

# THE SLAVE'S MISSION

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

Pursuant to Sarah's burial, we are told of the mission undertaken by Avraham's slave - to find a wife for Yitzhak:

"Avraham was now old and well advanced in years, and Hashem had blessed him in every way. He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had: '... I want you to swear by Hashem, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Yitzchak.' The servant asked him, 'What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?'. 'Make sure that you do not take my son back there,' Avraham said. '... If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there.'" (B'resheet 24:1-8).

The mission is clear - find a wife for Yitzhak from among Avraham's extended family who will come back to K'na'an (Eretz Yisra'el) and join the Avrahamic tribe. The one condition which is stressed by Avraham is not to bring Yitzhak back "there".

Upon arriving at the old family home (Aram Naharayim), the slave prays to God for help in completing his mission:

(Parenthetical note: from early Midrashim on, the unnamed slave is identified as "Eliezer"; indeed, in the famous dictum of Rav [BT Hulin 95b], the validity or taboo of divining is modeled after "Yonatan, son of Saul and Eliezer, the slave of Avraham". This identification is, *prima facie*, somewhat difficult. After all, the only time that Eliezer's name is mentioned is as Avraham's chief steward - hardly a slave - and he has already reached that powerful position in Avraham's household about 70 years earlier than this event. The likely reason that the Rabbis "assumed" Eliezer is that it is the only name of a member of Avraham's household that we can reference; there are other examples of this phenomenon in Midrashic literature but that is beyond the scope of this discussion).

"Then he prayed, 'O Hashem, God of my master Avraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Avraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, "Please let down your jar that I may have a drink," and she says, "Drink, and I'll water your camels too" - let her be the one

you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master."

How does the slave's request of God conform to the stated goals of his mission? Avraham asked him to find a young woman who would come back to K'na'an to marry Yitzhak - and he set up a "hospitality test" for the local girls!

Before addressing this question, I'd like to pose a greater question about Yitzhak - one that is the focus of Midrashic and medieval commentary: From the time that Avraham is told to stay his hand from Yitzhak (B'resheet 22:12) until Rivkah is brought back with the slave as his fiancée, Yitzhak is nowhere to be found. He doesn't return to B'er Sheva with Avraham after the Akedah (ch. 22), nor is he present at his own mother's burial (chapter 23). (There are some who posit that he was present but not active - and therefore not mentioned - at both of these scenes; however, the simple reading of text implies that Yitzhak is not present at all).

The Akedah was undoubtedly the most critical point of Yitzhak's life - one which shaped the essential dimensions of his personality. The Midrash (B'resheet Rabbah 65:6) comments that as Avraham was looking down at his son on the altar, the angels were sobbing in heaven in anticipation of his death. At that time, the heavens opened and their angelic tears fell into the eyes of Yitzhak - leading to his early blindness (see B'resheet 27:1). The implication of this Midrash is that the events which took place on that mountaintop profoundly affected Yitzhak for the rest of his life.

What happened to Yitzhak atop the mountain, bound and lying on top of the altar, that changed him so deeply?

When we look back at God's original directive to Avraham regarding Yitzhak, we find an ambiguous command: v'Ha'alehu sham l'Olah (B'resheet 22:2) - which might be translated "take him up there as an Olah" - meaning "offer him up"; or it might be understood as "take him up there for an Olah" - meaning "show him how to perform an offering" (see Rashi and Rambam). Indeed, according to some opinions, this was the "test" of Avraham - to see how he would respond to an ambiguous message with cataclysmic overtones.

## **THE RESULT OF THE AKEDAH: YITZHAK BECOMES A LIVING OLAH**

There is, however, a third way of understanding the phrase in question which may explain Yitzhak's "disappearance" in the subsequent narratives. Unlike the "Hatat", "Asham" (expiation offerings) and "Shlamim" (peace offering), the Olah is totally given over to God. No part of the Olah is eaten by people. Within the matrix of offerings, the Olah represents the dimension of our personalities which longs to be totally bound up with God, unconcerned with (and unfettered by) mundane concerns.

Now, let's take a fresh look at the command: Take him up to be an Olah - in other words, do not offer him up (i.e. sacrifice him), but make him an Olah - an offering which is solely dedicated to God. Indeed, Avraham's hand is only stayed with reference to Yitzhak's physical life, but, following the

ruling of the Mishnah (Zevachim 9:1), once an offering has been brought up to the altar, it can never lose that sense of sanctity. Yitzhak became, from the moment of his binding, the human, living Olah. His life was no longer one of earthly concerns and interactions - he became an other-worldly man. This may be the implication of his not returning from the mountain - because, in the greater sense of things, he never "came down". He was no longer a child of Avraham and Sarah, but his own separate, sanctified being. This would explain the text's silence about his participation in Sarah's funeral. This also explains why Yitzhak, unlike Avraham and Yaakov, is not allowed to leave the holy land (see Gen. 26:3 and Rashi ad loc.) - he is, in the words of the Rabbis, an "Olah T'mimah" - a perfect Olah.

Back to our original question: Now that Sarah has died and Avraham turns his concerns to the continuity of the faith community, he appoints his slave to find the appropriate partner for Yitzhak. Avraham knows, from his own experience, that in order to carry on the mission of spreading God's word, it takes another Avraham - someone who knows how to reach out to others, who can interact with this world in a sanctified manner, someone who can keep one foot in the mundane and the other in the holy. This is no longer Yitzhak, as he is a separate being, dedicated to God and separated from this world.

He sends his loyal servant with a mission - to find someone who is willing to leave Aram/Charan, separate from family and move south, to the land of the future and the promise. This so strongly echoes Avraham's own beginnings, that the slave well understands that his master essentially wants another "Avraham" as a daughter-in-law. Avraham even points this out in his response to the slave's voiced concern that he may not be successful: *"Hashem, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house, and from the land of my nativity, and who spoke to me, and who swore to me, saying: To your seed will I give this land; He will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there."* (Beresheet 24:7)

He must find someone who is not only willing to leave home, but someone who exemplifies Avraham's attributes and values. The trait which most typifies Avraham is kindness - and that is most obviously expressed by him in his hospitality. Therefore, the litmus test which any potential fiancée must pass, is the test of hospitality. Will this young woman be capable of carrying on the Avrahamic tradition of "Kiruv", bringing people closer to God's truth through kindness, love and hospitality? Fortunately, the young woman passed with flying colors - and our future was secured.

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