

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

תשפ"ב

This week's parsha is divided into a number of different parts.

The first part is the story of Avrohom Ovinu's negotiating with Efron haChiti. Avrohom wanted Meoras haMachpeilah. Why? Odom and Chavoh are buried there. But if it was only that reason, we wouldn't learn from this story the halacha that Jews must be buried among Jews and not among non-Jews. The entire idea of having an exclusively Jewish cemetery was the primary motivation of Avrohom Ovinu. But we have to understand this better – what difference does it make where a person is buried and why Jews cannot be buried together with non-Jews?

Why is the burial of a dead body necessary in the first place? Why is cremation not acceptable? The human being was created with a tzelem Elokim. Human beings must be treated with dignity and respect in life and in death. During a person's lifetime, the human body was the carrier of the neshomoh. It was the means through which the neshomoh was able to serve Hashem. Here is the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew. When the Jewish body helps the neshomoh carry out all the mitzvos of the Torah, that body achieves an extra level of kedushoh. A Jew elevates his body through all the mitzvos he keeps. A non-Jew doesn't keep taryag mitzvos and he doesn't elevate his physical body in the same way as a Jew does.

It is forbidden to derive benefit from the body of a Jew. It has kedushoh and must be buried. We learn it from Miriam and from Egloah Arufah. This teaches us that death and burial is a means of kapporah. It is not clear if a non-Jewish body has this quality and therefore must be buried.

Avrohom needed a separate burial spot for Soroh. And there was an extra level of burying her in Meoras haMachpeilah specifically.

Then we have the shidduch of Yitzchok.

Avrohom called over Eliezer to assign to him this task of going to his family to find the appropriate girl. The posuk refers to Eliezer as the eved. He is not given a name. Eliezer is without a name and has total control over himself. He was careful with all the details of Avrohom's behavior patterns. Avrohom trusted him entirely. Another verse tells us that he was the primary disciple of Avrohom who taught his Torah. He certainly had a name, but the pesukim here keep him nameless throughout the parsha.

Eliezer said to Avrohom: perhaps my own daughter is more suitable for a wife for Yitzchok than anyone else? Why do I have to go all the way to Choron to find a wife? Avrohom responded – as Rashi explains – I am blessed and you are cursed. There can be no shidduch between us. Hashem will see to it that the right shidduch is found without Yitzchok leaving Eretz Canaan.

We find a rare shalshales, when Eliezer is in Choron looking for the right woman for Yitzchok. The shalshales always connotes hesitation. There is a part of him that really doesn't want to succeed. But he is the servant of Avrohom and he has to do his job.

Eliezer davened to Hashem to make it clear when the right woman comes along. Eliezer traveled through the desert with camels. When he arrives in Choron they are thirsty and they will need to drink a lot of water. The test will be to ask her for a drink and she will volunteer to offer water to the camels – which is a big, time-consuming job. Rivka showed up just as he finished davening and she passed the test with all the details.

Now, after finding Rivka, Eliezer finally became "ho'ish" – a man. He gave her gifts and asked who she was and found out that she was from Avrohom's family. Eliezer openly acknowledged that Hashem has been guiding him and indeed made sure he found the right woman. She brought him into their house and he retold the whole chain of events to Rivka's family. After he finished Eliezer becomes 'the eved' again! How strange!

We have to appreciate what kind of house Rivka grew up in. Besuel was a wicked person – trying to kill his guest, Lavan essentially killed his father and tried to swindle everyone he met. The house is full of avodo zoro! This is the kind of yichus Avrohom was after? Avrohom passed up Eliezer's daughter who was his prime student, for this family? And why is Eliezer never referred to by name? Why is he just "the eved", who becomes "the ish" in the middle of the story, and back to being "the eved" at the end? This is all very puzzling and needs to be explained.

The last part of the parsha is Avrohom remarrying Hogor. She is called Keturah because her deeds were as nice as ketores. She refused to be with anyone else. She is the only one suitable for Avrohom to marry. Avrohom has six children with her, but he drives them away from Eretz Canaan with presents. Their mother is only a concubine – not a main wife – because he does not want them to be a part of Avrohom's legacy. It is only with Yitzchok.

We conclude with the descendants of Yishmoel, who is Hogor's first child when she was Soroh's Egyptian maidservant. What is the Torah trying to tell us?

The Rambam taught us a major idea. Avrohom was fighting a world absolutely dominated by avodo zoro. The world, before Avrohom Ovinu came on the scene, had no concept of chesed and emes. The one who brought it to the world was Avrohom. The cultures which were influenced by Avrohom have a concept of truth, justice and morality. The ones that don't, live their lives as animals. When the Europeans came to the western hemisphere, they found very primitive, barbaric people. They didn't develop like the Europeans because they never had any contact with these ideas.

Avrohom didn't just teach the world the concepts of chesed and emes. He showed the world that the commitment to these ideals and morals cannot endure unless they are connected to the Derech Hashem. We follow these middos because Hashem Himself operates with these middos. But this aspect of Avrohom's teaching didn't always penetrate. On the one hand, notions of chesed, truth and justice are very widespread in the west through Christianity. But, on the other hand, they are not very deep. In the late 1700's, the European philosophers disconnected their concept of ethics from Hashem and the Torah. They came up with the belief that human beings can decide what is moral and what is ethical from just using their own logic and reason. As a consequence, morality stopped being absolute. Hitler can come to the world and begin a new philosophy – kill six million Jews. Every society can decide for themselves what is ethical and what isn't. So even though Germany had so many great ethicists and was the most sophisticated, cultured and educated country in the West, when it became inconvenient, the old morality was discarded and replaced with a new one where it was virtuous to kill Jews.

Ideas that began with the Torah fizzle out once they become divorced from the Torah. The Rambam is saying that if you don't view the

human being as a neshomoh and a body but just an advanced animal, then you don't really understand chesed and emes. You are an animal at the core.

What is a slave? He is someone who doesn't have his own identity – he adopts whatever identity that his master gives him. He will do everything his master says because he is completely under his master's control. Eliezer is a slave to Avrohom. Yes, he is devoted to spreading Avrohom Ovinu's Torah and worships Avrohom's G-d. But he doesn't have his own relationship with Hashem.

An animal cannot act against its own self-interest. When it is hungry, it needs to eat. It can't deny its urges and its instincts for self-preservation for the sake of another animal. Only a person aware of his neshomoh and who believes in Hashem can rise above his own narrow self-interest and expand it to encompass others. Eliezer wants his own daughter to marry Yitzchok. But can a slave's daughter make her own relationship with Hashem and rise above her own self-interest?

When does Eliezer transition from being the 'eved' to the 'ish'? It was only after he recognized that Rivka was truly the right match for Yitzchok and that Hashem has been guiding him to meet her. It was only when he rose above his desire for his daughter to marry Yitzchok and gave Rivka the gifts against his own self-interest. That is when he becomes the 'ish' who can rise above his instincts and do the right thing. He sees Hashem's hashgocho and doesn't try to thwart it. But it is a temporary phase. Eliezer soon reverts to being the eved. Avrohom says I can't have this kind of person as a part of my family.

Hashem, with His infinite wisdom, created every human being with an innate sense of what is right and what is wrong. But it can become confused and abused. When the mass protests against police brutality broke out in the United States, it was ostensibly for a just, moral cause. But these protests quickly became waves of rioting and unrest which brought chaos and a break-down of law and order. It has led to the deaths of countless innocent people, even though it probably started with good intentions. Without the Torah guiding you every step of the way, one's moral instincts of what is right and wrong can get horribly twisted and skewed. You run around with these extreme emotions and moral passions and you don't know what to do with them.

What was the sign which would prove the girl was the right one for Yitzchok? It was only someone with a certain kind of middas hachessed that goes beyond the moral instincts that Hashem created in every human being. Only someone who will go out of her way to offer to give water to all the camels – a huge, time-consuming task – without being asked! This kind of extreme chesed shows that it comes from a connection to Hashem. It meant this person understands that the middas hachessed has no limits.

Avrohom Ovinu had an unbelievable impact on his own family – much more than the impact he had on the people in Canaan. Avrohom felt that in all likelihood, only someone from his own family would manage to come out pure with the ideals he instilled deeply within them. The Ramban wrote in his introduction to Sefer Iyov that Iyov and all his friends were from the family of Avrohom Ovinu and this is why they

had all these ideas of hashgocho and reward and punishment. So Avrohom thought maybe there is some woman from his family who can connect directly with Hashem. But, Eliezer can't do it. His core identity is a slave and even though he can rise above it from time to time, his essential identity prevents him from making that connection.

Then we have Hogor. She was so special that Avrohom married her again. All her actions were beautiful as ketores. But again, at her core, she was still an Egyptian maidservant of Soroh. She couldn't make that independent connection with Hashem and pass this mesorah over to her seven children. She remained a maidservant of Soroh. Only Soroh herself was able to have a child who could pass on this legacy of Avrohom to his children and eventually form a nation who followed this path of the Derech Hashem – where the ideas of chesed and emes, and tzedoko and mishpot are based on the fact that we are connected to Hashem.

We live in a world where people are going in the opposite direction. They claim to be so moral and ethical but without any connection to Hashem. But it doesn't last. The proof is from Nazi Germany. Germany had the most sophisticated high culture of morality and ethics, of literature and music and philosophy. But it was disconnected from Hashem. It allowed this same nation to descend into the most vicious and cruel murderers the world has ever seen. No-one in history before them had put so much planning to organize an entire system, using the most sophisticated technology available, to kill people in the most rapid and efficient manner.

When you divorce these concepts from Hashem and the Torah, you remain a sophisticated monkey.

Soroh had to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Once a person uses their body to do mitzvos and do Hashem's will, connecting directly to Hashem, their body is transformed and sanctified. It needs to be buried separately.

The rest of the world sees the human being as an overdeveloped monkey and as a result it is descending into chaos and there is no more morality. 150 years ago, abortion was murder and assisted suicide would be unheard of. Now these things are enshrined in law as a human right. They consider it a chesed. But, it is misplaced chesed. Kill everyone who is inconvenient to society. It supports their pursuit of taivoh and self-interest. They don't want to be bothered to care for people who are sick. Once you divorce ethics from the Torah, it spins out of control – you become cruel and vicious.

Soroh spent her life using her body to express her neshomoh. Her body became kodosh. She couldn't be buried with non-Jews. The search for a wife for Yitzchok was a search for someone who could form her own relationship with Hashem, and whose middas hachessed was connected to it. Eliezer couldn't do it and Hogor couldn't do it. Their actions were perfect, but it couldn't come from their own connection to Hashem and their children couldn't carry on that mesorah of tzedoko and mishpot as the Derech Hashem. All the attempts throughout history to create a morality divorced from Hashem just don't work.