

This week's parsha focuses on the story of three women.

It first focuses on Soroh Imeinu who had to be buried in a separate Jewish cemetery. Avrohom Ovinu made the extra effort so that she would not be buried together with the local non-Jewish people of Ches. It is the source for an unbudgeable minhag Yisroel. It is a clear halacha that is reinforced by Rashi in Gittin that Jews must have separate burial places.

It is also the story of Rivka Imeinu and the story of Keturoh who is Hogor.

They are three unusual women who gave birth to powerful children.

Who was Hogor? She was the daughter of Pharaoh who was greatly impressed with Avrohom and Soroh when they came to Egypt. Pharaoh saw how special and powerful they were. Soroh commanded a maloch to strike someone and the maloch obeyed! Pharaoh gave his daughter to their household as a maidservant because he figured it would be a better environment for his daughter than living in his own royal palace. Avrohom had a major impact on Pharaoh's mindset.

Hogor herself was no simple woman. Of all the women he could have chosen to marry Avrohom after Soroh died, Yitzchok went to get her back to remarry Avrohom. He figured that there was no other woman more fitting to be Avrohom's wife. She was a tzadekes – her actions were perfect, as beautiful as ketores. This is why she is called Keturoh.

Hogor had a number of children with Avrohom – Yishmoel chief among them. They didn't turn out as you would expect from such a tzadekes. They caused much trouble for Klal Yisroel throughout history, and the obvious question is why? What went wrong?

Soroh Imeinu was also a great tzadekes, and her family background wasn't too impressive. She had Terach as a grandfather, Horon as a father, and Lot as a brother. Not such sterling, quality people.

Rivka Imeinu had a very interesting story. When Avrohom sent Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchok, Eliezer was hesitant to accept the mission. He himself had a daughter and he figured that he is the greatest disciple of Avrohom – why not do a shidduch with him to marry their children together? Avrohom rejects the offer.

Why?

Yichus issues. Eliezer is from Canaan and Canaan is cursed while Avrohom is blessed. The cursed cannot intermarry with the blessed. But where does Avrohom send Eliezer for better yichus? To Besuel and Lavan! Are they any better? They are gangsters and thieves and idol worshippers! Why is that a better alternative to Eliezer who is Avrohom's best product – no avodo zoro, who knew all his Torah and a complete tzaddik? What is going on?

We learned last week that after Hogor and Yishmoel were banished from Avrohom's household, they went back to Hogor's home country in Egypt to find a wife. Hogor goes back to her roots. This was alluded to by Soroh identifying Hogor as an Egyptian maidservant – 10 years after she left Egypt! It was apparent that despite all she learned from being in Avrohom's household, Hogor never cut herself off from her previous identity as an Egyptian.

Contrast to Avrohom. At the advanced age of 75, Hashem tells Avrohom to basically start his life all over again from scratch. He was 130 years old when Terach died – well after Yitzchok was born. He went

back to visit his father Terach in Choron from time to time until Terach died. But, Avrohom never took Yitzchok along with him. Avrohom made a clean break with his past.

This is the crucial difference between Avrohom and Soroh, and Hogor. Avrohom and Soroh were independent human beings who were able to look at things differently than their society. Once they realized the truth, they completely rebuilt their lives around this truth and did not identify whatsoever to their previous lives. Hogor was incapable of doing this.

One of Milkah's sons from Nachor – Avrohom's brother – was Utz. In the beginning of Sefer Iyov, it states that Iyov was from the land of Utz. The Ramban says that means that Iyov was a descendant of Avrohom Ovinu's extended family. It tells us that Avrohom's philosophy and message was known among his family. Iyov apparently grabbed on to that message and lived by it even though many other members like Besuel and Lovon couldn't care less. It apparently filtered down to Rivka Imeinu. She was also able to take that message of Avrohom to the extent that she defined herself differently than the rest of her immediate family. This takes incredible strength of character.

When Eliezer presented to Rivka's family the whole chain of events leading up to meeting Rivka, they agreed that this must be divinely orchestrated and agreed to the shidduch. But Eliezer wanted to leave with Rivka and take her back with him to Yitzchok without delay. The family said: why not let Rivka get ready here at home for a few months and then we'll send her? Eliezer insisted on bringing Rivka back right now. So the family decided to ask Rivka what she prefers to do. She responded without hesitation: I am leaving here right away. She knew she didn't belong with this family and she couldn't wait to cut herself off from them completely.

Hogor couldn't do this. In her mind, she was always an Egyptian princess – daughter of Pharaoh. We find a similar contrast between Rus and Orpoh when their Jewish husbands die in Moav and their mother-in-law Naomi is returning to the land of Yehudoh where she came from. These were not ordinary Moabite women. They were the daughters of Eglon the king of Moav. They were members of a royal family! When Naomi left, she instructed her two daughters-in-law to remain where they are in Moav – move back into the palace of your father! You have no future with me. Orpoh listened and went back while Rus decides to stick to Naomi and abandon her father's palace. She is finished with her past.

Looking just in the short term, you would think Orpoh made the right decision and Rus made the wrong one. Here is Orpoh, living in the royal palace and she has a son who is the great warrior and famous champion – Goliath. There is Rus, penniless and without a family, picking up abandoned stalks from the harvest to live off of. But Hashem doesn't work on a short-term basis. He works on the long-term. In the end, Rus has a descendant Dovid who kills Goliath and becomes the king of Klal Yisroel. He made a very special seat right next to his throne for his great-grandmother Rus to sit in. She gave up everything and lived in poverty for her ideals. Don't worry. Hashem didn't forget all the sacrifices she made for abandoning her past and living with the emes.

Some people have the strength of character to ignore their society and surroundings and build their lives completely around their ideals.

We have two people in this parsha – Eliezer and Hogor. There is a lot

in common between them.

If you look carefully throughout the entire parsha you see that Eliezer is referenced over a dozen times. But his actual name isn't mentioned once. Why not? The answer is that he is in essence a slave – an extension of his master with no real identity of his own. He may be the biggest talmid of Avrohom Ovinu who knows his Torah and taught it to others better than anyone else. But in the end, it's not really him. He is just fulfilling his master's instructions and directions. Eliezer has no personal, individual relationship with Hashem. It is all channeled through his master Avrohom. If Avrohom will change his relationship with Hashem, then Eliezer's connection will automatically change as well. He is subservient to this human master and he cannot connect to something which is beyond the finite. He is cursed and Avrohom is blessed.

Similarly, Hogor is routinely identified as the Egyptian maidservant. True, all her actions were perfect. But this is only because she was trained to obey and always do the right thing. But this perfection in action didn't express who she herself was intrinsically as an individual. It only reflected her training by her master and mistress. She could not connect to a being who was not finite.

Throughout the parsha, Eliezer is referenced continually as the slave of Avrohom. He cannot act independently. Until we get to one point in the story where Rivka appears at the well to draw water. Here Eliezer is called 'ish'. Why? Because here is where Eliezer transcends his own narrow agenda. Eliezer wanted his own daughter to be the wife of Yitzchok. The moment Rivka will be chosen as Yitzchok's wife, that opportunity for his daughter to marry Yitzchok will be closed forever. So at the moment Rivka is starting to fulfill the divine sign that Eliezer chose to signal that this is the one for Yitzchok, Eliezer is caught in a conflict between his own self-interests and the objectively right thing to do. He is hesitating. He is a slave who does everything out of self-interest, but ultimately decides to go against his self-interest and gives the jewelry to Rivka. We find him thanking Hashem as an individual. As an 'ish'.

The act is done. Does Eliezer remain an 'ish'? Or does he revert back to being a slave? We find that soon afterward, Eliezer is again referred to as a slave. His time as an 'ish' was a temporary aberration. It didn't reflect his essential identity which is still to be a self-interested slave to a finite master. He cannot establish a new permanent pattern of behavior. He cannot redefine who he is.

Rivka was able to establish her own personally to define who she was against her entire environment and upbringing. Yitzchok is also an 'ish'. He is davening mincha, which is his own tefilloh to Hashem.

When Yitzchok brings Rivka into the tent of his departed mother, Soroh Imeinu, something remarkable happens. Rashi explains that when Rivka comes in, the cloud of the Shechinoh that left when Soroh died, comes back. Where else do we find a cloud of Shechinoh? In last week's parsha, while traveling towards Har Habayis from Chevron, Avrohom sees a cloud over the mountain and turns to Yitzchok, Eliezer and Yishmoel and asks them what they see. Yitzchok responds that he sees a cloud. Yishmoel and Eliezer respond that they only see a bunch of hills. Chazal say, just like the donkey you are riding cannot see, so too you can't see. Stay here with the donkey while I and Yitzchok go up to Har Habayis.

Chazal are teaching us that people who elevate themselves and live

a life of kedushoh can sense that kedushoh when it is close-by. They develop a sensitivity to kedushoh and can detect it in the various people and places they come in contact with. When Avrohom reaches the area near Har Habayis he feels the kedushoh, and Yitzchok feels the kedushoh. Eliezer feels nothing. If you just fulfill the will of your master, and you don't develop your ruchniyus as an individual, you don't feel anything. When Soroh was in the tent, she brought the Shechinoh with her. When Rivka came, she brought it there as well. Most people live their lives superficially, just doing the right things and saying the right things because of outside pressures. But they don't develop an internal sensitivity to kedushoh and they don't feel anything.

The Nefesh HaChaim in Shaar 4 explains that the way we connect to Hashem today is through limud HaTorah. It could be that before, when there was a Beis Hamikdosh with nevuoh and ruach hakodesh, you could connect to Hashem in various ways. In the Midrash Heicholos it says that before they built the second Beis Hamikdosh, they realized there wouldn't be that same deveikus to Shechinoh as there was in the first Beis Hamikdosh with nevuoh and the Urim V'Tumim, etc. They insisted that Hashem reveal the secrets of Torah shebaal peh to the masses as a way of connecting to Hashem – otherwise, the Jews would go back to avodo zoro. Hashem agreed to the deal. He revealed the secrets of Torah shebaal peh.

Chazal are telling us that the way Klal Yisroel connected to Hashem while there was nevuoh and ruach hakodesh, etc., is something we can't describe. It isn't within our experience today. But what we do have today is Torah shebaal peh. Rav Chaim of Volozhin in Nefesh HaChaim explains how this connection works. We connect to Hashem through limud haTorah by using our minds to connect to Hashem's ideas that He gave us in His Torah. Having my mind preoccupied with Hashem's thoughts – throughout our day we immerse our minds with how Hashem wants the world to run, we establish a deep connection to Hashem.

Once we understand His Torah we feel closeness and we obtain ahavoh and yiras Hashem automatically.

We see Hogor and Eliezer. They were tzaddikim and did everything right. But they were connected to a finite human being. They were slaves and they couldn't break from their original identity. Hogor couldn't get rid of her identity as an Egyptian woman. Orpoh couldn't get rid of her identity as a Moavi princess. They couldn't cut themselves off from their past. But Rus was able to do it and connect to something much greater than being a Moavi princess. Soroh was able to do it and have the cloud of the Shechinoh in her tent. Rivka was able to do it. She was even able to reject her upbringing and her surroundings which were completely against everything she was trying to become.

This is the question we all face growing up as part of western civilization. How do we define ourselves? Do we define ourselves around Torah and our connection to Hashem? Or do we define ourselves by all the cultural trends and distractions that surround us? Eliezer and Hogor couldn't give rise to a nation who will serve Hashem, because they couldn't remake themselves based on their own individual dedication to spiritual ideals. Yonah was asked the same question by the sailors on the ship that was about to capsize from the storm: Who is he? Yonah could have defined himself by his culture, his homeland, his profession. But he said none of that is relevant. The only thing that makes me who I am is my relationship with Hashem. That is who we are.