

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Haya Sarah Part II The Servant's Talk to Rebekah's Family

### 1. Introduction

Commenting on the verbosity of the several conversations of Abraham's servant as recorded in Genesis 24, Rab Ah(a stated: *יְפֵה שִׁיחָתָן שָׁל עֶבְדֵי בְרַחֵי*: אַבּוֹת מִתּוֹרָתָן שָׁל בְּנֵים שִׁיחָתָן שָׁל בְּנֵים, "The conversations of the servants of the patriarchs' households are choicer than the Torah of the children" (*Gen. Rab.* 60:8).

In his talk with Rebekah's family, the servant provided them a detailed account of Abraham's instructions to him as well as of the events at the well. This was of value to the family, but since the Torah had related these matters in detail as they occurred, what benefit was provided the reader by detailing his recapitulation? Why not merely provide a statement such as, "And the servant related to them that Abraham had sent him and all that transpired"? When the servant returns home and reports on his mission, all the text states is that he "related to Isaac all the things that he had done" (*Gen.* 24:66). We will return to this question.

An appreciation of the numerous, often subtle, variations between the initial accounts of the events and the servant's review of them is crucial to grasping the significance of this passage. We cannot accept the view of Ibn Ezra, Radaq, et al., that such slight textual differences are merely another way of saying the same thing and of little if any consequence. Critical study of the Bible subsequent to their time has yielded compelling evidence that even slight variations were intended to be noted and are exceedingly significant (as was recognized by the Sages of old). Neh'ama Leibowitz (*Studies in the Book of Genesis*) and Meir Sternberg (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*) have adeptly commented on

many of our parasha's variations, and we will draw much from their works.

From the moment he begins to speak to Rebekah's family, the servant manifests faithful dedication to his task and superb understanding of the situation, as well as extraordinary skill in negotiating competing priorities. He accomplishes his goal in superlative fashion. The attentive reader is struck by the servant's unwavering attention to subtle detail and his acute psychological insight. This is virtually all brought out through dialogue.

In introducing himself, the servant omits his personal name (and the narrative follows suit throughout); indeed, his name is never revealed in our passage. While representing his master, a devoted servant is his master's extension and his individual ego must be subdued.

In sharp contrast to the narrative's brief opening verse, "Hashem had blessed Abraham in all things" (*v.* 1), the servant begins with a lengthy catalogue of possessions that Hashem has blessed Abraham with (itemizing, notably, eight categories): sheep, cattle, silver, gold, male servants, female servants, camels and asses. Although the events at the well convinced him that Rebekah was divinely selected to be the wife for Abraham's son, he realizes that he cannot presume a similar viewpoint for the other family members. He assumes persuasion will be necessary and his goal facilitated by informing them of Abraham's great wealth. His statement may merely have been an acknowledgment of human nature; after all, he did depart from Abraham with ten camels, a number of servants and a great deal of his master's bounty. It may also be that the servant's encounter

with Laban at the well prompted him to emphasize possessions. In the next verse he adds that Abraham gave all he owns to Isaac. Although this was not yet official (only fulfilled in Gen. 25:5), the servant knows it is as good as done, so why confuse his listeners?

## 2. Variations Relating to His Instructions

Before continuing, it will be helpful to review the verses describing Abraham's instructions to his servant. First, the patriarch asked him to "place your hand under my thigh" to take an oath, a procedure that was also employed by Jacob when adjuring Joseph (Gen. 47:29). Whether "under my thigh" is a euphemism for the organ upon which the covenantal sign is etched or, more likely, is to be taken literally and for the purpose of modesty the hand was placed near the covenantal sign, in either case it should be understood as invoking the Covenant, a sign of which is circumcision. The action calls upon G-d, who is in a covenantal relationship with the individual involved, to witness the sacred commitment being made. It should be recalled that Abraham's servants were included in the requirement to be circumcised (17:12-13). In recognition of the important assignment and great discretion accorded the servant, Abraham places him under oath to "Hashem, the G-d of heaven and the G-d of earth." (This is the only attestation of this appellation in Tanakh; perhaps it is a case of substituting the monotheistic formula for what previously was an invocation of all the gods.)

The first point Abraham stressed was "you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites in whose midst I dwell" (24:3). Just as G-d's plans for Abraham required departure from homeland and family to settle in a new environment, so, too, did the patriarch deem it necessary that Isaac's wife not be from the local populace. The influence a local family and its culture would exert on one of their daughters would prevent her from fully integrating with Isaac in carrying on the new heritage and transmitting it to the next generation. Marrying into a local family might also make it more difficult to envision eventually possessing the whole land.

Abraham's formulation of his instructions draws from the terms of G-d's initial *lekh lekha* ("go you

forth") command of 12:1; he instructs the servant to go *אל ארצי ואל מולדתי* ("to my land and my kinsmen"). He omits reference to the third object that G-d had asked him to separate from in that *lekh lekha* command, *בית אביך* ("your father's home"). This is understandable – a matchmaker restricted to a particular family operates at a great disadvantage. Abraham does not know what type of girl might be available in that family; what if they try to pass off an inappropriate one? To assure a suitable wife the representative requires some latitude.

Not marrying a local woman was especially critical in the first stage of establishing the new nation, when there had not as yet been a single transmission of the new heritage. This was of particular concern since (perhaps primarily because) Sarah was no longer alive to be an example to Isaac's wife. (Similarly, the imperative of not leaving the promised land was crucial in regard to Yish%aq, since G-d's promise of inheritance of the land was symbolized in his living there.)

Abraham stresses to the servant that under no circumstances is Isaac to leave the promised land, even if the supposedly "right" girl is found and all that stands in the way of marriage is the issue of where they will live. He declares his faith that "Hashem, G-d of heaven who took me forth from my father's home and my homeland" will intervene to bring the mission to success (v. 7). However, being practical, he added, "If the woman does not agree to go after you, you are released from my oath" (v. 8).

When explaining his assignment to Rebekah's family, the servant cannot repeat his master's charge verbatim without creating major difficulties. Surely Abraham understood this and relied on the insight and good judgment of "his servant, the senior of his household, who was in charge of all he had" (v. 2), who, we may assume, internalized the values of his master.

In referring to the oath, the servant omits the placing of his hand under his master's thigh. This act had a unique meaning associated with the newly established Covenant that Rebekah's family knew nothing of and was therefore inappropriate to be mentioned. (Oath-taking accompanied by holding the

procreative organ may possibly have been practiced in some ancient societies, but with totally different symbolism.) The servant also omitted Abraham's citation of "Hashem, G-d of heaven and G-d of earth." The family, not assumed to be monotheistic (see Josh. 24:2), probably had other ideas regarding the gods of heaven and earth.

Relating that his master did not specifically send him to them would not be conducive to good family relations. So, as he believes G-d directed him specifically to them on behalf of his master, his going to them is equivalent to Abraham having sent him to them in the first instance and he accordingly incorporates that detail in Abraham's instructions. He thus nurtured and capitalized on a feeling of family solidarity (vv. 38, 40, 41). Abraham's description of G-d as the One "Who took me forth from my father's home and my homeland" would not play well to his father's close relatives and homeland natives. How could he explain that they were unsuitable for Abraham in the past, but he now desires their daughter for Isaac? Abraham is therefore quoted as saying, "Hashem, before whom I have walked," a locution commonly used in Mesopotamia in conjunction with various gods, which they would assume Abraham adapted to his personal Deity.

The dialogue addressing the concern the servant raised to Abraham, namely, what if the prospective bride does not agree to come, a possibility that Abraham had acknowledged, could also not be repeated verbatim to the family. In many ancient societies, granting a daughter the right to make such a decision would be viewed as a lack of respect for the parents, implying overconfidence regarding their agreement, and taking them for granted. Abraham is therefore portrayed as correcting the servant and focused on the family's wishes – "if *they* do not give her to you, you shall be released from my oath" (v. 41). The critical point of not returning Isaac, under any circumstances, to Abraham's former homeland, would not be appreciated by them. On this matter, the servant skips the possibility completely; the terms of his oath would have to suffice: "if they do not give her to you, you are released from my oath." If anyone brings up the possibility of Isaac coming to Rebekah, they will realize that the servant is not empowered to negotiate on that matter.

### 3. Concerning Events at the Well

Arriving at the well in the late afternoon, when the young women of the town would come to draw water, the servant prays. He begins with, "Hashem, G-d of my master Abraham, please cause [wondrous things] to happen before me today and do kindness with my master Abraham" (v. 12). He proceeds to designate a sign of behavior that reflects a great degree of sensitivity and kindheartedness to both humans and animals. The maiden to whom he would ask for a drink of water and responds that she will give him to drink as well as give water to his camels (and he has ten camels), "she is the one You have chosen for your servant Isaac." He assumes that he may rely on fulfillment of such a combination of factors as an omen coming from G-d.\*

Immediately upon his concluding his prayer Rebekah appears on the scene. When he asks her for a drink her response was favorable concerning him but at first she did not mention the camels. Only when he was through drinking did she say she would draw for the camels, and adds that she would do so until they finished drinking. Amazing. The maiden has an extraordinary commitment to *h%oesed* and also possessed a fine sense of propriety, respecting human dignity by not combining the camels' needs with those of a person. She possessed boundless energy and perseverance; a thirsty camel drinks many gallons of water and for ten camels she would have to go down to the well countless times. All this for a stranger. She was a perfect match for Abraham's family.

In his recounting to the family he quoted himself as introducing his prayer at the well with, "Hashem, G-d of my master Abraham, if You choose to grant success to my mission," manifesting a much more modest tone than was the case. As the faithful servant of Abraham, knowing he was praying sincerely to the one G-d for the benefit of his master and his master's son, he felt comfortable expressing himself to G-d in a bold manner, asking straightforwardly, "please cause [wondrous things] to happen." However, to those not familiar with the fuller context these words would appear arrogant.

Regarding Rebekah's response to his request, to the family he quotes her telling him, "you should drink

and I will also give your camels to drink,” in harmony with his formulation of the omen. In her actual response she had not volunteered to give water to the camels until after he drank. Although separating man and animals is surely an exquisite flourish and enriches fulfillment of the omen, he omits that detail. In the pagan world in which the family lives, prayers such as that of the servant were viewed as incantations and magical charms; the closer the external correspondence between the verbal formulation and the ensuing occurrence, the more convincing the omen. An interposing act might detract from their recognizing the providential dimension. To provide an explanation would be unrealistic and unconvincing.

The servant understandably omitted the part of Rebekah’s response that she would draw until the camels finished drinking, an intention that the text makes clear she fulfilled. To the family, however, that detail might reflect negatively on the servant, portraying him as exploitative of the young girl. In addition, he is now defining his mission as having been specifically directed to Abraham’s family from its initiation. Accordingly, he does not want to speak of having subjected the young lady to a character test of unusual dimensions, prompting the thought that he was not necessarily looking for their family or that without the character test he may not have selected Rebekah. His report of his prayer with the omen and her actions at the well include a test, but one much reduced from what it actually was.

In his prayer he did not stipulate that he would ask for מֵעַט מַיִם (“a little water”), but when he made his request to the beautiful girl who had just filled her jug he did so specify. He already was impressed with her and, subconsciously, wanted to do his share to help bring about the fulfillment of his omen. (Of course, it was a slight violation of the rules of the game.) When he related the events to the family he reversed the placement of when he said “a little water,” as if to imply that when he initially stipulated the details of the sign it was “a little water,” but when he acted he omitted those words. Thus, he exchanged the possible notion of having lessened the demands of the omen with making it a bit more challenging. He was balancing subtle implications.

The Torah relates that when the camels finished drinking the servant gave the maiden the gold jewelry and only then asked as to her family. He had a divine omen that she was the designated wife and her character traits fit those of his master’s family, so the question of pedigree was no longer pressing. But to the family, he relates that he first asked her concerning her lineage.\*\* Although he wants them to accept the fact that divine providence is at work, he is also promoting the perception that Abraham is loyal to his family and he does not want to be inconsistent with what he said previously.

From his opening statement depicting Abraham’s great wealth, utilizing subtle but meaningful modifications while maintaining a high degree of respect for the family, the servant moved from the attraction of riches and worldly success to an emphasis on family solidarity and concluded with the religious dimension. They accepted the indication that G-d Himself had intervened to make this match, as they proclaimed: “This matter has come forth from Hashem” (v. 50).

#### **4. In Conclusion**

In light of the above, we are better prepared to address the question of why the Torah reported the servant’s recapitulation of events in the great detail that it did. Abarbanel explains that it was to show the superlative wisdom and skill of the servant. Nehama Leibowitz goes further: it was to provide insight into the servant’s deep dedication to his task, fully investing heart and mind into successfully concluding his mission. However, depicting a great servant at work, even if it reflects positively on Abraham and his household, does not appear to be sufficient reason to warrant so many extra verses in the Torah. It could have merely stated that the servant successfully accomplished his task.

Perhaps the recapitulations with the many adjustments and variances were incorporated into the Torah’s narrative to demonstrate the beneficial results achievable in dealing sensitively and courteously with people who were not familiar with the religious beliefs of Abraham. After all, with the servant’s respect for the feelings of members of another culture and maintenance of cordiality

throughout their interaction, he moved them to the recognition of divine providence at work. The servant's behavior was an outstanding example for the members of the forthcoming nation to be familiar with and emulate in their own lives. Living as they inevitably would among people of differing religions and philosophies, by being ever-sensitive to, and respectful of, the feelings of others, they would be able to move them to an appreciation of the divine will and higher values. It would require great sensitivity, prudence, good judgment and generosity of spirit with pure intentions, but it is the way of friendship and peace. Thus, the recapitulation reveals another facet of Abraham's extraordinary character and concern for others and contains a valuable lesson for his progeny.

"The conversations of the servants of the patriarchs' households are choicer than the Torah of the children." They provide insight into an aspect of how G-d's goal of bringing blessing to the nations of the world – which lies at the foundation of His first prophecy to Abraham – may be furthered.

### Endnotes

\* Regarding his prayer at the well, the Talmud states (*b. Hul.* 95b): וְהָאֵמֶר רַב כֹּל נִחַשׁ שְׂאִינוּ כְּאֶלְיָעֶזֶר עֶבֶד אַבְרָהָם וְכִיּוֹנָתָן בֶּן שָׂאִיל אֵינוּ נִחַשׁ, ("All divination that is not in the manner of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, or Jonathan the son of Saul is not true divination"). This refers to relying on omens to determine how to proceed in a matter, a practice forbidden by the Torah: לֹא תִנְחָשׁוּ (Lev. 19:26); לֹא יִמָּצֵא בְךָ...מְעוֹנִין וּמְנַחֵשׁ (Deut. 18:10). Although the Talmudic statement was unqualified and was codified by Maimonides as stated in the Talmud (*MT, Laws Concerning Idolatry* 11:4), many have "defended" the servant. Some consider him blameless because he acted before the lawgiving. Others have deemed this explanation as well as that of the Rambam, inadequate, for it is not likely that the Torah would give so much prominence to an act that was basically forbidden.

Many commentators (see Rabad, Radaq, Abarbanel) take a different approach. In essence, there are two significant considerations that differentiate the servant's sign from the forbidden ones of divination.

First, the prohibition of divination is connected to belief in some sort of magic or supernatural agency that provides the imagined veracity to the omens, which implies existence of idolatrous forces. The servant, however, specifically asked ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אַבְרָהָם, ("Hashem, the G-d of my master Abraham"), to provide him a distinctive sign. Second, the omens in divination do not provide much, if any, rational basis upon which to act, whereas the servant's omens comprised a multifaceted character test that provided excellent criteria to rely upon. There were ten camels and the servant had men with him. Volunteering to give water to the camels of a stranger is a great indication of a kind, well-bred, capable, healthy and energetic girl. Whether an individual should engage in deciding that a certain outcome is a sign from G-d that supports a particular course of action is a totally different matter.

The Talmudic statement concerning Eliezer and Jonathan was perhaps merely intended to illustrate from well-known examples the external form of divination, that it is a case of stating a sign and basing action on whether or not it occurs, not that the two particular cases cited were transgressions.

\*\* Most classical commentators assume that the servant asked Rebekah about her father before giving her the jewelry. Rashbam assumes the narrative is structured as it is so as not to interrupt the dialogue that follows; Ibn Ezra interprets "he asked 'whose daughter are you?'" to mean "he had already asked"; Ramban capitalizes on the fact that the verse does not explicitly state that he gave her the jewelry or placed it on her, to interpret it to mean he prepared it; Tosafot (*b. Hul.* 95b) cite the exegetical rule of "there is no earlier or later in the Torah," an application that some authorities only consider valid on the paragraph level (*parashiyot qetanot*) but not within a paragraph as here; Bekhor Shor comments: "he gave after he asked for he was not a fool." Rebekah's presumed presence when the servant recounted the story to her parents lends some support to these interpretations. But the straightforward reading surely is that he gave before asking. Perhaps, as Rashi suggests, the servant fully trusted the omen and acted on it. Or perhaps the gifts were a thank you for her prodigious efforts. When speaking to the family he deemed it more appropriate to "normalize" the order of his actions.

A conjecture: Immediately upon Rebekah's reporting home about the visitor, we are told that her brother "Laban runs outside to the man at the fountain" (Gen. 24:29). The next verse informs us that when "he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's hands and when he heard the words of his sister Rebekah...he came to the man...by the fountain." The first of these two verses serves in an anticipatory manner. The narrative employs a literary device to focus on Laban

to bring out a point. He was so anxious and excited to see the man that he was "running out of the house" so the narrative anticipated it. Perhaps when the servant saw the maiden perfectly fulfilling the details of the omen that he set he was so anxious and excited and so wanted to give the gifts that the narrative described it a bit early.

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