

REMOTE RELATIVES AND NEARBY NEIGHBOURS - FINDING THE RIGHT MATE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household... "I will have you swear by Hashem, G-d of heaven and G-d of earth, that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. Rather, go to my land and to my birthplace, and take a wife for my son, Yitzchak." [24:2-4]

Mefarshim (commentaries) question Avraham's rejection of the Canaanites, and his insistence on Yitzchak's wife being a woman of his own family. Avraham's family in Charan were no less idol worshippers than were the Canaanites.

What was it about the Canaanites that made them so detestable, and what was so distinctive about his family that made them worthy mechutanim?

Some commentaries answer that Avraham had been told by Hashem (Bereishis/Genesis 15:13), "Your offspring will be exiled in a land not their own... for four hundred years." Rashi (ibid.) notes that in fact, the Jews spent no more than 210 years in Egypt. Where are the remaining 190 years of exile? He explains that the tally of 400 years begins with Yitzchak's birth. Indeed, the verse never promises that they will spend 400 years in Egypt - only "in a land not their own." Since Yitzchak never had the permanent home nor the security enjoyed by Avraham, he and his offspring considered themselves foreigners even during the years that they lived in Eretz Canaan, and it is because of this that these years are counted.

Avraham realized that were Yitzchak to marry a Canaanite woman - and establish his home with a woman born and bred in the land and in the towns in which they now dwelled - he would be far more prone to grow comfortable in his domestic life, and the possibility of these years being counted as part of our exile would have been lost. He therefore chose to marry-off Yitzchak to a foreign woman, who like him would never quite feel at home. [Ma'yana shel Torah]

Many mefarshim see the difference as follows: Sin has an adverse effect on one's neshama. This effect, while deplorable, has two promising elements: Firstly, it can be relatively easily erased through proper teshuva (repentance). Secondly, even for the non-penitent, the sins of the fathers are

not (necessarily) passed on to their children. Sin is a matter of choice (bechira). It is not engrained in one's personality, and it is not hereditary. Just because a parent has chosen to sin (through exercise of his/her free will) doesn't mean their child will make the same choices.

Where poor middos (personality/character traits) are found, things get a bit stickier (literally). Genetic tendencies are very much a factor in one's personality flaws. This is not to fatalistically assume that poor middos must be adopted by children, but that it is likely they will have to struggle to overcome the same shortcomings their parents had.

Avraham's family were indeed idol worshippers, and deserved little praise or regard for their deeds. But it was not their deeds that interested Avraham; it goes without saying that Yitzchak's kallah must be a woman of valour. Avraham was interested in their roots, and it was in this area that he felt they excelled. The Canaanites, conversely, were renowned not only for their pagan beliefs, but for their lack of character and proper middos, and it was for this reason that Avraham rejected them outright. [Derashos Ha-Ran 5; K'li Yakar; Avnei Nezer]

This topic is not without repercussions for those dealing with shidduchim (matches) for their own children. When considering a potential mate, it seems it is more critical to look for proper manners and good character than it is to solicit achievements and academic excellence. While a chassan/kallah may have overcome poor middos and developed into fine individuals, there's no guarantee that their offspring will do the same. Of course this is only one of many factors involved in choosing a mate, but judging from Avraham's actions, it's not a factor to be ignored.

One of the great ba'alei mussar, R' Yitzele Petterburger zt"l, once found himself immersed in a deep philosophical discussion with a certain "truth- seeking" Jewish heretic with whom he was acquainted. They argued over the most basic and fundamental issues - the existence of G-d, the meaning of life, and the veracity of the Torah. In the heat of their discussion, the man looked at his watch, and began to put on his coat.

"Where are you going?" asked R' Itzele incredulously.

"I just realized - I have a train to catch!"

"A train? Who cares about your train?! Here we are, discussing the very meaning of life. I tell you right now, that if - G-d forbid - you were to somehow convince me in the course of our discussion that your heretical beliefs were in fact the truth, I would here-and-now take off my yarmulke. And for you, it's more important to catch your train? What right do you have to call yourself a truth-seeker? You seek only what's convenient!" Unswayed, the man ran out the door, and never continued his discussion with R' Itzele.

The Moshav Zekeinim explains that although Besuel's family worshipped idols, they pursued truth. Unlike the Canaanites, they were truth- seekers, and Avraham felt that were they exposed to his monotheistic beliefs, they would immediately recognize their veracity, and come around. Indeed, after hearing Eliezer's account of his trip and his subsequent encounter with Rivkah at the well, they immediately exclaimed, "The matter is obviously from Hashem! (24:50)" It was their willingness to recognize truth, and their desire to pursue it, that made Avraham choose them over the Canaanites.

Finding truth is no simple matter. Sometimes truth lies hidden beneath a polished veneer of false appearances and misleading realities. Sometimes it doesn't hide from us; we hide from it. "Truth undermines the self, to which we so desperately cling." One who seeks the truth can't run from it when it stares him in the face. It was their devotion to the truth that attracted Avraham to Besuel's family. We should demand no less from ourselves.

Have a good Shabbos.

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