

GETTING TO KNOW RIVKAH - THROUGH DEVORAH

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In parshas Vayishlach, Yaakov, after having spent twenty years in the home of his father-in-law Lavan in Padan Aram, is finally told (by Hashem) that the time has come for him to return home to his parents, Yitzchak and Rivkah. On his way, Yaakov arrives in the city of Beis-El, where "Devorah, the wet-nurse of his mother Rivkah (35:8)," dies. Devorah had been sent to Padan Aram to tell Yaakov to return home, and was travelling with Yaakov and his entourage back to Canaan when she died (suddenly?). She is buried there, and a great eulogy seemingly takes place, so much so that the area in which her eulogy was given is renamed Alon Bachus - Plain of Crying. Rashi notes that in this name there is an allusion to a second death/eulogy (the word Alon, plain, also carries the connotation of "second," i.e. there was an additional unmentioned death). What in fact happened, says Rashi, is that while there, news arrives of Rivkah's death, so that the crying that took place was both for Rivkah and for her wet-nurse Devorah, hence the "double" crying. Rashi thus notes that the "blessing" Yaakov received there from Hashem (35:9) was actually the blessing of consolation given to mourners - as Yaakov was in mourning over his mother.

Why does the Torah make no explicit mention of Rivkah's death, while publicizing the death of her maidservant Devorah? Rashi explains that the Torah "keeps quiet" about Rivkah's death, alluding to it only suggestively, is because Rivkah's death itself was kept quiet by her family. Were Rivkah to have received a public burial and eulogy such as she deserved, her son Eisav certainly would have been in attendance, which would likely have caused people to speak disrespectfully of her as "the one who gave birth to such a wicked man." Since her death was kept under wraps, the Torah in allusion to this also merely hints to her death, giving it no explicit mention.

It is certainly interesting that the Torah makes no mention of Devorah other than here, in her death. There is no doubt that Devorah was a righteous woman. Firstly, Rivkah Imenu would not have chosen as her wet-nurse anything less than a truly pious person. And if the Torah goes to the trouble of mentioning her in her death, making note of the crying that took place in its wake, it does not do so gratuitously. All the same, it is remarkable that the Torah suddenly introduces us to the mysterious Devorah just at the time of her death, as if that carries some significance. Furthermore, why did Hashem - Doer of all deeds - arrange things such that the news of Rivkah's death would arrive just as the mourning over Devorah was commencing? Was Rivkah not deserving of her own separate period of mourning?

Although the holy and renowned sage Rabbi Akiva Eiger zt"l passed away on the 13th day of Tishrei

5598/1837, his family, including his illustrious son-in-law R' Moshe Sofer (known as the Chasam Sofer zt"l), didn't get news of his death until just before Chanukah time. To their eternal distress, some of the Chasam Sofer's children and grandchildren never had the opportunity to meet their venerated grandfather. On the day the news arrived, the Chasam Sofer gathered all the members of his household in order to eulogize his father-in-law. His wife, R' Akiva Eiger's daughter, had at this point already passed away.

Since parshas Vayishlach was the Torah portion being read at the time, R' Moshe began his eulogy with a discussion of the aforementioned questions. "Imagine the situation," he said. "Yaakov had raised his family in Padan Aram, far away from his parents and his birthplace in Canaan. No doubt, Yaakov missed no opportunity to tell his children (and wives) about their paternal grandparents; after all, the only grandparents they had ever known were Lavan and his wife, hardly the people Yaakov hoped his offspring would take on as their role-models! After having heard about them for so many years, one can imagine that their anticipation to one day meet Yitzchak and Rivkah must have been most overwhelming. Now, finally, they are on their way home, and will soon have the opportunity to meet their holy grandparents face to face.

"Then, suddenly, their anticipation was shattered in a moment. News of Rivkah's death arrives, and Yaakov's family realizes they never will have the opportunity to meet their remarkable matriarch and receive her guidance and blessings. They must have been crushed. What did Hashem do? He arranged things that at least they would have the opportunity to get to know Rivkah's wet-nurse, who herself was a bastion of piety and strength. True, Devorah does not even reach the proverbial ankles of her master Rivkah, yet at the very least Yaakov's children and wives could through Devorah gain some remote glimmer into what must have been the greatness of their illustrious grandmother.

"This is the 'double mourning' to which Rashi refers. Due to concern's over Eisav, Yaakov could not eulogize his mother at length. Furthermore, it is impossible to capture in words the greatness of a person they never knew; in such cases, sometimes less is more. As they cried over the righteous wet-nurse Devorah, though, Yaakov took the opportunity to open their eyes and awaken their hearts to what Rivkah must have been. 'Imagine,' he said, 'what a person she was to have had such a maidservant!'

"The same," concluded the Chasam Sofer, "I say to you, grandchildren of the brilliant and distinguished scholar R' Akiva Eiger. You will never know him; never witness firsthand his brilliance, never feel the warmth of his personality, never understand his burning love for Hashem and Torah. But you knew your mother - his daughter. Take a moment to think about her faith and piety and immeasurable dedication and sacrifice for my learning; perhaps you will glean just the smallest inkling of the greatness of her father..."

It is said that the holy Rebbe R' Chaim of Sanz zt"l used to tell his disciples: "You simply have no idea

what it was like to pray with my holy rebbe, R' Yaakov Yitzchak (the Seer) of Lublin zt"l. It was beyond description."

"But Rebbe," they retorted, "how is it humanly possible for one to be more uplifted by prayer than we already are when we pray together with you?"

"My dear students," he would answer, "by my Rebbe, when we began saying Hodu each morning, the very walls of the synagogue danced along with us. And do not think I mean this figuratively - when I say the walls danced, they danced!"

By taking the opportunity to spend time and even just to be in the presence of the great tzaddikim and gedolim of our generation, we connect ourselves not only to them (a worthy exercise unto itself!), but as well, we will perhaps merit to gain the smallest appreciation of what the tzaddikim and gedolim of earlier generations must have been like. While we may never reach their levels of love and fear for Hashem, by speaking about them, and emulating their deeds, perhaps we can at least preserve the connection to generations passed on.

Have a good Shabbos.

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