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Chayei Sarah 5781

Words: Scarce And Sacred

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered November 12, 1960)

What is the value of a word? This is a most appropriate question on the first Shabbat after our national elections took place. Elections to the presidency are a wondrous thing to behold and a glory and tribute to a free people. Yet when the elections were done our countrymen across the land heaved a blessed sigh of relief. For many of us believed that the campaigns for the election did not do much to enhance the glory. Many of us suspected that they were largely an exercise in futility. The real issues, such as they were, could have been discussed much more quickly and conclusively. Most of the words that followed were not meant for clarification as much as for tools in the projection of "images." There has been talk recently of the possible devaluation of the dollar. Much more thought should have been given to a more serious danger: the devaluation of the word. I believe the nation could have survived the election of either candidate. But we may properly doubt whether the nation could have survived another month of endless, repetitive, meaningless torrents of words without seriously compromising its sanity.

What then is the Jewish attitude to words? First let us understand that Israel's greatness can benefit the world only through words. We have never been a numerous people. We have never, except in the most restricted sense, been militarily significant. We have usually been diplomatically weak. Therefore, our message to the world has been transmitted only through the power of the word. Ever since our father Isaac said *ha-kol kol Yaakov, ve'ha-yadayim yedei Esav*, "the voice is the voice of Jacob and the hands are the hands of Esau," our tradition has maintained that *Yaakov kocho be'feh--* that the strength and the might of Israel lies in its mouth, in its words. The message of Torah is referred to as *divrei ha-berit*, "the words of the covenant." What the Western World calls the "Ten Commandments," our tradition refers to as *aseret*

*ha-dibrot--*the "ten words." And when Jews speak of a spiritual gem, they say in Hebrew, a *devar Torah*, "A word of Torah," or, in Yiddish, a *gut vort--*"a good word." The word is the medium of spiritual enlightenment, of the message of Israel.

But words in our conception, have an even more universal function. Words are the mortar that binds man with his fellow men. Without the extensive use of words, human beings would never group themselves in a society. Without words there can be no communication, no study, no schools, no society or social life, no civilization or business or commerce. Neither can there be any family life. When husband and wife are "not on speaking terms," that is a real danger sign for domestic health.

The great Aramaic translator of the Bible, Onkelos, had that in mind when he offered an unusual translation of a familiar verse. When the Bible relates that G-d breathed the life into Adam, it says *va-yehi ha-adam le'nefesh chaya*, which we usually translate "and the man became a living soul." Onkelos does not translate that as "living soul." Instead he writes *va-havet ba-adam le'ruach memalela--*"and (the breath of G-d) became in man man a speaking spirit." The living soul of man is his speaking spirit. The uniqueness of man, his intellect, would be muted and silent were it not for his ability to use words and thus articulate his rational ideas and the feelings of the heart. A word has a life and biography and character and soul of its own. And the word can give or take life to the human being. A word can kill and a word can make alive. One word can give a man the reputation for wisdom; one word can mark him in the eyes of his peers as a fool. The speaking spirit has a profound effect upon the living soul.

Because of this, Judaism regards words as more than mere verbal units, as just another form of communication. In Judaism words are, or should be--holy! When the Torah commands a man that he not break his word, it says *lo yachel*

devaro. Our rabbis noted that *yachel* is an unusual word and so they explained it as *lo yaasenah chullin*--he shall not profane his word, not desecrate it. Only that which is holy can be made unholy. Only that which is sacred can be desecrated. Man's words therefore must be holy.

If our word is to be holy, we must keep it, honor it and revere it. Indeed the sanctity of a man's word is a measure of the confidence he deserves, whether in business or in family. If he keeps his word holy, people will confide in him and trust him. If he desecrates his word, if he makes it *chullin*, then he does not deserve the confidence of his wife, his partners, his fellow man. Many many years later, Oliver Wendell Holmes was to put it this way: "Life and language are alike sacred...Homicide and verbicide are alike forbidden."

It follows therefrom that we must be careful and discriminating, not casual, in whatever we say. When the Israelites conquered the pagan Midianites and destroyed them, the Torah bade the Israelites not to use the vessels of the Midianites until they had been purified and cleansed, so that even the atmosphere or memory of paganism and idolatry be banished from the midst of Israel. The Torah puts it this way: *Kol davar asher yavo va-esh ta'aviru ba-esh ve'taher*--any vessel that is normally used over an open flame must be purified by passing it through fire. Our rabbis of the Talmud (Shabbat) asked this interesting question: What of a metal megaphone, an instrument devised for magnifying the voice. Can that contract impurities, and if so how can it be purified? Yes, answer our rabbis, it can become impure, and must be purified by passing through fire. For they played cleverly on the one word: *kol davar*. Not only, they said, *kol davar* but *kol dibbur*-- not only every "object" but every "word" must be passed through fire. Therefore, a megaphone, used to magnify words, is included in the laws of the impurities of the vessels of Midian. Our rabbis meant, I believe, to refer more than just to a megaphone. They meant a *kol dibbur*--every word spoken by human lips must be passed through the fire of the soul before it is spoken to the world at large. Every word must be passed through the flame of integrity, of sincerity, of consideration for others and the effect that the word may have on them. A word untampered in the furnace of integrity and wisdom is like a table unplanned and unfiled: its splinters and rough edges can injure far more than the table can serve. A word not passed through the fire of consciousness is the master and not the servant of him who speaks it.

Furthermore, we must be not only discriminating in our words, but sparse as well. Our words must be few and scarce. In all of Judaism, the principle of *Kedusha* is protected from the danger of over-familiarity. When man has too much free access to an object or a place, he gradually loses his respect and awe for it. That is why, as you may have noticed, the reader of the Torah uses a silver pointer. That is not used for decorative purposes. It is implied because of the Halakhah that *kitvei kodesh metam'in et ha-yedayim*, that we are forbidden to touch the inner part of the Torah scroll. The reason for this is a profound insight of the Torah into human nature: if we are permitted to touch it freely and often, we will lose our reverence for it. The less we are permitted to contact it, the greater our respect for it. Similarly, the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem was preserved in its sanctity by our tradition when it forbade any man other than the high priest to enter its sacred precincts; and even he might not do so except for one time during the year--on the Day of Atonement.

And so it is with words. The more we use, the less they mean. When our rabbis investigated the first portion of Genesis, they discovered that the world was created by G-d *ba-asarah maamarot*, in ten "words." Only ten words to create an entire universe! And yet our rabbis were not satisfied. And so they asked *ve'halo be'maamar echod yakhol le'hibarei?*--could not the world have been created with only one word? Why waste nine precious words? Indeed, for with words, quantity is in inverse relationship to quality. If there are so many words that you cannot count them, then no individual word counts very much.

In our Sedra this morning we read *va-yavo Avraham li'sepod le'Sarah ve'livkotah*, that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. If you have read the portion carefully, you will have noticed something strange about the word *livkotah* "to weep for her." The letter *khaf* is smaller than usual. It is a *khaf ketanah*, a miniature *khaf*. Why is it? The commentator Baal Ha-Turim explains *she'lo bakhah ela me'at*, that Abraham did not weep or speak too much. Of course Abraham said something. There had to be some weeping and mourning and eulogizing. He had to give some articulate expression to the grief that welled up in his breast. For a man who cannot speak out of his grief is like a man who cannot sweat--the poison remains within. It can be psychologically dangerous not to mourn. But it must not be overdone. Abraham realized that if words are too many, then words are an escape, an escape

from the confrontation with reality. He realized that with too many words he would dissipate the real feelings he contained within himself. He wanted something to remain, something deliciously private, painfully mysterious, some residue of memory and love and affection for his beloved Sarah that he did not want to share with the rest of the world. And so the *khafketanah*, indicating that he knew how to limit the outpouring of his words.

O how we moderns need this lesson of making our words sacred by making them scarce. How we need that lesson of the *khafketanah*. How we must learn to pass our words through the flames of wisdom. Modern life seems centered so much about words. We are dominated by a communications industry. We veer constantly between meetings and discussions, symposia and forums, lectures and sermons, public relations and propaganda. We are hounded continually by radio and television, telephone and telegraph. We are the “talkingest” civilization in all of history. How desperately we need that *khafketanah*. Some time ago, Jewish leaders, with all good intentions--that of enhancing the appeal for refugees and immigrants--announced to the world that Rumania was opening its doors and letting its Jews out. And how tragically that torrent of words backfired, provoking the Arab States and causing Rumania to shut its doors in the face of thousands of unfortunate Jews who must now remain unreunited with their immediate families in Israel.

Only two weeks ago one of the most important leaders of Israel made the announcement that he expects Soviet Russia to open its doors in from one to five years. Here were words that kindled a spark of hope in us, but at the

same time caused a shadow of fear and the whisper of terror to pass over us. Perhaps these very words will cause the good news to be revoked. Perhaps because of the words, Russia will close its doors for more years to come.

It is about time that all of us, and especially Jewish agencies learned that we ought not be dominated by the public relation machines. It is about time that we learned to respect the *khafketanah*. Moses himself was a stammerer and a stutterer, and so he spoke few words--but whatever he did speak was engraved in letters of fire upon the consciousness of the race. David told us, “commune with your hearts upon your beds and be silent.” Shammai reminded us “speak little, but do much.” Other rabbis told us that the way to wisdom is through silence. The great Besht meant the same thing in a comment upon G-d’s command to Noah, *tzohar taaseh la-tevah*--thou shalt make a light for the ark. Besht pointed out that the Hebrew word *tevah* means not only “ark,” but also “word.” Make sure each word brilliant, alive, shining, sparkling, and illuminating. Use it to enlighten, not to confuse. All of these know the secret of Abraham, that of the *khafketanah*.

Words are important and powerful, therefore they are sacred. Because they are sacred, they must be issued with great, extreme caution. They must be tampered in the fire of one’s character. And because they are holy and purified in fire, they must be few, choice and scarce.

When we will have learned this, we will have learned a great deal indeed. So that ultimately, we will be able to say to G-d, with David; *ki lekha dumiyah tehillah*. Almighty G-d, our very silence is praise unto Thee.

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Smart Chesed

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

What does it take to be a person who embodies chesed? We tend to associate kindness with both emotions and behaviors. I feel empathy towards someone, and I help them through action. Yet, there is an essential element to chesed that often gets overlooked: thinking. Dr. Nancy Eisenberg, a psychologist who studies the importance of prosocial behavior (what we might call chesed) argues that helping others requires several essential cognitive processes. First, we need to be able to perceive the needs of another by interpreting the situation and making inferences about what they are thinking or feeling. Then,

we need to evaluate the most beneficial course of action. Finally, we have to formulate and carry out a plan to help. In short, she contends, prosocial behavior requires perception, reasoning, problem solving, and decision-making.

It should come as no surprise that when looking for a wife for Yitzchak, the servant of Avraham focuses his test on the trait of chesed. After all, his master Avraham epitomizes chesed. As we noted last week based on Rabbi Moshe Alshich, an essential component to Avraham’s chesed was his ability to use his social intelligence to predict and counter all the possible worries of the angels in order to help them

best. We can therefore hypothesize that as part of his search for someone with the trait of chesed, the servant of Avraham would incorporate a test related to how well Yitzchak's potential match can think as it relates to chesed.

On a simple level, the pesukim indicate that Rivka demonstrates chesed by offering both the servant to drink as well as the camels. Upon closer study, there is a tremendous depth of analysis by Rivka. Malbim highlights that Eliezer doesn't just ask Rivka to give him water, he says *הֲטִיבָא כֶּדֶךָ וְאֶשְׁתָּהּ* – he asks that she tip the jug for him as opposed to him taking the jug from her and drinking himself. She could have responded angrily: take it yourself – I am not going to pour it into your mouth! But that is not how she reacts. She responds with wisdom, sensitivity, and perspective. She thinks to herself, why is it that he is asking me to pour for him? It must be that there is something wrong with his hands so he must not be able to draw water for himself. And if he can't draw water for himself, he must not be able to draw water for his camels! That is why she responds positively to his request and goes above and beyond what he asks for and provides for the camels as well. She is able to dig deeper and realize the real problem. Eliezer's test isn't just about chesed, it's about smart chesed.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in his commentary Beit HaLevi, also frames Avraham's servant's test as requiring

Rivka to demonstrate intelligence and sensitivity in the context of chesed. The test, he argues, was not whether she would give him water. That wouldn't be so special. The test was, what will she do with the water in the jug after he drinks the water? The first option would be to take the water back to her house and give it to her family, as she was originally planning on doing before he asked for water. The problem with following through on her original goal is that to Rivka, this person is a random nomad. It would not be hygienic to allow him to drink from the barrel and then have her family drink the rest. The second option is to spill the leftover water out. The problem with this option is that it may be insulting to the person she is helping. Stuck with two bad options, she problem-solves and thinks of a great idea: she will give the water to the camels! This way nobody gets sick and nobody gets insulted. She doesn't just demonstrate that she like to help others. She is healthy, sensitive, and smart.

Chesed isn't just about doing but requires intelligence. Truly understanding the depths of what someone is asking for is essential to effective helping. Uncovering what wasn't asked is often more important than identifying what was. Thinking through options and potential consequences is required in order that we make sound and sensitive decisions. My we learn from Avraham and Rivka and not just do chesed but do smart chesed.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

From the standpoint of the Torah, there can be no distinction between one human being and another on the basis of race or color." (Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, Civil Rights and the Dignity of Man)

"Some of our enemies among the nations of the world claim that the nation of Israel is a racist nation, for the Torah says that Canaan is cursed and will be a slave of slaves to his brethren... But the truth is certainly not so, for it is clear that the Torah's view is against racism... Racism means that one race elevates itself over another race because of its origin and lineage, as though it were formed of higher and better 'material' and the like. But here, the reason Noach distinguished them was because of the corrupt traits of Cham, and his son Canaan, traits which he conveyed to his descendants after him. (Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, Emet l'Yaakov to Bereishit 9:25)

If the Torah opposes racism, how are we to explain Avraham's insistence that Yitzchak should not marry a

Canaanite? (Bereishit 24:3-4) And lest one say it was based on Canaanite sin, we must ask: Were Arameans much better? Indeed, Hashem told Avraham to leave that land and his family behind! (Bereishit 12) Further, commentators suggest that Avraham said "among whom I live" to reject the righteous daughters of his allies, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. (Bereishit Rabbah 59:8, Ramban) This implies a genetic basis for Avraham's demand!

Perhaps Hashem told Avraham to demand this. Indeed, a midrash contends that after the Akeidah, Avraham considered marrying Yitzchak to a daughter of Aner, Eshkol or Mamre, to ensure an heir. Hashem then preempted him, telling him that his brother Nachor had produced a family, which is why the Torah records the lineage of Nachor after the Akeidah. (Bereishit Rabbah 57:3) However, we might offer three other possibilities, based on three goals of the marriage of Rivkah and Yitzchak.

1: Creating a Home

Addressing our questions, Rabbeinu Bechaye (commentary to Bereishit 24:3) first discussed the possibility that a Canaanite woman could lead Yitzchak astray, but then he noted that newlyweds face challenges due to their different backgrounds. Each side enters with a particular social standing and religious orientation, and imbalances can disrupt the peace of their nascent home. [See Pesachim 49a.] The home of an intra-clan marriage would be more peaceful, despite the family's religious differences.

2: Perpetuating a Nation

Rabbeinu Nisim suggested that Avraham was looking toward the future nation created through this marriage. (Derashot haRan 5) He discerned that biology influences human conduct, and behaviour may influence biology, as we can observe in the body's reactions to emotional stress. Therefore, he contended that bad behaviour could shape a person's nature in a way that could be passed to one's children.

Aramean idolatry would not be inherited, but Canaanite corruption could be communicated.

Rabbeinu Nisim's approach faces at least two

weaknesses, though. First, it is unclear how such traits would be inherited, without assuming race-based spirituality. [It is unlikely that Rabbeinu Nisim anticipated epigenetics.] Second, the Torah emphasizes the corrupt conduct of Yitzchak's cousin Lavan, and not his idolatry.

3: Transmitting a Bequest

Yitzchak's marriage began the process of realizing Hashem's promise to give the Land of Israel to the descendants of Avraham and Sarah. Marrying a Canaanite could warp that bequest in two ways: it would give Canaanites a lasting stake in the land (Abarbanel to Bereishit 24:3), and conversely, it would suggest that the Jewish claim to the land came from the Canaanite side of their family. (Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor ad loc.) To avoid Canaanite entanglement, Yitzchak needed to marry someone from the outside.

Rivkah supported all three goals. We see no strife between Yitzchak and Rivkah based on their different backgrounds. Rivkah ensures the continuity of the Jewish nation, arranging for Yitzchak to bless the righteous Yaakov. And via the union of Rivkah and Yitzchak, the Land of Israel remains within the family of the Jewish nation.

Is Anti-Zionism Really Antisemitism? Does it Matter?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The parsha is dominated by two parallel stories of dramatic negotiations. Avraham bargains with the citizens of Chevron to secure a burial plot for his deceased wife. Afterwards he dispatches his loyal servant to secure a wife for his chosen son Yitzchak. In each instance local "parties" must be convinced – to sell land or to release Rivka to Avraham's family. These two parallel negotiations exhibit multiple similarities: Each evolves in three successive waves of 'discussions': Avraham's servant first encounters Rivka at the well, subsequently presents his request to her parents and finally "closes the deal" the next morning. Avraham, for his part, first negotiates with the general Chevron population, and subsequently engages in two rounds of negotiations with a chieftain named Efron. Each "project" of this parsha is riveted to a central and even iconic location: Avraham and Efron confer at the gates of Chevron- the ancient equivalent of City Hall; the servant discovers Rivka at the watering hole or the well. The Chevron talks are pitched on money and the marriage project involves gifts of jewelry and ornaments. There are

numerous similarities uniting these two storylines.

Yet, these two parallel stories exhibit one glaring difference. The marriage project could not have gone more smoothly. "Luckily" Rivka literally falls into the servant's lap and her family couldn't be more excited nor more welcoming to this long lost "relative". Indeed, they are torn about releasing their daughter so immediately but, sensing Rivka's enthusiasm, they willfully offer their full blessings.

By stark contrast the Chevron project is protracted, plodding, and painful. Initially, the residents voluntarily propose burial opportunities, but Avraham soon discovers that these offers are empty pledges as he must persuade Efron as well. A simple burial-plot purchase, which could easily have been summarized in one pasuk, extends for twenty verses and becomes labyrinthine. Chazal sensed the bulky and stalled nature of the negotiations and portray Efron as hesitant, hostile and even manipulative. Ultimately, Avraham must pry away this burial site and even overpays for his modest purchase. By carefully aligning these two storylines the Torah highlights their core difference: while

the marriage project is wildly successful and harmonious, the land project is stalled and fractured.

Jews are tasked with advancing the human condition and Avraham's launches this grand mission. The arranged marriage between the two families represented more than "just" a wedding between Yitzchak and Rivka. This alliance extends Avraham's influence beyond the borders of Israel- to his long-forgotten family. Curiously, Avraham's camels play an outsized role in the story, in part because they highlight the great distance traveled. A short journey to the akeidah can be traversed by donkey but longer expeditions to international locations require camels. The camels were also essential in transporting Avraham's great wealth to his family. This marriage expedition enables Avraham to reconnect with his distant overseas family and share his prosperity. More importantly, Avraham's servant constantly thanks G-d and mentions His role in the family's successes. Through this servant's conversation, Lavan and his crew learn about the G-d of Avraham. During the marriage project Avraham's impact as international agent of religion and welfare goes global and his audiences, both in this parsha and in previous sections are, by and large, extremely receptive to his message. Throughout history, and even more so in the modern era, the world has welcomed the Jewish "contribution" to society. Jews have spearheaded development in almost every sphere of human achievement including science, economics, culture, medicine, and politics. The warm welcome which Avraham's servant receives foreshadows the manner in which humanity will welcome the Jewish "light" provided to nations.

However, a Jew is tasked with a second and parallel mission: to settle the land of G-d and transmit our messages from that land. This second mission commences in this parsha as Avraham bids for his first legally binding purchase of land. Though he previously resided in Israel, Avraham lived either a nomadic lifestyle wandering from hilltop to hilltop or as a guest hosted by his local friends. Finally, Avraham hopes to set roots in this land, but the

locals aren't very happy. Though their hostility is hidden, it simmers beneath the surface and severely complicates what should be a quick and easy purchase of a small burial shrine. Though the world is happy to embrace the "Jewish contribution" to humanity, they are far less enthusiastic about granting us our land of Israel. This ironic contrast is illustrated by the two negotiations of parshat Chaye Sarah- one which zigzags and one which is fluid.

We have worked hard at unmasking anti-Zionism and exposing the horrible monster of anti-Semitism which oftentimes lies beneath. We encounter many who, in addition to anti-Israel rhetoric, issue bigoted and vile attacks on Jews. However, as much as we battle this unholy union between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, we cannot conflate the two issues – for two reasons. Firstly, because they are fundamentally two different issues – oftentimes fused but still independent. Many opponents of Jewish settlement of the land of Israel fully embrace Jews and their importance to society. Sometimes, anti-Zionism bleeds into anti-Semitism, but often it remains absent of any hatred toward Jews. In fact, many Jews themselves are uncomfortable with the State of Israel even though they are proud of their Jewish identity and heritage. Though many enemies of Israel are virulent anti-Semites, some are not, and we best not simplistically blur those differences.

Secondly, and equally important, we must not conflate these issues for our own sake- to maintain our own clarity of mission. We deserve this land through Divine mandate and historical heritage and that is a self-sufficient justification. The battle for our land is important and Divinely mandated even independent of the important battle against anti-Semitism. Our two missions- to advance the human condition and to settle our homeland land are indistinguishable and inseparable. Our commitment to our land and our struggle with those who oppose this project doesn't have to be justified as part of a larger battle against anti-Semitism.

Strive For Greatness

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Chaye Sarah, the Torah tells us of Sarah Imeinu's passing at the age of one hundred and twenty seven years old. Following her death, Avraham Avinu negotiates the purchase price of the Me'aras

Ha'Machpela, buys the cave and buries his beloved wife: וְאֶחָרַי-כֵּן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת-שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ, אֶל-מְעַרַת שְׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה עַל-פְּנֵי מְמָרָא--הוּא הַכְּרוֹן: בְּאֶרֶץ, כְּנָעַן and after that, Avraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah

facing Mamre, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan (Bereishis 23:19).

The parsha begins by telling us: *וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה, מֵאָה שָׁנָה, וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵים שָׁנִים שָׁנֵי שָׂרָה*, and the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life (23:1).

Rashi famously comments: *ויהיו חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים. לכה נכתב שנה בכל כלל וכלל, לומר לה שכל אחד נדרש לעצמו, בת ק' כבת כ' לחטא, מה בת כ' לא חטאה, שהרי אינה בת ענשין, אף בת ק' בלא חטא, ובת כ' כבת ז' ליפי 'shana' (years) is written at each category (after the hundreds, tens and ones) to teach you that each one is expounded on its own. When she was one hundred years old, she was like twenty years old with respect to sin; just as one who is twenty years old is considered sin-free, so too when Sarah was one hundred she was without sin. And when she was twenty years old, she was like seven years old with regard to beauty.*

Furthermore, Rashi comments: *שני חיי שרה. כלן שוין. לטובה* - The years of Sarah's life: They were all equal for goodness.

Our first foremother, Sarah, was a tzadekes who was sin free when she died, as beautiful in her old age as in her youth, and who recognized that all the years of her life - even the difficult nisyonos she and her husband, Avraham, faced - were equal for goodness. She truly lived up to her tafkid of becoming the Eim b'Yisrael, the first mother of Israel who birthed our nation.

There is a well known Medrash that teaches:

רבי עקיבא ה"ה יושב ודורש והצבור מתנמנם בקש לעוררן אמר מה ראתה אסתר שתמלך על שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה, אלא תבוא אסתר שהיתה בת בתה של שרה שהיתה מאה ועשרים ושבע ותמלך על מאה ועשרים ושבע מדינות.

R' Akiva was sitting and lecturing and his students were falling asleep. He sought to wake them up, so he said: What did Esther see that she ruled over 127 provinces? He answered his own question and said: Let Esther, the daughter of Sarah, who lived for 127 years, come and rule over 127 provinces! (Medrash Bereishis Rabbah 58:3)

This is a seemingly very strange Medrash. How can we understand that the students of the great R' Akiva were falling asleep in his shiur? How would his connection between Esther Ha'Malka and Sarah Imeinu wake them up? And what lesson does this Medrash teach us?

R' Ari Wasserman quotes R' Eliyahu Dessler zt'l (1892-1953) and writes "(In his Michtav M'Eliyahu) R' Dessler explains that there are two ways of rousing oneself to higher levels of serving Hashem. One can either

contemplate his lowliness, or aspire to greatness by aiming high.

"Rabbi Akiva chose the latter path; (he strove and aspired to reach greatness by always seeking to attain higher levels in his avodas Hashem). Well versed in the most esoteric aspects of the Torah, R' Akiva was surely speaking about very lofty things that day in the beis medrash.

"That's why his listeners were falling asleep: they thought that they could never possibly attain such heights. (They were focusing on their lowliness, instead of focusing on their boundless potential and ability to reach ever-higher heights.) Therefore, says R' Dessler, R' Akiva sought to 'wake them up' to the fact that, precisely by 'thinking big,' they could indeed become great.

"Just look at Queen Esther! he was telling them. She achieved greatness by contemplating the life of Sarah Imeinu and asking herself (to paraphrase another medrash), *מתי יגיעו מעשי למעשה אבתי*, when will my deeds reach those of my ancestors?

"... This was precisely Rabbi Akiva's message to her students: If you really want to reach higher heights in serving Hashem, you can find inspiration everywhere, even - and especially - in that which currently lies beyond you.

"R' Dessler's understanding of this fascinating medrash teaches us the importance of striving to improve. We should never be content with the status quo. Only by constantly working on ourselves (to reach greater heights) can we, too, (grow to) serve Hashem with clarity and completeness" (Welcome to Our Table 2, p.45-46).

Only when we look at those who are greater than us, and we recognize our own boundless potential to reach higher heights, will we be able to grow in our avodas Hashem. We may never become a Sarah Imeinu, an Esther Ha'Malka, or a Rabbi Akiva, but we can certainly all become greater than we are today, if we only believe in ourselves and our ability to grow.

It happened one time that a talmid of the great R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel zt'l (1943-2011, Rosh Yeshiva Yeshivas Mir Yerushalayim) visited his home on a Friday afternoon and saw him sitting with two young men wearing jeans and t-shirts, with Chumashim open in front of them. When they left, the talmid asked the Rosh Yeshiva, incredulously, "Was the Rosh Yeshiva learning Chumash with Rashi with them?" "Yes," the Rosh Yeshiva replied. "But why?" asked the talmid (as a learning seder in Chumash with Rashi was well below the Rosh Yeshiva's exalted level of learning!)

“Because they asked,” the Rosh Yeshiva replied (Rav Nosson Tzvi, Artscroll, p.280-281).

We can all reach higher heights, if we but arouse our

Dealing with the Hittites

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

The narrative at the beginning of our parshah is perplexing. On the one hand, we read how Efron the Chitti (Hittite) deceptively and greedily negotiated with Avrohom Avinu for the sale of Me'aras Ha-Machpelah (the Cave of the Patriarchs) to Avrohom, initially asserting to Avrohom (Bereshis 23:11) that the property was being given to him as a gift, yet when Avrohom then insisted on paying, Efron exacted a very hefty fee (ibid. v. 15).

On the other hand, Rashi (ibid. v. 10) cites the Medrash (Bereshis Rabba 58:7) that the locals, B'nei Cheis (the Hittites), took leave of their work when Avrohom came to their town that day, in order to be present and show their respects to him (“to bestow kindness to him”) upon the passing of his wife Sarah.

These same people who had just appointed the selfish Efron as their leader and representative that very day (v. Rashi ibid.) came out en masse to perform an act of kindness to Avrohom; how could it be?

The simple explanation is that although B'nei Cheis were no tzaddikim, as illustrated by the atrocious way that Eisav's Chitti wives dealt with Yitzchok and Rivka (v. Targum Yonasan b. Uziel on Bereshis 26:35), when it came to a person who had just suffered the loss of his wife, B'nei Cheis showed their humanity. This trait was perhaps not dominant in B'nei Cheis, but it emerged in a time of personal crisis.

The juxtaposition of Avrohom's interactions with B'nei Cheis and his subsequent command to Eliezer to travel to Charan in order to find a wife for Yitzchak, due to the unfitness of the local women in Canaan, is quite striking. Let's take a close look.

Avrohom Avinu was renowned for his chesed, reaching out to people and bringing them near to Hashem. Avrohom could see the good in people and recognize that they are redeemable. It is clear from the reception accorded Avrohom by B'nei Cheis that they held him in very high esteem, undoubtedly due to his reputation for dealing warmly and lovingly with everyone, such that all had the

own selves, by remembering that the path to greatness lies in thinking big, and striving to attain that which is just beyond reach.

greatest respect for him. Everyone knew that Avrohom could see their virtues, despite other major aspects of them that offended Avrohom's values.

But this was not enough when it came to selecting Yitzchok's future wife - it would not suffice for Yitzchok's lifemate to merely have a latent sense of goodness and be redeemable. To become the next of the Imahos, the Matriarchs, one needed to be a Rivka - a pillar of tzidkus (righteousness) without question or deficiency. It is for this reason that the narrative of Avrohom and B'nei Cheis is immediately contrasted with the narrative of Eliezer's dispatch to Charan in order to locate a wife for Yitzchok, to differentiate and teach that the standard for this mission was vastly different and higher, as merely possessing a concealed potential for good and hopefully improving one's ways was not enough. Rather, to be Yitzchok's wife and the progenitor of the nascent Jewish nation, total devotion to the path of Hashem was an absolute requirement from the outset; someone with lacking commitment was a non-starter.

The lesson for us is clear. We must deal with everyone warmly and in a welcoming manner, acting with chesed and making a kiddush Hashem as we interact with all types of people. But when it comes to our own lives and the lives of family members, we dare not embark on an insecure spiritual path, placing people in scenarios in which we hope that they can make the best of a situation that is not spiritually ideal and try to seek out the latent good so as to emerge as Torah Jews.

Whether it comes to where we decide to live, where to send our kids to yeshiva, where to daven, and much more - matters that determine our religious path and spiritual future - we cannot compromise. We need to be like Avrohom Avinu sending forth Eliezer, demanding for ourselves and our families unwavering standards. This is our holy responsibility and an absolute necessity in placing ourselves and our dear ones on the derech (path of) Hashem.