

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Chayei Sarah

A Servant's Mission

Much of this week's parsha is devoted to the Torah's description of Eliezer's quest to find a wife for Yitzchak. Notably, not only does the Torah recount this episode itself in detail, it also includes Eliezer's retelling of it in full. Commenting on this phenomenon, the Midrash states:¹

יפה שיחתן של עבדי אבות לפני המקום מתורתן של בנים, שהרי פרשה של אליעזר כפולה בתורה, והרבה גופי תורה לא ניתנו אלא ברמיזה

The conversation of the servants of the patriarchs is more beautiful before the Omnipresent than the Torah of the descendants; for the section dealing with Eliezer is presented twice, while many primary Torah laws are only imparted through allusion.

This itself is a very beautiful statement, but it does require some contemplation on our part. *Why* is the patriarchs' servants' conversation more beautiful than the laws of the Torah itself?

Some Differences between the Two Accounts

To understand this matter, we first note that, upon inspection, Eliezer's account of the story is not a verbatim repetition of the Torah's "own" account, for there are numerous aspects which differ between the two presentations. A couple of notable examples:

1. Avraham tells Eliezer that he must go "אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלְדֹתַי" – to my land and to my birthplace."² When Eliezer tells the story, he quotes Avraham as telling him to go "אֶל בֵּית אָבִי וְאֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתִּי" – to my father's household and to my family."³

¹ Bereishis Rabbah 60:8, cited in Rashi to verse 42.

² Verse 4.

³ Verse 38.

2. As soon as Rivkah has given both Eliezer and his camels to drink, he gives her the jewelry and then asks her who she is.⁴ When he recounts the story, he first mentions that he asked who she was and only then says that he gave her the jewelry.⁵

These discrepancies certainly require our attention, for why would Eliezer see it as either necessary or appropriate to depart even slightly from the events as they actually happened?

Avraham's Instructions – and Hashem's Orchestrations

The key to this matter lies in understanding Avraham's original instructions to Eliezer, and then noting how the entire mission underwent a complete transformation approximately halfway through. We might be inclined to formulate Avraham's instructions as telling Eliezer find a wife for Yitzchak in his hometown, Charan, specifically his family who still lived there. However, the Malbim explains that, in actual fact, Avraham's family *did not feature in his original plan at all*. Rather, Avraham simply felt that the inhabitants of Charan in general were the type of people from whom a suitable young girl could be found for Yitzchak. Thus, he stipulates only that she come from "my land and my birthplace," but makes no mention of his family. What, then, will determine who is the right girl? The answer is very simply, that anyone who exhibits exemplary character traits and generosity of spirit is *by definition* a good choice for Yitzchak.

It is for this reason that when he arrives at Charan, Eliezer makes his way, not to Besuel's house, but rather to the well to conduct his test and find a wife for Yitzchak. That test will tell him all he needs to know about the prospective bride – whoever she may be! Indeed, not only does Eliezer not make his way to Avraham's family, he *doesn't even enter the city*; for as verse eleven relates, the well was outside the city limits. Eliezer reasoned that a family which was prepared to send its daughter outside of the city to draw water would hopefully be agreeable to her leaving the city for purposes of a good marriage. Throughout all this planning, Avraham's family could not be further from Eliezer's mind. It is fascinating to consider that the way he envisages his mission going, they will never even need to know that he was there.

⁴ Verses 22 and 23.

⁵ Verse 47.

This explains why, as soon as the girl Eliezer approaches has passed his test with flying colors, he gives her the jewelry before even asking her name. By passing the test, she has already demonstrated that she is a suitable match for Yitzchak regardless of who she is. Needless to say, Eliezer needs to ask her name at some stage, but that is only to find out who this anonymous wonderful girl actually is, and what name to put for “Bride’s Family” on the wedding invitation. With this background in mind, we will appreciate that nothing could have prepared Eliezer for what was about to happen next.

Although Avraham’s family were not part of his original plan, they were part of Hashem’s plan, Who arranged that the one Eliezer approached and who passed the test was Rivkah, Avraham’s niece. Indeed, we can only imagine Eliezer’s utter astonishment upon hearing that the girl who had passed his test was none other than the granddaughter of Nachor, Avraham’s brother!

Revising the Script

At this stage, it is clear beyond any doubt that Rivkah is the one for Yitzchak. However, it is equally clear that if Eliezer tells her family the story exactly the way it occurred, he will practically guarantee the failure of his mission. If they hear that they were *completely incidental* to Avraham’s plan, it will not bring out their most agreeable side, to say the least. Therefore, Eliezer realizes that in order for this to work, he will need to retell the entire story – with them as the focus from the beginning! This will require a number of adjustments, the first among them being tailoring Avraham’s original instructions telling him to go “to my land and to my birthplace,” stating instead that he was told to go “to my father’s house and to my family.”

Fine-Tuning

In this regard, there is a fascinating accompanying shift in nuance between the two accounts. Avraham’s words were “כִּי אֶל אֶרֶץ וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי – Except to my land and to my birthplace,” Eliezer retells this as “אִם לֹא אֶל בַּיִת אָבִי וְאֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתִּי – If not to my family and my father’s house.” Why does he shift the pivotal term from “except” to “if not”?

The difference between the two versions is that Avraham was absolutely insistent that the girl come from Charan, hence he used the term “except”. The reason he could be so insistent is because he was not particular as to who exactly the girl

should be. From the pool of prospects in the entire city, surely someone suitable could be found. When Eliezer retold those instructions, with his version centering on Avraham's family specifically, he also needed to back away and "tone down" that level of insistence. For if they knew that they were Avraham's only choice, they could become unreasonably demanding; after all, what other alternative does he have? To this end, he modified Avraham's words as saying: "Do not consider anyone from Canaan unless ("if not") it doesn't work out with my family". In this way, Eliezer is communicating a blended message to her family, which said: "You are certainly Avraham's *first* choice, but you are by no means his *only* choice. I sincerely hope it works out and I don't have to consider other options."

Of course, a major piece in Eliezer's retelling of the story will be the test at the well. After all, if he was only ever meant to come to Avraham's family, what is the purpose of stopping off at the communal well outside the city to conduct a test that anyone could pass? For this, Eliezer resourcefully weaves this element of the story into his presentation, making it in fact even more ambitious than it originally was. In blessed hindsight, he can claim that in order to seek absolute Divine approval for the match, he set up a test whereby the one who passed would be from Avraham's family – and so she was!

For this reason, in retelling the part where she had passed the test, Eliezer reversed the order of his actions, stating first that he asked her name and only then that he gave her the gifts. According to his version of events, he could not have given her the gifts prior to finding out who she was, after all, what if she was not from Avraham's family? Wasn't that what the test was all about? Therefore, he says that first he asked her for her name, and when she turned out to be from his master's family – representing the success of his test – he then gave her the gifts.

Understanding Eliezer's retelling in this manner illuminates this entire chapter, as well as serving as encouragement to look at Eliezer's account vis a vis that of the Torah with much more alertness than we otherwise might have done.

Eliezer's Faithfulness

There is another element in this story which reveals a whole new dimension to Eliezer's actions. The Sages inform us that Eliezer had his own ideas for a match

for Yitzchak – his daughter! When he communicated this wish to Avraham, the latter rejected his proposal, and instructed him instead to find a girl from Charan.⁶ Set against this background, we can fully appreciate that throughout his mission, Eliezer is working against his own self-interest.

This brings us to the changes in Eliezer’s story. No one could have faulted him for telling the episode exactly as it occurred. If that should lead to the match breaking down, that would be regrettable, but it would also bring a glimmer of hope for Eliezer himself. However, his faithfulness to his master overcame such an inclination, and expressed itself not only in carrying out his instructions to the letter, but also in then enlisting his resourcefulness and ingenuity to see that the outcome would be the optimum for his master. Such selflessness and dedication to a higher ideal in the face of one’s own preferred outcome is indeed a very beautiful thing to behold. It is this quality that the Sages have in mind when they refer to “the beauty of the conversation of the patriarch’s servants.”

In this regard, there is an overarching lesson contained in this story that relates to the Jewish people themselves. Our relationship with Hashem is likewise that of servants to a Master, and in this, our role-model is the quintessential servant of Chumash Bereishis – Eliezer. Moreover, the particular laws of the Torah can be effectively derived from a mere allusion in the verse, using the principles of halachic exposition. In contrast, the lesson of what it means to be a servant specifically emerges from the Torah recounting in full not only the episode itself, but also in replaying it, this time set to the beautiful melody of a servant’s faithfulness. It is a song presented not only for our appreciation and admiration, but also for our emulation and application.

⁶ Bereishis Rabbah 59:9, cited in Rashi to verse 39.