responsibilities and obligations. The unwillingness or inability of the bnei Ketura to respond to the challenge of being the descendants of Avraham is what brings them to even lose that distinction of their illustrious pedigree. Throughout the Bible, the Jewish people are constantly reminded that they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. This is not a matter of pride and hubris look how great my family is but rather a call to spiritual arms look at the great mission and responsibility that has been thrust upon us precisely because of who our ancestors were. This is what the rabbis meant when they stated that a Jew must always ask one's self: When will my actions be of the same caliber of holiness and spirit as those of my forbearers? Pride in ancestry is necessary and commendable. But if it only remains a matter of pride without advancing the covenant, commitments and goals of those who went before us, then that pride of ancestry is almost worthless. It leads only to the fate of the bnei Ketura, assimilation, anonymity and eventually the disappearance of the knowledge of one's own ancestry itself. All of Jewish history testifies to this truism of Jewish life, both in individual and communal terms.