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Parshat Chayei Sara

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SOUL TRUSTEE

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

When Avraham seeks a wife for his son Yitzchak, he called no one other than his trusted loyal servant, Eliezer. Eliezer was one of the primary soldiers, aiding Avraham during his battle to rescue Lot. Eliezer was considered by Avraham to be his heir apparent until Hashem informed him of the forthcoming birth of Yitzchak. Eliezer was nicknamed the one who drew and watered from his master's Torah. Simply put, the Torah constantly informs us that Eliezer was Avraham's right-hand-man. Before sending Eliezer, the Torah tells us that "Avraham told his servant, the elder of his household, who was in complete charge of every one of Avraham's possessions, to swear that he would not take a girl from Canaan for Yitzchak. Eliezer swore in the name of Hashem, the Master of the heaven and the earth" (cf. Genesis 24:3).

Avraham instructed his most trusted aid to get the proper shidach (mate) for Yitzchak. He was to go back to Avraham's hometown. The girl had to come from the right family. She must have been raised in the proper environment. And Avraham warned Eliezer that Yitzchak was not to leave the Land of Canaan. His charge was forceful. He made his trusted servant swear. He used strong language. "Be careful – watch out! Lest you bring my son there!" (Genesis 24:6)

The Torah's reiteration of Eliezer's domestic position in this context is perplexing. Isn't the juxtaposition – the glorifying of Eliezer's position as "the elder of his household, who was in complete charge of every one of Avraham's possessions" – "contradictory with the severe scrutiny and pressure that Avraham placed on him in reference to Yitzchak's matrimonial requirements? If Avraham trusted Eliezer for his entire worldly possessions, why did he make him swear in this instance? And if he had to swear in regard to Yitzchak, then why define him here as "the elder of his household, who was in complete charge of every one of Avraham's possessions"? Isn't the fact that he had to swear, obvious evidence that he, in fact, was not in charge?

Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant, the founder of the mussar movement, once stayed at an inn. The inn was quite crowded and the innkeeper realized that he was low on meat. Seeing a distinguished and pious-looking Jew with a beard, the innkeeper approached Reb Yisrael. "Are you perhaps a shochet? You see, I am running low on meat and I must slaughter a cow." Reb Yisrael was taken aback. "I would love to help," he stammered, "but unfortunately I am not a ritual slaughterer." The next morning Rabbi Lipkin approached the innkeeper. "I have a tremendous business opportunity. If you were to invest a few hundred rubles with me, I can guarantee a nice return." The man looked quizzically at the rabbi. "Reb Yid," he stammered. "I hardly know you! How do you expect me to invest with you? Give me a few references, and as many days, and let me check out the deal in its entirety. Then we can meet and I'll make my decision." "Aha!" Exclaimed the great mussar luminary. "Just yesterday, you were about to trust me with the ritual slaughter of your cow. You were going to feed you guests with that meat based on the appearance of my frock and beard. Nevertheless, you would not invest a few rubles on those same grounds. Shouldn't one treat his spiritual skepticism on the same level as his financial uncertainties?"

The Be'er Mayim Chayim explains: the Torah specifically states, in the context of Avraham's admonitions, that Eliezer "was the elder of Avraham's household, who was in complete charge of every one of Avraham's possessions."

When buying stocks and bonds, when investing in real estate, when purchasing appliances or furniture, Eliezer had free reign. Yet when it came to Yitzchak's future that esteem was not enough. Avraham made Eliezer swear in the name of Hashem that he would bring a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Avraham's concern for spirituality and his future were by no means on the same level as those he had for his mundane needs. True, Eliezer was in complete charge of every one of Avraham's possessions. But when it came to Avraham's future, when it came to spiritual decisions, even Eliezer was suspect. For when it comes to your spiritual needs, your sole trustee can never become your soul trustee.

The Holiness of Hebron

by Rabbi Yehuda Appel

All political considerations aside, it is worthwhile to understand Hebron's place in Jewish thought.

The Torah introduces us to Hebron in this week's Torah portion, Chayei Sarah. The parsha opens with a description of Sarah's burial. Abraham, wanting to find a grave for his wife, approaches the Hittites, asking for a particular burial spot - the cave of Machpela. After some onerous bargaining with a wily character named Efron, Abraham purchases the land and buries Sarah there.

In subsequent verses, the Torah goes out of its way to mention that Sarah's grave is not simply in the Cave of Machpela, but is also in the city of Hebron, which the Torah also calls "*Kiryat Arba*." Two questions arise: Why did Abraham choose Machpela as the burial site, and why does Hebron have the additional moniker of Kiryat Arba?

The Midrash explains that Kiryat Arba means "City of the Four," because four couples - Adam and Eve, Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah - were eventually buried there. Many of the commentaries explain that because Adam and Eve had been buried in Machpela, Abraham wanted his family buried there.

Beyond its significance as the burial site for the most famous Biblical couples, there are other important elements that drive Hebron's place in Jewish tradition.

In Kaballistic teaching, Hebron - whose root "*haber*" means "to connect" - is seen as the spot on earth which connects the physical and spiritual worlds. In fact, in Jewish mystical literature, the journey that the soul is said to make as it passes from this world to the next (and as countless people have described in near-death experiences) is called the "journey through the Cave of Machpela."

Rabbenu Bechaya adds that Hebron is the place that connects this world to "The City of the Four" - a spiritual city in heaven called "Jerusalem" - which is said to possess four levels of holiness. In that holy city above, the soul ultimately connects itself ("*hebron*") to the Almighty.

Hebron makes its appearance in two important later Scriptural accounts. In the story of the 12 spies sent by Moses to reconnoiter the land of Canaan, Hebron is given as a special gift to Caleb, who alone with Joshua maintained his loyalty to God. Furthermore, it is in Hebron that King David begins his kingship, ruling there for seven years before making Jerusalem the permanent Jewish capital.

Given all this historic significance, it is no surprise that Hebron is revered as one of the four "Holy Cities" of Israel. Whatever one's politics, the significance of Hebron in Jewish tradition is long standing, and should not be forgotten in the political maelstrom that has enveloped it.

Rivka's Lessons in Kindness

by Shoshanna Dresner

Eliezer is on the hunt for a wife for Yitzchak. Someone who would be worthy of becoming a matriarch of the Jewish people.

He understands that for this position it must be a woman who would be a role model in the area of *chesed*, loving-kindness.

He found Rivka. Looking at Rivka's kindness teaches us invaluable lessons in this area.

DO MORE THAN THE MINIMUM: Someone who loves to give, will do more than he/she is asked to do. Eliezer only asked for water for himself, but Rivka went above and beyond by providing for the camels too.

ACT WITH MODESTY: Give with pure intentions rather than for validation from others. Rivka only mentioned after giving Eliezer a drink that she would also give the camels. Had she said all her intentions at the beginning it would have been conceited. (Rabbi S R Hirsch)

BE PROACTIVE: If you are able to help people in some way, let people know. While others would hide their jugs to avoid the bother of lending them out, Rivka carried hers on her shoulder so that people might ask to borrow it. (Tiferes Yonoson)

The way that Rivka acted shows that she was someone who truly loved kindness. She is described as running, to do something she wasn't even asked to do!

Embedded into our spiritual genetics is this character trait of *chesed*, kindness. We can learn from Rivka, to be people who personify the trait of giving to the highest level. People who look for opportunities to give, and when granted them perform them with enthusiasm and grace.

“And Avraham listened to Ephron, and Avraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the sons of Cheis, four hundred shekels of silver, accepted by the merchant” (23:16)

Rashi points out that the second mention of Efron’s name in this posuk is missing a “vav.” His name is deficient to teach us that Ephron talked a lot by promising to give the land away for free, but in the end did not act on his words and instead charged an exorbitant sum. Ephron had a chance to be recorded in Hashem’s Torah for all time as a good person, but he blew his chance. We also must remember that all of our actions are inscribed in a book before Hashem and we should make sure that our names are recorded for posterity as completely as possible.

“And I will adjure you by Hashem, the G-d of the heaven and the G-d of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell” (24:3)

Why did Avraham mention that Hashem is G-d of heaven and earth? Seforno answers that Avraham warned his servant that if he failed to follow his instructions, Hashem would hold him accountable in this world (earth) and the next (heaven). Notably, Avraham mentioned heaven first, because that punishment would be permanent and more serious. Avraham’s words should serve as a reminder for us that there are ramifications for our actions in both this world and the next if we fail to follow Hashem’s instructions. Nobody gets away with anything without having to face the consequences. Of course, Hashem has mercy and has given us the opportunity for repentance, but if a person does not take his mistakes seriously, he will eventually have to deal with the fallout. Rabbeinu Bachya writes that we learn from Avraham’s desire to find a daughter-in-law within his own family that one should look for a wife who is similar to him. This will help them have a strong marriage because too many differences can lead to discord. He adds that when people find spouses who are of a similar type and from a similar social background with shared mindsets and values, then peace increases in the world.

“Then Lavan and Besuel answered and said: The matter stemmed from Hashem! We can say to you neither bad nor good” (24:50)

The Sdei Chemed cites that a custom exists that a portion from Parsha Chayei Sarah regarding Yitzchak and Rivka’s marriage is read on a Shabbos when a couple is celebrating their Sheva Brochos. The Sukkas Dovid asks: Why would this parsha be read during Sheva Brochos, after the couple is married? Why not read it before marriage so that the unmarried people should know what to look for in a spouse? The answer is that shidduchim originate directly from Hashem. Even Lavan and Besuel recognized this when they told Eliezer that “the matter stemmed from Hashem.” After getting married, one may wonder what he has gotten himself into. This parsha is read as encouragement to the newly married couple that this shidduch came from Hashem and it is meant to work out if the effort is put into making it work.

“It was after the death of Avraham that Hashem blessed Yitzchak his son, and Yitzchak settled near Be’er Lachai Ro’i” (25:11)

Rashi, citing a Gemara in Sotah 14a, says that this blessing was Hashem’s way of comforting Yitzchak when he was mourning. We learn the mitzvah of comforting mourners from this posuk and seek to emulate Hashem. Based on this, Rabbeinu Yonah, as explained by the Torah Temimah, writes in his commentary to the third chapter of Maseches Brochos that the mitzvah to comfort mourners has its roots in the Torah, although it is rabbinic in origin. We also find in last week’s parsha that Hashem visited Avraham when he was sick. While Hashem may have done this for these righteous men in a public fashion, Hashem continues to comfort mourners and visits the sick, albeit in a hidden manner. This is why we wish the mourner that Hashem should comfort him.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Liar's Remorse

By Sheldon Stern

Every year we read in the Haggadah that Lavan the Aramean was worse than Pharaoh because Pharaoh only decreed against the males while Lavan wanted to eliminate the corpus Yehudi. Yes, we say it but do we believe it? Pharaoh carried out his edict, but Lavan seems to be little more than an annoying swindler. Can we really consider him an anti-Semite of Hitlerian proportion? It's generally held that the Baal Haggadah was Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, so it behooves us to give serious credence to his words.

After navigating Sarah's funeral Avraham dispatched his trusted aide-de-camp Eliezer to find a Shidduch for Yitzchok. Through Divine Providence, Eliezer discovered the perfect match in Rivkah but there was still the matter of obtaining the family's consent. In verse 24:50 they're apparently all in. Lavan and Besuel, the Kallah's brother and father respectively, acknowledge that this pairing was from Hashem and they say, "Take her and go." But in verse 56, with Besuel no longer in the picture (see Midrash) Lavan does a 180. He's not calling off the nuptials but he wants a period to prepare for the wedding, get the bride's trousseau what have you. Why the sudden change of heart? Yitzchok had everything to offer; Yichus, wealth Middos you name it. Ramchal wrote that a Rasha spends his entire life in regret. We can understand this by considering that Rabbi Miller described Gehinnom as the world of regret. A person will see his/her life played out and he will realize all the opportunities he missed. As Adele sang, "You could've had it all." Now the Gemara says that a Rasha is considered as if he was dead even while he's in this mortal coil. It therefore follows that a Rasha constantly regrets everything he does.

I wouldn't have understood this point if not for an experience I had about 40 years ago. The second dentist I worked for was named Paul Cohen. He was a Medicaid mogul boasting about 15 offices that recent dental school graduates largely operated. He assigned me to a place in the Bronx. I made about \$800 the first week and he paid me on Friday at 1:00 PM. Same for the next week, but on the third Friday he showed up with a check for \$400 with the excuse that his accountant was out that week, and the following Friday he'll make up the difference. That next Friday he called to say that he was running late and he couldn't bring my check until 5 or 6 (Shabbos was 4:30). So, of course, he didn't come at all. Before long I realized what was happening. After a few months, I decided to cut my losses and I just left. My next boss, Howie Rothenberg also had a string of offices but he was a decent person. One day I mentioned Dr. Cohen to him and he told me, "I met him recently and he told me that at this point the money doesn't mean anything to him, his real joy is when he '2\$%^7' kids coming out of dental school. And then I remembered an exchange I had with Cohen. It was the day before some Yom Tov. I think it was Shavuot. Paul showed up and insisted that I come to work the next day because there was no one available to cover for me. When I told him no he said he'll pay me double. At this point, he had basically stopped paying me at all so the offer meant nothing. What was interesting was Cohen's reaction when I refused. He started shaking his head in wonderment and I didn't understand. Now all these years later it makes sense to me. The Rasha's life is full of regret because there's no joy in anything he does. As he told Dr. Rothenberg, "My 'happiness' comes from hurting others." But is that happiness? Let's imagine that you got the following phone call, "Abe I see this fellow in the nursing home every Sunday but I can't make it this week can you take my place? He's a nice guy and he likes to learn." Immediately your Yetzer hora will try to talk you out of it. But if you go you'll feel good for having done so, because that's the power of doing Hashem's Mitzvos. And that's real. But to find meaning through the suffering of others runs counter to the Gemara, "A person doesn't sin unless he benefits from it" This degenerate got nothing tangible from his wickedness. Just the thought that he was making people miserable. Let's elaborate on this point because it's at the crux of the entire essay. Let's say you find yourself in a place where there's no kosher food available. You're really hungry and decide, just this once, to have an Egg McMuffin at McDonald's. I mean how treif can it be? So you feel remorse for having succumbed to the imp, but admitting your mistake gets you back into Hashem's good graces. As Billy Joel wrote, "You're only Human." But a Rasha sins for the empty thrill of sinning and this is what makes him totally odious and potentially dangerous.

Now let's return to Lavan. In Parshas Vayeitzei Yaakov tries to explain to his wives why he wants to leave so he tells them (31:7), "Your father has cheated me 10 times." Rashi says it was 100 times, and I would suspect it was 100 times a day. Why this mendacity? Because, again, the Rasha always regrets what he does, and now we add a point from Dr. Cohen, "The Rasha's joy comes from destroying others." So what does this mean? Lavan would make some agreement with Yaakov which was completely one-sided, but when he saw his son-in-law, he was all smiles. So Lavan would think to himself, "I must have missed something. Okay, this time I'll change the conditions to make certain that I break him, but again complete equanimity." What Lavan didn't understand is that Yaakov lived by the mantra of Gam Zu Letovah or as John wrote, "Jai Guru De Va Om." Nothing's gonna change my world. Nothing could change Yaakov's outlook. If Hashem decided that this was his fate then it's all good. And this must have driven Lavan crazy. And so Rebbe was correct, "At a certain point the fiend would've decided that the only solution is you know what and it's quite possible that when Yaakov decided to flee he recognized that it was a real case of Pikuach Nefesh." Having mentioned Hitler we see the same dynamic. The Gemara says that Moshe Rabbeinu was a glutton for Mitzvos and we see this from the cities of refuge. Moshe set up three cities Eiver Liyarden even though they wouldn't function until their counterparts in Israel were established. Lehavdil and Leidach Gisa Hitler's evil streak could never be sated. He got Silesia, and next on the docket was Poland. A deal with Russia followed by attacking Russia. How long would it have been before he reneged on his alliance with Japan? Rebbe was clueing us in on the essential nature of the completely corrupt.

I'd like to end on a personal note. The time I spent working for Paul Cohen was very unpleasant. But in retrospect, what I lost is water under the bridge, but look what I gained, this DvarTorah. That's a deal I'd take any day of the week and twice on Sundays. Hashem has an unlimited repertoire for getting His points across. It often comes through hardships, usually because of our intransigence. Rabbi Miller said that a person should do Tshuvah while eating a piece of watermelon i.e. when things are good, but even when one faces difficulties he should keep in mind that there's an eternal light at the end. And we should be grateful for these distressing situations. The Gemara says that if a person goes 40 days without any troubles he should be concerned that Hashem is paying him off in this world. These untoward states of affairs should not be viewed as Divine Punishments rather they're opportunities for personal growth.

Avraham, The Locomotive

By Rabbi Berel Wein

Was Eliezer correct in establishing a pre-ordained sign of behavior to determine which woman would be the proper mate for Yitzchak? This is a long running debate among the commentators and scholars until our very day. Maimonides criticizes him for so doing while Rabbi Avraham ben David (Raavad) severely criticizes Maimonides for criticizing Eliezer.

The Talmud in the Tosefta to the eighth chapter of tractate Shabbat discusses all sorts of superstitions, signs, indications of good fortune or danger, etc. that are forbidden to Jews to indulge in. The clear indication of the Tosefta is that anything that has been empirically proven to be of practical value is permitted, whereas good luck charms and other empirically unproven signs and omens are forbidden, as being akin to pagan belief and practices.

Due to many historical and social pressures over the centuries, many such omens and signs have seeped into Jewish society eventually acquiring the status of accepted custom. And we are all very aware of the power and hold that customs have upon individuals.

I am always reminded of the rueful comment of Rabbi Yaakov Emden who famously said that “it is regrettable that ‘not to steal’ was a commandment and not a custom for had it been a custom more people would attempt to observe it.” Part of the problem in today’s society is the prioritization of omens and signs and questionable customs over the values and observances of Judaism itself as proscribed by the Torah and rabbinic writings. The spooks apparently always win out.

Of interest, at least to me, is the fact that Eliezer disappears completely from the narrative of the Torah after the mission of bringing Rivkah to Yitzchak is accomplished. If one adopts the opinion of Maimonides regarding Eliezer’s use of signs and omens as being incorrect and unjustified, perhaps that would inform his later disappearance from the Torah’s text. However, those who laud his behavior and view him as a greatly righteous person, must confront the issue of his absence in the narrative of the Torah after fulfilling the mission that Avraham placed upon him.

A parable is related in the name of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Chafetz Chaim): A person who never saw a railroad train before stands at a crossing and sees the train whiz by his eyes. He notices that all of the cars of the train are moving at the speed as is the locomotive. He does not therefore realize that the cars have no power of their own independent of the locomotive. When the locomotive can pull no longer then all of the cars will come to a halt.

Our father Avraham was the locomotive that pulled Eliezer and many others along in their search for God. When he passes from the world, as recorded in this week’s parsha, then Eliezer remains frozen and unable to grow spiritually. Thus the Torah has really nothing more to say to us about him. Jews are supposed to be locomotives, not just train cars being pulled along.

Chayei Sarah: Ishmael – How Does it End?

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Following the events of Abraham and Sarah's lives – the birth of Isaac, the expulsion of Ishmael at Sarah's behest, Abraham offering Isaac to G-d (the Akeidah) – this week's Torah portion (*Chayei Sarah*) brings this chapter of history to a close.

Sarah passes away at the age of 127 and is buried in the Machpeilah Cave in Hebron, which Abraham purchases from Ephron. Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to find a bride for his son Isaac. Eliezer returns with Rebecca and she marries Isaac. Abraham passes away at the age of 175, and is buried beside Sarah by both his sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

The portion concludes with the chronicles of Ishmael. It delineates his twelve children, who become twelve princes that establish the Arabian nations. Ishmael dies at the age of 137.

The final verse of this week's portion is: "[Ishmael's descendants] lived in the area from Havilah to Shur, which borders on Egypt, all the way to Assyria. They overran all their brethren."

Thus ends the story of Ishmael son of Abraham. In each of the last three Torah portions Ishmael plays a prominent role: in *Lech Lecho* Ishmael is born, with the promise to Abraham that he would be a great nation. In *Vayeira*, Sarah insists that Abraham send him away. Finally in *Chayei Sarah*, his life ends and his progeny documented.

Interesting to note that the concluding chapter of Ishmael is included in the portion called *Chayei Sarah*, the life of Sarah. Sarah was not Ishmael's mother; indeed, she actually caused Ishmael to be banished from Abraham's home. Why then would the Torah place Ishmael's final legacy in the chapter titled "the life of Sarah"?!

Rashi, the great classical Torah commentator, tells us that Ishmael did *teshuvah* (repented) before Abraham passed away. Indeed, the expression "*vayigveh*" (he breathed his last) used to describe the death of Ishmael, is only used in regard to tzaddikim. Some commentaries explain that through his *teshuvah* he transformed all his sins into virtues, thus his entire life was ultimately redeemed.

Abraham felt that the best way to influence Ishmael was through love and kindness. However G-d tells Abraham that he should defer to Sarah and send Ishmael away. Because *chesed* (love) that is not balanced with *gevurah* (discipline) can ultimately turn destructive. Rain without discipline will flood the fields; rain must fall in drops so that the earth can absorb the moisture.

Ishmael "will be a wild man." He inherited the passionate faith of Abraham. However passion must be tempered and channeled with *gevurah* lest it consume others, "his hand will be against everyone." As it turns out (at the end of this week's Parsha), that Ishmael's descendants "overran all their brethren," "at the end of days the children of Ishmael will initiate wars in the world."

Thus G-d tells Abraham to heed Sarah's *gevurah* approach, to send Ishmael away. This was not meant to destroy Ishmael, rather by banishing him he will become a great nation, as G-d promises Abraham. Ishmael cannot live in the same home with Isaac. Only with the appropriate measure of discipline can Ishmael grow. *On the face of all his brethren he fell* – Ishmael did *teshuvah* and was humbled ('fell'), and that elevates him (his *tikkun*).

Ishmael's *teshuvah* and the summation of Ishmael's life is therefore specifically placed in the portion of *Chayei Sarah*: Sarah's life and influence, particularly in regard to disciplining Ishmael, was instrumental in Ishmael's return to Abraham's faith.

The conclusion of Sarah's life (the end of Parshat *Chayei Sarah*), the climax of her achievements, is her impact on Ishmael: Sarah's *gevurah* approach causes that 'on the face of all his brethren he fell.' And from Ishmael's fall at the end of days will sprout Moshiach, who stems from the 'children of Isaac.'

Thus concludes the story of Ishmael son of Abraham – a story of aggression, banishment, but also a story that concludes with hope and redemption.