Yeshivas Toras Moshe
ישיבת תורת משה
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PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

תשפ"ז

Becoming Part of the Legacy of the Ovos

Why do we learn about the Ovos? The stories in Chumash are vital to understanding Yiddishkeit. They tell us who we are, where we come from, and how we are supposed to live.

The Ovos were extraordinary human beings. Chazal tell us: אבות הן הן המרכבה.

They brought the presence of Hakodosh Boruch Hu into this world. Through their extraordinary spiritual level, they established Klal Yisroel and the unique level of the Jewish neshomoh. We draw on the spiritual powers of the neshomos of Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Yaakov. These are not simply people who lived a long time ago. Our very identity comes from them.

Avrohom Ovinu discovered Hakodosh Boruch Hu. With his remarkable mind, he went as far as a human being could go through his own thinking, until Hakodosh Boruch Hu revealed Himself to him. He then spread that recognition throughout the world. But his individual greatness alone does not explain why he was chosen to establish Klal Yisroel.

Last week's parsha tells us what we are missing: כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט.

There would be a continuation after Avrohom because he would teach his children to follow the derech Hashem – belief in Hakodosh Boruch Hu, His truth, and His middos. Avrohom was chesed, and that was what he would transmit to the generations after him.

Yitzchok Ovinu was brought to the mizbeiach as an oloh. We learn laws of shechitas kodshim from Avrohom's taking the knife to slaughter his son. Yitzchok had the status of an oloh, and that is why he could not leave Eretz Yisroel. His life was completely dedicated to serving Hakodosh Boruch Hu. He, too, was involved in chesed and spreading recognition of Hashem, but the central quality of his life was gevuroh: single-minded avodas Hashem.

Now Avrohom had to find the person who would join Yitzchok in continuing that legacy. This is what the search for Rivkoh is about.

Why Not Eliezer

Avrohom tells his trusted servant to find a wife for Yitzchok. Hakodosh Boruch Hu had promised Avrohom that the land of Canaan would go to his descendants, and that his continuation would be through Yitzchok. But strangely, Eliezer must go all the way back to Avrohom's family and birthplace. He must not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.

What was wrong with the daughters of Canaan? What about Eliezer's own daughter? Eliezer very much hoped that Yitzchok would marry her. Who was Eliezer? He was doleh u'mashkeh mitoraso shel rabbo: he drew from his rebbe's Torah and taught it to others. He knew Avrohom's shiurim, reviewed them, and followed everything Avrohom said and did. Here was a devoted talmid living in Avrohom's own home.

Yet Avrohom's answer was that he was boruch, blessed, while Eliezer was orur, cursed, and the two could not join. The ancestry of Canaan was not suitable. But where was Avrohom sending him instead? To the house of Besuel, with Lovon as a leading figure! It was a house of avodoh zoroh, and Lovon was a thief and a swindler. That is better ancestry? Why prefer that household to the devoted talmid who knew and followed everything Avrohom taught?

The answer is as follows: Look at how the parsha describes Eliezer. It does not use his name. Again and again, it calls him "the servant." It suddenly calls him "the man," but then he reverts to being "the servant." His identity throughout the mission is that of an eved, a servant of his master. He never has a name. He has no independent identity.

An eved does what his master does because he is his master. His dedication is always linked to his own place in the household and the benefits of belonging to it. Eliezer believed in Hakodosh Boruch Hu because Avrohom his master believed in Him. His relationship with Hashem was an extension of his relationship with Avrohom. It was not his own relationship.

Listen to Eliezer's language: "Hashem, the God of my master Avrohom." When he arrives at Lovon's house, he speaks about how greatly Hashem has blessed his master. Everything revolves around Avrohom. He follows his master's beliefs and middos, but they have not become his own in the same way. His dedication remains bound to something finite and to his own self-interest in belonging to it.

Avrohom's connection was to Hakodosh Boruch Hu, to something infinitely beyond himself. That ability to go beyond one's own limited existence was necessary to establish Klal Yisroel. Knowing all the shiurim and following all the practices was not enough.

I remember being invited, shortly after I was married, to a kiruv Shabbaton for eleventh- and twelfth-grade students from marginally Orthodox high schools. On Friday night, someone gave one of the most inspiring talks about Shabbos I have ever heard. He explained what Shabbos could mean in a person's life. Suddenly, a girl jumped up and said, "But I like to go shopping!"

An entire dimension of life had been presented to her, but she could not see beyond shopping. That is the limitation we are discussing. A person can be so enclosed within his own interests that he does not recognize another dimension of existence. Even for young men brought up in Orthodox homes, discovering that there is something beyond that familiar world can be a tremendous breakthrough.

Chesed That Goes Beyond the Self

The daughters of Canaan presented another problem. Parshas Acharei Mos describes the corrupt practices of Canaan and warns us not to imitate them. It was a society immersed in forbidden relationships and the pursuit of desire.

We saw the same process in the generation of the Mabul. It began with immorality and ended with stealing. Once a person becomes a baal taavoh, ruled by his desires, everything revolves around himself. What do I want? What gives me pleasure? First it is one desire, then another. Eventually, someone else's property also becomes something he feels entitled to take. Society falls apart.

A baal taavoh cannot be a baal chesed. One is occupied with himself and his needs; the other has to think about someone beyond himself. Avrohom was looking for someone whose middos would allow her to carry on his legacy.

Avrohom had made a tremendous impact wherever he went, including in Choron. He taught that Hakodosh Boruch Hu exists, that He created everything and is the absolute power in the universe. He also taught chesed. In that area, there were people on whom his message had made an impression. That was where Eliezer was to look.

The Rambam describes the revolution Avrohom brought about in human civilization. Even the influence transmitted through Christianity and Islam ultimately derives from Avrohom's beliefs. To appreciate the difference, he says, compare societies reached by that tradition with societies in remote parts of Africa that had no connection to it. He says the world had the morality of the African jungle.

The first priority in choosing a wife for Yitzchok was middos. Eliezer's test was therefore a test of chesed. Rivkoh did not merely give a thirsty traveler a drink. She offered: גם לגמליך אשאב עד אם כלו לשתות.

Do you understand what that meant? Camels store an amazing amount of water. These camels had completed a long journey. They drank, and drank, and kept drinking, and she kept drawing water for them. She took upon herself an enormous amount of work for someone she had just met. This was extraordinary chesed.

But there was a further purpose. Avrohom represented chesed; Yitzchok represented gevuroh, intense dedication to avodas Hashem. Yaakov

Ovinu would be born and eventually bring those two middos together in the emes of Torah. Yaakov's avodoh brought the middos together. Through that combination, he could establish Klal Yisroel.

A person can become absorbed even in his own avodoh. Sometimes I ask someone to do a chesed, and the response is, "Sorry, I'm busy shteiging." But there is a Torah! The Torah requires that intense avodas Hashem be joined with chesed. A person cannot become so occupied with his own growth that he has no room for someone else.

Avrohom therefore sought precisely that middoh to join with Yitzchok's din and gevuroh. Rivkoh would come into Avrohom's household, and the other matters of belief could be addressed there. The indispensable starting point was someone with good middos, someone who could think beyond herself.

Chesed According to the Torah

There also has to be a balance within chesed itself. People can speak endlessly about compassion, while harming others in its name. They want to distribute the money of the wealthy – not their own. They claim to be helping one group, while ignoring the people whose livelihoods they destroy.

Look at the pro-Palestinian riots in Europe: people breaking into stores and stealing, all supposedly out of concern for the Palestinians. What about the shopkeeper who lost his livelihood? Where is the concern for him?

That is not the chesed Avrohom was seeking. Chesed has to be directed by Hakodosh Boruch Hu. The posuk joins 'tzedokoh' with 'mishpot'. We have to follow His way, including His requirements of justice. Concern for someone else does not give us permission to disregard the Torah.

Nor is chesed simply a social contract: I will be nice to you, so that you will be nice to me. When I give tzedokoh or treat someone kindly, I am connecting to Hakodosh Boruch Hu by following His ways. The other person was created betzelem Elokim. There is something here beyond myself and what I expect to receive in return.

Getting used to seeing beyond yourself

Torah is our life: ki heim chayeinu ve'orech yomeinu. We have to break out of our narrow limitations and recognize what it means for Torah to fill a life. Mitzvos, Torah, and tefilloh connect us to Hakodosh Boruch Hu, to something far beyond ourselves.

Entering Soroh Imeinu's Home

Avrohom gave Eliezer another essential instruction. The woman would have to come to Yitzchok. Yitzchok must not go back to her environment. Hakodosh Boruch Hu had told Avrohom to leave that world; he was not going to send his son back into it.

People underestimate the power of an environment. Almost everyone becomes shaped by the society around him. That is human nature. What is the purpose of a yeshiva? To create an environment in which Torah is what life is about, so that a person becomes part of that world.

Rivkoh had the potential. The posuk describes both her beauty and her purity: והנערה טובת מראה מאד, בתולה ואיש לא ידעה.

She had preserved her purity in Choron and there were no issues – unlike in Canaan and Egypt where Avrohom and Soroh had a lot of trouble with Soroh's beauty. These were very different environments.

Eventually, even Lovon and Besuel acknowledged that this shidduch came from Hashem: me'Hashem yotzo hadovor. When Rivkoh first saw Yitzchok, what struck her? His avodas Hashem. He was out in the field davening. She asked Eliezer who the man was, and he answered that it was his master.

Then came the final test: ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו.

Rashi explains: ונעשית דוגמת שרה אמו שכל זמן ששרה קיימת היה נר דלוק מערב שבת לערב שבת וברכה מצויה בעיסה וענן קשור על האהל ומשמתה פסקו וכשבאת רבקה חזרו.

She became like Soroh Imeinu. The lamp that remained lit from one Erev Shabbos to the next, the brocho in the dough, and the cloud attached to the tent all returned when Rivkoh arrived. You felt the presence of the Shechinah in that home.

Rivkoh entered that environment and fulfilled the role of Soroh Imeinu. The qualities Eliezer had seen at the well were now part of the life of Avrohom's household. She could continue Soroh's legacy and become the mother of Yaakov.

Hogor and the Past She Could Not Leave

There is another marriage in the parsha. After Soroh's death, Avrohom married Keturoh. Rashi tells us that Keturoh was Hogor, and that she was called Keturoh because her deeds were as pleasing as ketores. Yitzchok saw her as the person who could become Avrohom's wife after Soroh.

Yet Avrohom had eight children: one through Soroh and seven through Hogor. Only Yitzchok continued the line that became Klal Yisroel. What was missing in Hogor?

Hogor was Pharaoh's daughter. After what happened when Soroh was taken in Egypt, Pharaoh recognized the extraordinary greatness of Avrohom's household and gave his daughter to serve there. But the Torah continues to identify her as an Egyptian maidservant. Why? Because that identity remained significant to her throughout her life.

When Yishmoel needed a wife, where did his mother turn? To Egypt, the place from which she came. Rashi points out that she took a wife for him from the place where she had grown up. She went back to her roots.

Avrohom had been told, "Lech lecho." Leave those roots. Begin again. He could speak about Hakodosh Boruch Hu and chesed, and have a tremendous influence on the people around him. But, as long as he remained embedded in that culture, something still held him there. To become what he was meant to become, Avrohom had to leave.

Hogor's deeds were indeed beautiful. She lived in Avrohom's house and behaved properly. But deep inside, she still belonged to Egypt. When the question was whom her son should marry, that was where she looked. Her attachment to the old culture had never been broken.

Children grow up within a culture. If, deep down, a mother still feels that she belongs to Egypt, how can she tell her child, "You are different. You come from Avrohom Ovinu's home. Your task is to continue his legacy"? Hogor could do all the right things and still retain an identity that prevented her children from continuing Avrohom's legacy in the way Yitzchok did.

What Defines a Person

We see the contrast in Rus and Orpoh. They followed Naomi as she returned, penniless, to Eretz Yisroel. They came from the royal family of Eglon, king of Moav. Naomi urged them to return. Why should they accompany an impoverished older woman when they could go back to their former lives?

Orpoh went back. From a worldly perspective, it could look like a sensible decision. She had a family, and Golias came from her line. There was power and apparent success. Rus chose something entirely different:

עמך עמי ואלוקיך אלוקי, באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר.

She was leaving Moav behind. She did not know what the future would bring, but she was beginning a new life with Naomi. Her old world would no longer define her.

Every person has to confront that question. Who am I? What defines me? When someone enters a Torah environment, is he merely behaving in accordance with it, or has it become his own world? Is Torah one activity among many, or is it the center of his identity?

That is one of the problems with entering the army in this country. The army is a culture. The years from eighteen to twenty-one are formative years, when a young person develops his identity. If that happens in yeshiva, he becomes one kind of person. If it happens in the army or a university, he is shaped by a different environment. Only unusual individuals can live in one environment while defining themselves entirely through another.

Hogor's problem was not that she physically moved back to Egypt. Mentally, Egypt was still where she belonged. Rivkoh, by contrast, came into Soroh Imeinu's tent and became the continuation of her life. Rus left her former identity behind and joined Naomi completely.

These are not simply stories. They teach us how a person becomes who he is. Eliezer's dedication remained bound to his master and his own place in that household. Hogor's proper behavior did not remove her attachment to Egypt. Rivkoh had the chesed that reached beyond herself, and she made the life of Soroh Imeinu her own.

To become a ben Torah is to build an identity whose center is Torah and not himself. A person can do many things, but he has to know what stands at the center of his life. That is what these parshiyos teach us about the Ovos, about the establishment of Klal Yisroel, and about ourselves.