

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Chayei Sarah

Eliezer's Retelling of The Story

כִּי אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי תֵלֵךְ וְלִקְחָתָּ אִשָּׁה לְבְנִי לְיִצְחָק

Rather, to my land and to my birthplace you shall go and take a wife for my son, for Yitzchak (24:4)

Repetition – With Adjustments

One of the noteworthy features of our parsha is that it contains not only the Torah's account of Eliezer's mission to find a wife for Yitzchak, but also records Eliezer's retelling of these event with all of their details. However, as numerous commentators have pointed out, Eliezer's retelling is not a verbatim repetition of the events as they occurred, for in numerous instances his description of events actually differs from that of the Torah. A couple of notable examples:

1. Avraham tells Eliezer that he must go "to my land and to my birthplace."¹ When Eliezer tells the story he quotes Avraham as telling him to go "to my father's household and to my family."²
2. As soon as Rivkah has given both Eliezer and his camels to drink, he gives her the jewelry and then asks her who she is.³ When he recounts the story, he first mentions that he asked who she was and only then says that he gave her the jewelry.⁴

These discrepancies certainly require our attention, for why would Eliezer see it as either necessary or appropriate to depart even slightly from the events as they actually happened?

Avraham's Instructions – And Hashem's Orchestrations

The Meshech Chochmah explains that originally, when Avraham told Eliezer to travel to Charan in order to find a wife for Yitzchak, he did not specifically have his family in mind. Rather, he felt that the inhabitants of Charan in general were the type of people

1 Pasuk 4.

2 Pasuk 38.

3 Pesukim 22 and 23.

4 Pasuk 47.

from whom a suitable young girl could be found. Thus, he stipulates only that she come from “my land and my birthplace,” but makes no mention of his family. What, then, will determine who is the right girl? The answer is very simply, that anyone who exhibits the exemplary character traits and generosity of spirit needed to pass Eliezer’s test is *by definition* a good choice for Yitzchak, and moreover, presumably both she and her family will be amenable to the match. It is for this reason when he arrives at Charan, Eliezer makes his way not to Besuel’s house, but rather to the well to conduct his test and find a wife for Yitzchak – whoever she may be!

In fact, this explains why, as soon as she has passed Eliezer’s test, he gives her the jewelry before even asking her name, for she has already demonstrated that she is a suitable match regardless of what her name is. Needless to say, Eliezer needs to ask, but only to find out who this anonymous wonderful girl actually is.

Hashem, however, had other plans, and had arranged for Rivkah to be there to meet Eliezer and to pass his test. Indeed, it must have come as quite a shock when the girl told him that she was none other than the granddaughter of Nachor, Avraham’s brother! Although Avraham’s family were not actually part of his original plan, they were clearly part of Hashem’s plan.

Revising the Script

At this point, a new element has been introduced into the equation. Moreover, Eliezer, faithful servant to Avraham, sees this as an opportunity to convince Rivkah’s family beyond a shadow of a doubt that this match is meant to be.⁵ This he does by retelling the story as if they were the ones from the very outset to whom he was meant to travel, and thus he relates that Avraham told him to go “to my father’s house and to my family.”⁶ [The Meshech Chochmah points out that the word “מולדת” used by Avraham in his initial instruction can also have the meaning of family,⁷ and that perhaps Eliezer saw within this providential choice of word the latitude to emphasize the family aspect when retelling the story.]

And what of his test at the well? If he was only ever meant to come to Avraham’s family, what is the purpose of stopping off at the communal well was to conduct a test that anyone could pass? With hindsight, Eliezer is able to retell this part of the story as well, making it in fact even more ambitious than it originally was. He claims that in order to seek absolute Divine approval and blessing, he set up a test whereby the one who passed would be from Avraham’s family – and so she was!

This explains why, in retelling the part where she had passed the test, Eliezer reversed the order of his actions. For according to his version of events, he could not have given her the gifts prior to finding out who she was, after all, what if she was not from Avraham’s family? Wasn’t that what the test was all about? Therefore, he says that first he asked her

5 Perhaps, upon meeting them, Eliezer sensed that they would not be so easy to deal with, and hence felt the need to actively convince them of the heavenly ordained nature of the match. Additionally, they may take offence if he told them that Avraham had no interest in them per se, but simply in someone from Charan, who then happened to turn out to be their daughter.

6 In addition to emphasizing the role of Avraham’s family in the original plan, Eliezer also omits Avraham’s reference to “my land.” The Meshech Chochmah explains that when Avraham referred to Aram as “his land,” he was alluding to the fact that in the future it would come to belong to his descendants, an idea which was fulfilled when David HaMelech conquered that region (see Shmuel 2, Chap. 8). When retelling the story, Eliezer felt it was more advisable to leave this part out, as Besuel and Lavan might not react that positively to the news that Avraham would one day possess their country and it may cause them to be less amenable to allowing Rivkah to go with him.

7 See Gur Aryeh to pasuk 4, and Rashi to Bereshis 43:7 s.v. *lanu*.

for her name, and when she turned out to be from his master's family – representing the success of his test – he then gave her the gifts.

Eliezer and the Prohibition of Nichush

With this idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah proceeds to offer a stunning answer to a question raised by Tosafos. One of the prohibitions in the Torah concerns an act called *nichush* – divining one's course of action by relying on signs and omens.⁸ In this regard, the Gemara⁹ states that the type of sign which is subject to this prohibition is exemplified by one we find in the episode of Eliezer. Apparently, the Gemara is stating that choosing a wife for Yitzchak based on the test he conducted constituted an act of *nichush* on Eliezer's part. Tosafos¹⁰ raise a question on this assertion, for there is an opinion, cited in the Gemara elsewhere,¹¹ that even a Ben Noach (gentile) is subject to the prohibition of *nichush*. According to this, it turns out that Eliezer's test involved a violation of what was for him a Torah prohibition – which is obviously completely unacceptable!

The Meshech Chochmah explains that in reality Eliezer's test was not *nichush*, for *nichush* involves specifically relying on a sign that has no reasonable bearing on the decision one makes based on it. If the only qualifications Eliezer is looking for are kindness and generosity, then to conduct a test to find out if she is kind and generous is entirely reasonable and hence not a violation of *nichush*, and this is exactly what he did. However, as we have mentioned, in retelling the story to Rivkah's family, he states that the sign he asked for was that the one who would pass the test would also be from Avraham's family, something which is without any reasonable basis. *That* is what is identified by the Gemara as the kind of act which qualifies as *nichush*!

Justice, Kindness and Truth

As the verses in our *parsha* describe at length, the primary quality Eliezer was looking for in a wife for Yitzchak was that of kindness. Although this emphasis can certainly be understood on a straightforward level, for a kind and generous girl will no doubt be a wonderful wife and mother, the Meshech Chochmah explains the matter on a deeper level. Yitzchak's characteristic was that of "*din*" – justice, i.e. self-discipline and exacting standards. To complement this trait, Eliezer was looking for someone who was characterized by "*chesed*" – kindness. Not only would this form a counterpoint to Yitzchak's trait of justice, but it would also allow for their child to embody a blend of their two traits into a harmony known as "*emes*" – truth. This was the trait of Yaakov. Thus, when Eliezer sees the trait of kindness exemplified by Rivkah he says,¹² "*Blessed is Hashem... who did not withhold His kindness and His truth.*" Through Hashem allowing "His kindness" as personified by Rivkah to enter Avraham's household and marry Yitzchak, it was then possible to bring "His truth" into the world, as embodied by Yaakov.¹³

8 See Vayikra 19:26.

9 Chullin 95b.

10 Ibid. s.v. *kol*.

11 Sanhedrin 56b.

12 Passuk 27.

13 It was this contrast of personifications which led to Rivkah being so startled upon first seeing Yitzchak – the embodiment of *din* – leading to her either alighting (or falling) from the camel, inquiring of Eliezer (pasuk 65), "Who is that man walking in the field towards us?" and covering her face with a veil upon being told who he was.