

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Learning to Pray in the Aftermath of Sarah

Rabbi Asher Lopatin

Sarah, our Matriarch, the woman who fought to give birth to and protect the inheritance of the Jewish People, leaves our story in this week's *parasha* after a life of action and resolute decision

making. In the aftermath of our great Matriarch's passing, the Torah portion is filled with prayers and beseechings. Avraham beseeches the Hittites for a place to bury Sarah; he beseeches his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak. Yitzchak actually creates the afternoon prayer while walking through the field toward his beloved Rebecca. Yet some of the moments that are most tender are found in the prayers of Avraham's servant to God.

Our rabbis say the Torah loves the prayers of simple servants even more than those of the great Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and when we read the portion we notice that the servant's prayer does indeed occupy a prominent position in the text. Moreover, the servant's demands that God help him find the right wife for Yitzchak may not even adhere to the proper etiquette of not asking God to do miracles. This makes the prayer even more touching: God seems to welcome imperfection in prayer as long as the prayer is heartfelt. *Halakhic* authorities as recent as the Chafetz Chayim have included this in their discussions of the laws of prayer with the term *Rachamana liba ba'ei* – "God desires the heart" – allowing for some flexibility in prayer, within the bounds of the law.

This past weekend, I was privileged to see beautiful, heartfelt prayer while visiting Los Angeles for a Bat Mitzvah at the *shul* of our honorary *musmakh*, Rav Yosef Kanefsky. On Friday morning, I visited Rav Devin Villarreal, a *musmakh* dedicated to serving a broad swath of the Jewish community as Director of Judaic Studies at the New Community Jewish High School in the Valley. Dr. Bruce Powell, the founding Head of School, has described the school as not religious, but Rav Devin and other faculty members strive to bring Jewish spirituality to the students in a number of ways,



including weekly *tefillah*. By their own admission, they are still working on a model that works for the students, that gets them to give their hearts in prayer. Yet I think that when Hashem looks down on 350 students who choose to attend a Jewish school and who choose to *daven*, God hears Eliezer's attempts to pray, to connect, and God loves it.

On Friday night, I *davened* with the incredible Happy Minyan, an eclectic group of men and women whose diversity can be seen in their dress, ranging from black hats to jeans and everything in between (I couldn't see over the *mechitzah*, but I imagine the women were also a diverse group). People were dancing, singing, laughing, and smiling, making every effort to connect to the words, the tunes, the heart of the *tefillah*, and the heart of their connection with God. At the Happy Minyan we were all trying to be Eliezer, trying to find our innocence in *davening*. Forty-five minutes to the west, IKAR, a non-Orthodox *minyan*, took in eighty young men and women to celebrate Kabbalat Shabbat in their own way. I hope God sees the lengths that God's people go to in their efforts to connect to Hashem from their innocent, pure hearts.

On Saturday, the Bat Mitzvah took me from a 7:15 AM *hashkama minyan*, to being behind the *mechitzah* listening to the Bat Mitzvah read Torah for a Women's Torah Reading, and back up to the beautiful and grand main sanctuary of B'nai David where Rav Yosef works hard – successfully – to create a special place for *davening*.

We need not go to Los Angeles, Israel, or anywhere else to follow the ways of Avraham's beloved servant in our *tefillah*. At the same time, wherever we are for *tefillah*, we have to make an effort to explore how we can be in a place of *tefillah* where our hearts are open to Hashem, singing out the holy words in a way that reflects the passions of our souls. I found a little bit of that 2,500 miles from Riverdale, but I am committed to searching every day, three times a day, to find the magic, as it were, of the prayers of the servant. May God bless us with the humility, strength, and joy of Eliezer to learn to grow in our prayers, and may God then answer our prayers with love and happiness.

FROM THE ROSH HaYESHIVA

Women with a Voice Rabbi Dov Linzer



When Avraham charges his servant to find a wife for Yitzchak, the servant asks a strange question: “Perhaps the woman will not desire to follow me to this land. Should I return your son to the land which you came from?” (Breishit, 24:5).

The concern that the woman herself will resist is unexpected. Later laws in the Torah make it clear that it is the father who controls and speaks for his daughter, and yet here the father and his possible refusal to give his daughter is not a matter of concern. The possibility that Yitzchak will be asked to go live with his wife is also considered here. This is quite strange, as in patriarchal societies it would always be the woman who would be taken into the husband’s home. Certainly there must have been exceptions, but the more natural question would have been: “If she refuses, can I then find a wife from somewhere else?” It seems that Avraham’s servant knew something about that society which shaped his particular concerns, concerns about how the woman would act and what she would demand.

The place of women in Haran comes up again when the servant arrives there and interacts with Rivka and her family. After Rivka passes the test with the watering of the servant and the camels, the servant asks her, “Whose daughter are you?” She responds, “I am the daughter of Betuel, who is the son of Milkah, whom she bore to Nachor.” This manner of familial identification is a departure from the standard identification by father. A classic example is the beginning of next week’s *parasha*: “These are the generations of Yitzchak the son of Avraham, Avraham begat Yitzchak” (25:19). Rivka’s answer should therefore have been, “I am the daughter of Betuel, the son of Nachor.” What is Milkah’s name doing here?

Now, Milkah actually showed up at the end of last week’s *parasha* as well. “After these things it was told to Avraham saying, behold Milkah has given birth to Nachor your brother” (22:20). Notice again the unusual focus on the mother. It seems that the family structure is different in Aram Naharaim. This society is not a patriarchy, where the child is identified after his or her father and the genealogies are in the form of father-son, father-son. Aram Naharaim seems to be a matriarchy, a society where the family structure is defined by the

mother. (I owe this insight to Nancy Jay’s book, *Throughout your Generations Forever*.)

A matriarchal society is not necessarily one in which the mother held political power. There is doubt as to whether any society with women as the holders of political power has ever existed. Rather, a matriarchal society is one in which family lines are defined by matrilineal descent, one in which women do, as a result, have more rights and a greater voice. The benefit of this structuring is obvious: In such societies, the question of who a person’s father was – a question whose answer would always be in doubt – was nullified. It was the identity of the mother that mattered, and that was always known. The head of the household would not be the (presumed) father but the mother’s brother or her oldest son. Thus, while a man was at the head, the structuring around the mother removed the anxiety around paternity that existed in patriarchal societies. Consider Rashi’s comment on the verse, “Avraham begat to Yitzchak” (25:19): “Since the mockers of the generation were saying that Sarah had been impregnated by Avimelekh... God formed Yitzchak’s facial appearance to be similar to Avraham’s, so that all could testify that Avraham had sired Yitzchak.”

We can now understand why Rivka identifies herself as the granddaughter of Milkah. The servant, however, when he repeated the story, reframed Rivka’s answer in his own cultural norms: “And she said, ‘I am the daughter of Betuel the son of Nachor, whom Milkah bore to him’” (24:47). While Rivka had said that Betuel was the “son of Milkah,” the mother, in the servant’s version, he is the “son of Nachor,” the father, just as he would be described in a patriarchal society.

Similarly, the servant asks Rivka, “Does your father’s house have a place for us to stay?” (24:24). What is Rivka’s response? “And she said to him, ‘We have much straw and fodder, and also a place to sleep’” (24:25). For Rivka, there was no “father’s house”; in her society the father was simply not in the picture.

Thus, when Rivka leaves the servant we read, “And the young woman ran and she told her mother’s household according to these events” (24:28). This is perhaps the most revealing verse of all. Rashi notes how unusual it is to refer to a “mother’s household” and resolves this problem by interpreting the phrase to mean a physical house or room that the mother would have to herself, and that Rivka ran there to confide these events to her mother. There is no question, however, that the simple sense of the verse is that it was her mother’s

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household. The mother, not the father, was at the head of or defined the household.

In fact, Rivka's father, Betuel, is quite invisible in this entire episode. It is not Betuel who greets the servant but Lavan, Rivka's brother. And when the servant completes his story we read that "Lavan and Betuel responded, 'From God has this matter come!'" (24:50). Why is Lavan, the brother, mentioned before Betuel, the father? Because, in this society, the brother and mother head the family, not the father. And thus, the servant gives gifts not to the father, but to Rivka's "brother and mother" (24:53).

It thus comes as no surprise that when the final decision is made, the father is nowhere to be found. "And her brother and her mother said, 'Let the lass stay with us a year or ten months'" (24:55). Rashi, assuming the norms of a patriarchal society, asks, "And where was Betuel." His answer: "Betuel wanted to refuse to give Rivka and an angel came and smote him dead." As we have seen, this question disappears once we assume that we are dealing with a matriarchal society. This is also why it is Lavan and Rivka's mother who send Rivka away and who bless her, referring to her as their "sister," not their daughter (24:59-60). With Lavan as the head of the family, Rivka is the family's sister, not its daughter.

Returning to the beginning of the *parasha*, we can understand why Avram's servant was concerned that the woman would stay put and Yitzchak would be asked to relocate and why he was concerned about what the woman, and not her father, would say. For in such societies, the husband would move into the woman's house. And in such societies, women had a voice regarding their fate. And, lo and behold, we find that unlike cases in which a father marries off his daughter unilaterally, here, when the critical moment comes, the final decision is given to Rivka. "And they said: Let us call the lass, and ask for her answer" (24:57). In fact, this is a value that finds its way into *halakha*. It is from this that the Sages learn that a father is forbidden to marry off his underage daughter, that he must wait until she is an adult and can choose her own husband (Rashi and Nachalat Yaakov, Breishit, 24:57 and Kiddushin 41a).

Perhaps this helps explain why Avraham was so insistent on the servant going to Haran. Maybe Avraham wanted to make sure that Yitzchak's wife would be a woman who had a voice of her own. Avraham had learned this lesson well: "Everything that Sarah tells you, listen to her voice" (21:12). Sarah, also from Haran, did what was necessary to ensure the survival of her family. And for this family, this new religion, to succeed,

it would require not just strong men but strong women as well. It would require women like Sarah and Rivka. For as we will read in next week's *parasha*, it was Rivka who, using her strength and her voice and finding a way to operate in a patriarchal society, followed in Sarah's ways and acted to ensure the continuity of the Jewish family.

It is unhealthy to have only men in positions of power. What is needed now is for us to learn to follow Avraham's example, to seek out strong women, to seek out women's voices, to be led collaboratively by men and women, working to ensure our survival as a people who will sanctify God's name in the world.

GUEST D'VAR TORAH

On Parashat Chayei

Sarah

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In this week's *parasha*, Sarah Imeinu is buried in Qiryat Arba (קרית ארבע). Qiryat Arba is another name for the city of

Hebron (חברון) (Breishit, 23:2). Rashi, questioning the name of Qiryat Arba, comments on this verse, quoting the Talmud and Midrash (Eruvin 53a, Midrash Rabbah) to answer why the city was called "four" – ארבע. "It either could have been named for the four giants... or for the four couples buried there, Adam and Eve, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, and Yaacov and Leah." Since we already have two possible explanations for the name, I would like to suggest another.

In the chapter that mentions the four giants that lived in Qiryat Arba we also find that "Hebron was built seven years before Tanis of Egypt" (Bamidbar, 13:22). Tanis was the city for the palace of the kings of Egypt. How is it that Hebron could have been built before Tanis? The Rabbis explain that the verse should rather be understood to say that Hebron was seven times greater than Tanis (Sota 34b). This, the Rabbis say, is "to inform us of the praise of the Land of Israel. Since there is no less arable land in Israel than Hebron which was designated as a graveyard, and there is no better land than Egypt, 'the garden of G-d.' And yet, Hebron was seven times greater than Tanis."

The greatness of Hebron obviously does not lie in its natural resources or its urban development. Its greatness, the Rabbis are telling us, is in its spiritual nature, in its sanctity. We might go further to say that this holiness is present not in spite of the barren nature of Hebron but on account of it, for sometimes we can begin to appreciate true inner beauty when something is at its most humble or unadorned state.

Last week we read that Avraham, in his audacious arguing with God to defend Sodom and Amorah, declared, "Behold I have begun to speak to the Lord, and I am dust and ashes." It is in his humility, in his seeing of himself as dust, that he is able to look beyond his ego and connect to his inner core, to his unbending refusal to tolerate injustice. It is in his humility that he can even challenge God, knowing that this is not about

him but about what is true and what is right.

This brings us back to Qiryat Arba. Hebron, as we have seen, is an arid land; it was the "dust bowl" of the land of Israel. Now, the Acadian word for dust is *tarba*. We may speculate that this city was originally called קרית תרבע, the city of dust. Double letters were often written only once in ancient writing, and therefore the *tuf* at the end of Qiryat could easily have been meant to also serve for the beginning of the word *Arba*, producing the word *Tarba*. (The discussion in the Gemara as to the meaning of "*arba*" as "four" should be understood to refer to the Torah's spelling of the name with an *alef* and not with a *tuf*.)

The greatness of Hebron, then, is that it was the city of dust; it was a city whose holiness could be realized by the man who knew himself to be "dust and ashes." And as a result, it has now become a city made more holy as it serves as the resting place for our great forbearers. May we learn from them to always see the true holiness that resides below the surface, that is sometimes most pronounced in the most humble of places and people.