

# BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Chayei Sarah

### Beginnings and Endings

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Most of this week's parashah is devoted to Eliezer's journey to find a wife for Yitzchak. The Midrash Rabbah quotes the verse (Yeshayah 50:10), "Who among you fears Hashem, listening to the voice of His servant? Though he may have walked in darkness with no light for himself, let him trust in the Name of Hashem, and lean upon his Elokim." The midrash comments: "Who among you fears Hashem"--this refers to Eliezer. "Listening to the voice of His servant"--Eliezer listened to Avraham, G-d's servant. "Though he may have walked in darkness"--when he went to bring Rivka. "With no light for himself"--but Hashem lit the way with bolts of lightning. "Let him trust in the Name of Hashem, and lean upon his Elokim"--therefore he said (Bereishit 24:12), "Hashem, Elokim of my master Avraham, may You so arrange it for me this day." [Until here from the midrash]

R' David Cohen z"l (1887-1972; instructor at Yeshivat Merkaz Ha'Rav; known as the "Nazir") asks: Where does the Torah say that Eliezer traveled in the dark or during a lightning storm? He explains:

There is a dispute between the early halachic authorities, Rambam z"l and Ra'avad z"l, whether Eliezer's reliance on a sign--whether the girl would offer to give water to Eliezer's camels--was halachically proper or was improper (as it would be improper for a person to cancel a journey because a black cat crossed his path). However, writes R' Cohen, this midrash is teaching that Eliezer actually placed his trust in Hashem, and the "sign" which he set up was intended as no more than a momentary flash of light, a bolt of lightning, in an otherwise pitch black "night" to give him comfort that he was on the right path.

Indeed, R' Cohen writes, shidduchim / dating is always like that. Every couple is in the dark about what to look for and whether they are meant for each other. From time-to-time, a "bolt of lightning" will light the darkness to show the parties that they are on the right path. Still, in the final analysis,

one must rely on Hashem. (Zachu Shechinah Beineihem p.8g)

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"Now Avraham was zaken / old, well on in days, and Hashem had blessed Avraham bakol / with everything." (24:1)

Why does our verse say that Avraham was "well on in days" rather than "well on in years"? R' Yaakov Yosef Hakohen z"l (1710-1784; foremost disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov z"l; known by chassidim as "the Toldos" after one of his works) explains:

The Gemara (Shabbat 153a) teaches: Rabbi Eliezer said, "Repent one day before you die. But, since no one knows when he will die, repent every day." King Shlomo likewise said (Kohelet 9:8), "At all times, let your clothes be white." Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: "This may be likened to a king who announced that he would hold a feast, but did not announce the time. The intelligent ones among his entourage dressed-up so as to be ready on a moment's notice, while the fools did not prepare." [Until here from the Gemara]

The Toldos continues: Our verse refers to Avraham as a "zaken," a term which implies wisdom. Surely, like the intelligent servants in the above parable, he prepared every day for the day when Hashem would call him home. Furthermore, as a wise man, he knew what needed correcting. Thus, as Rabbi Eliezer suggests, he repented every day and made every day meaningful. This is why the verse says he was "well on in days." (Porat Yosef)

Rashi z"l comments on our verse: "The numerical value of the word 'bakol' is equal to that of 'ben' / son suggesting that G-d had blessed Avraham with a son, and since he had a son he had to find him a wife."

Why did Avraham wait until Yitzchak was forty years old to find a wife for him? R' Aharon Berachiah z"l (Modena, Italy; died 1639) explains: Our Sages say that one should take the daughter of a Torah scholar as a wife for his son. If that is not possible, he should take the daughter of "good people." In Avraham's time, taking the daughter of a Torah scholar obviously was not an option. Therefore, Avraham did the next best thing and waited until Betuel, a good person, had a daughter who could marry Yitzchak.

What made Betuel qualify as a good person? R' Aharon Berachiah explains further: In our parashah, we find Betuel living in Charan. Why? His father Nachor lived in Ur Kasdim! At the end of Parashat Noach, Betuel's grandfather leaves Ur Kasdim with his sons Avram (Avraham) and Haran, and travels to Charan. But, Nachor does not join them. How, then, did Betuel end up in Charan? It follows that Betuel was a good person who, like his grandfather, did not want to live in proximity to the wicked king Nimrod, so he moved to Charan.

Rivka's mother also was a good person. How do we know this? Because of the blessing which she

gave Rivka in our parashah (24:60): "May you come to be thousands of myriads, and may your offspring conquer the gate of its foes." This was a blessing that Yaakov should prevail over Esav, as it is written (Bemidbar10:36), "Reside tranquilly, Hashem, among the thousands of myriads of Yisrael." Likewise we read (Bemidbar 24:18), "Edom [Esav] shall be a conquest." (Derashot Ma'avar Yabok: Drush l'nisuin)

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"Food was set before him [Eliezer], but he said, 'I will not eat until I have spoken my piece.' And he [Lavan] said, 'Speak.' Then he [Eliezer] said, 'I am a servant of Avraham'." (24:33-34)

Surely they knew he was a servant of Avraham! R' Naftali Katz z"l (rabbi in Poland; popularly known as the "Ba'al Semichat Chachamim"; died 1719) explains, based on two introductions:

First, Pirkei Avot (ch.3) states: "If three people ate together and did not exchange words of Torah between them, it is as if they ate from a sacrifice offered to an idol." When should the divrei Torah be said? asks R' Katz, and he answers: It can only be before they have started eating, for if they wait until they have finished eating, they are no longer considered to be eating together. And, if they say divrei Torah during the meal, they may choke on their food.

Second, Rashi z"l comments on our parashah that the everyday conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs is greater than the Torah of the Patriarch's descendants. How so? Because many mitzvot are alluded to by only one word, or even one letter, in the Torah, while Eliezer's conversation with Rivka and her family is recorded in detail--not once, but twice.

In this light, we can understand our verses: Eliezer was offered food, but he said, "I will not eat until I have spoken my piece." Since one is supposed to say a dvar Torah before eating, Lavan assumed that that was Eliezer's intention as well, so Lavan said, "Speak!" (Of course, the wicked Lavan had no interest in hearing a dvar Torah; it was all part of his charade.) But, Eliezer did not say a dvar Torah; rather, he began to discuss the reason for his visit. This angered Lavan, who was hungry, and he said that such discussion could wait until after the meal. [The preceding two sentences are not mentioned explicitly in the Torah.] To this Eliezer replied, "I am a servant of Avraham"--my everyday conversation is greater than the Torah and therefore may precede the meal! (Likkutei Semichat Chachamim)

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"Yitzchak went out to pray in the field towards evening." (24:63)

Our Sages say that Yitzchak established the minchah prayer. However, our Sages also say that Avraham Avinu observed the entire Torah, even the mitzvot that are of Rabbinic origin. Why didn't he recite minchah?

R' Maimon z"l (12th century; father of Rambam) explains that all of the Patriarchs recited all of the prayers. However, every tzaddik makes certain mitzvot central to his unique way of serving Hashem. Of course, a tzaddik observes all of the mitzvot, but he puts special effort into one or a few mitzvot more than others. Thus, Avraham put special effort into reciting shacharit; Yitzchak put special effort into reciting minchah; and Yaakov put special effort into reciting ma'ariv. (Iggeret Ha'nechamah)

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## Letters from Our Sages

In connection with our parashah, the first to mention the practice of burying the dead, we present the tzava'ah / will of R' Moshe Shick z"l (Maharam Shick; 1807-1879; rabbi and rosh yeshiva of Khust, Hungary). This letter is the first of at least three surviving wills that Maharam Shick wrote in his last years. It appears in Igrot Maharam Shick No. 148.

Since no man knows when his time will come, therefore, I am instructing my household remaining after me. I request forgiveness from the members of my household and from my congregants and from all of the Jewish People if, G-d forbid, I slighted their honor. I forgive anyone who sinned against me, whether unintentionally or intentionally, and I forgive anyone who took anything of value from my home. I request that others forgive me if I took anything from them unknowingly. If anyone comes with a claim against me, pay him from my assets as seen fit by the moreh [usually referring to a halachic authority], even if not required by the letter of the law.

In my trunk, there is earth from Eretz Yisrael. Place some of this on my mouth, the place of the brit milah, and my eyes. Those who handle my body should have immersed in a mikvah the same day, as is fitting and is the custom. You should pay the chevra kadishah for my plot. I hereby submit my nefesh, ruach and neshamah [the parts of the soul] to Hashem, may He be Blessed. May the Merciful One atone for sins etc., and may my death be an atonement for all of my sins. May He conceal me under His wings, etc. and may You hear my prayer.

These are the words of this writer and suppliant, here, Khust, on the day when "ki tov" was doubled [i.e., Tuesday] of the week of "You are all standing today before Hashem" [i.e., Parashat Nitzavim], in the year 5635 [1875].

[Signed] Moshe Shick of Brezova

I also ask my students, wherever they are, to study mishnayot for my sake and to recite the prayer written for this purpose, and may Hashem lengthen their days and years.

[Signed] The foregoing

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics

('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the Hamaayan page.

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