

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Chayei Sarah

Pesukim and Perception

PART ONE: ELIEZER – EVED OR ISH?

A noteworthy feature of our parsha is the fact that although Eliezer is the prime protagonist in the search for a wife for Yitzchak, the Torah does not refer to him by name even once throughout the entire parsha. Instead, he is referred to either as “הַעֲבָד – the servant” or “הָאִישׁ – the man.” Specifically, the allocation of these two terms within the parsha can be broken down as follows:

1. From the beginning of the chapter until he meets Rivkah he is called “*eved*”. (Verses 2-20)
2. From the time Rivkah begins watering his camels until he finishes talking to her family he is called “*ish*”. (Verses 21-51)
3. From that point until the end of the chapter he is again called “*eved*”. (Verses 52-66)

Naturally, we are moved to ask: Given that Eliezer is both an *eved* and an *ish*, what is behind the variations in the way in which the Torah refers to him?

“HE WILL SEND HIS ANGEL BEFORE YOU”

A classic explanation of this matter is found in the commentary of Rabbeinu Bachye.¹ He draws our attention to a verse early on in the chapter that is very easy to read and then to forget about. When Eliezer asks Avraham what he should do if the girl he finds does not wish to come back with him to the Land of Canaan, Avraham responds:

ה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְנִי מִבֵּית אָבִי וּמֵאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדוֹתַי... הוּא יִשְׁלַח מַלְאָכּוֹ לְפָנַי וְלָקַחְתָּ אִשָּׁה
לְבָנִי מִשָּׁם

*Hashem, God of heaven, Who took me from the house of my father and the land of my birth... He will send his angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there.*²

When we read this verse, we likely summarize Avraham’s words as basically saying, “Don’t worry, Hashem will help you and everything will work out.” However, Avraham said more than this. He said Hashem would send an angel before Eliezer to help him. We tend to gloss over that point because

¹ Commentary to verse 15. See also Shelah Hakadosh to our Parsha, Torah Ohr sec. 5.

² Verse 7.

we never actually see or hear from an angel as the episode unfolds. However, perhaps this is because we are not looking in the right place.

As the verses relate, no sooner had Eliezer finished formulating his test for Yitzchak's prospective bride than Rivkah appeared at the well, the one intended by Hashem to marry Yitzchak. We will appreciate that Eliezer could probably not have conducted his test more than once before being either shooed away from the well, or simply being unable to drink anymore! And yet the first girl was Rivkah who turned up exactly at that moment. This was the angel at work, taking the form of arranging for everyone to be where they needed to be at the right time.

As Eliezer contemplates Rivka responding to his demanding test with alacrity and graciousness, he recalls Avraham's assurance and realizes that it was Hashem's angel who brought her to the well. And it is for this reason that from this point he is now called "the *ish*". We find the term "*ish*" in Tanach referring to an angel.³ Likewise, Eliezer's awareness of the angel's input in his situation is reflected by the way in which the Torah refers to him – as "the *ish*". This title pertains until he has met Rivka's family and secured their consent. At this point, and with his mission successfully concluded, the angel departs, whereupon Eliezer reverts to his original title: "the *eved*" for the rest of the chapter.

What is most fascinating to ponder about this approach is that the Torah's choice regarding how to refer to Eliezer is based, not on the *reality itself* of the angel's input – which was in play from the outset – but on Eliezer's *recognition* of that reality. And indeed, this is most appropriate. Since the two terms in question are referring to Eliezer himself, it is only fitting for them to be determined by his realization of what is happening, for his enhanced awareness represents a change within him himself.

PART TWO: FROM "MAYBE" TO "TO ME"

When Avraham initially charges Eliezer with finding a wife for his son Yitzchak, he tells him to go to Haran to find a suitable young woman and bring her back to the Land of Canaan. At a certain point, Eliezer asks, "Perhaps the woman will not wish to come back with me, shall I bring your son over there?"⁴ Rashi comments:

The word "perhaps" [אולי] is written without a vav [אלי], which means it can be read as "to me." This is because Eliezer had a daughter and wanted Yitzchak to marry her. To this Avraham replied, "My son is blessed, and you are [descended from Canaan who is] cursed, so there can be no match."

There is something very intriguing about this comment of Rashi. The story of Eliezer finding a wife for Yitzchak is actually told twice in that chapter, once as it actually happens, and then again in Eliezer's words as he tells it to Rivka's family. If we look at Rashi's commentary on the verse which originally presents Eliezer's question, we will see that he makes no comment! It is only when Eliezer retells the story and reaches this point⁵ that Rashi tells us about his hopes for his daughter. Why would Rashi not make this comment when the question was originally asked – which is when this exchange between Eliezer and Avraham must have taken place? Surely something new cannot become part of the actual story when it is being retold!

In truth, this question should not really be addressed toward Rashi for, as he stated, his comment is a response to the fact that the Torah writes the word אלי without a vav. If we look at the earlier verse when Eliezer asked the question, we will see that there the word is written

3 See Daniel 9:21. See also Rashi to Bereishis 37:15.

4 Verse 5.

5 Verse 39, based on Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Hoshea sec. 12, cf. Bereishis Rabbah 59:9.

with a *vav*! It is only the second time around when he retells the story that the *vav* is absent. Essentially, therefore, the question is on the verse itself: why is this part of the conversation only alluded to (through the missing *vav*) in the retelling of the story?

The Kotzker Rebbe gives a fascinating answer to this question: In reality, the underlying motivation for Eliezer's question was indeed his desire for Yitzchak to marry his daughter. However, at the time, specifically because Eliezer was so emotionally invested in the situation, he could bring himself to recognize his personal agenda. Eliezer honestly felt that his question was motivated by the practical considerations of how to react to the contingency of the girl not wanting to travel to Canaan. We should appreciate that this also means that when Avraham responded and said that Yitzchak would never marry his daughter, Eliezer felt that he had been misjudged by his master!

All of this had changed by the time Eliezer comes to tell the story to Rivka's family. By that stage, Rivka has demonstrated beyond any doubt that she is the one for Yitzchak. Once this is established, Eliezer is "free" of any plans he may have about his daughter, and, to his great credit, he thinks back over the episode from the beginning, and realizes that Avraham was right. When he was asking "What if she says no?" it really *was* out of the hope that Yitzchak would marry his daughter. The reason there is no *vav* missing from the word when Eliezer first asks his question is because it was not apparent at that time — even to him — that this is what he meant. Only when he perceives his true intent later on does the Torah reflect this by removing the *vav*, and that is where Rashi comments. In other words, at the point in the story where this idea registered with Eliezer, it registers in the verse.

It this instance, we may say that this is an added benefit of the Torah relating the story twice, with the second time being in Eliezer's own words, for it was thus able to communicate this additional lesson by choosing where to relate this element of the story.