

Parshat Chayei Sara The Uniqueness of Nachor's Family

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In this week's Parsha, Avraham insists that his servant not procure a wife for Yitzchak from amongst the local Canaanite women, but rather he should find a spouse from the women of Avraham's "land and birthplace (אֶל-אֶרֶץ וְאֶל-אֶרֶץ)"¹ It is not clear from the Pasuk whether the impetus for Avraham's request is the shunning of the Canaanite women² or whether he is motivated by his desire to secure a wife from the location he is sending his servant. Later on, when Avraham blesses the mission of his servant, he mentions that the God who took him from "his father's house and the land of his birth (מִבֵּית אָבִי וְאֶל-אֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתִּי)"³ should send His angel to help his servant to successfully obtain a wife "from there."⁴ The commentators disagree as to the relationship between the three locations mentioned by Avraham: my land (אֶרֶץ), my birthplace (מוֹלַדְתִּי) and my father's house (מִבֵּית אָבִי).⁴ Irrespective of one's approach, it would seem that the mention of his father's house is significantly narrowing the pool of potential wives who would be satisfactory to Avraham. That which is somewhat ambiguous at the beginning of the Parsha becomes much more apparent when Avraham's servant retells his story to Rivka's family. There he quotes Avraham as having him take an oath promising that he would not find a wife for Yitzchak from the Canaanite women, but rather attempt to secure a woman from "his father's house and his family (אֶל-בֵּית אָבִי תִּלְךָ וְאֶל-מִשְׁפַּחְתִּי)"⁵ It could be that the servant is embellishing the story to make it seem that his "chancing" upon Rivka was more prescient, but according to Avraham's servant, Avraham was insisting that Yitzchak's wife come exclusively from his family.

In his quest to secure a wife for Yitzchak, Avraham's servant travels to Aram Nahara'im, the residence of Nachor, who is Avraham's brother. He parks himself at the edge of the city, where the city's well is located, and asks God to aid him in his mission. He then conjures up a test through which God could indicate to him that this was the

appropriate woman for Yitzchak. The first girl to appear on the scene is Rivka. Avraham's servant rushes forward and asks if she could please provide him with some water. She graciously supplies the water and then she volunteers to draw water for his entire caravan of camels as well.⁶ This is no small undertaking given that camels tend to consume large amounts of water after concluding a long journey similar to the one just completed by Avraham's servant. In addition, the drawing of the water itself is a very taxing activity. Despite all this, Rivka happily obliges and voluntarily provides water to this stranger and all of his camels. Then, when asked if her father's home has place to host, she responds enthusiastically in the affirmative that they have "plenty of straw and feed at home and also room to spend the night (וְתֵאמֶר אֵלָיו גַּם תֵּבֹן גַּם מִסּוּפֹא רַב (עִמָּנוּ גַּם מְקוֹם לָלוֹן)." Upon hearing the story from his sister, Rivka's brother Lavan races out to meet the stranger. He invites the stranger to stay with them in a manner that is as solicitous as his sister with "Come in, blessed of God, why do you remain outside when I have readied the house and a place for the camels (וַיֹּאמֶר בּוֹא בְרוּךְ יְיָ וְיִקְוֶה לָמָּה תַעֲמִד (בְּחוּץ וְאֶנְכִי פְנִיתִי הַבַּיִת וּמְקוֹם לְגַמְלִים"?)⁸ Their Chesed and Hachnasat Orchim (הכנסת אורחים) rivals that of Avraham Avinu. Moreover, Lavan utilizes the Tetragrammaton (יְיָ) to refer to God which is unheard of as Paroah declares "who is this God (יְיָ) that I should pay heed to him (וְיִאמֶר)?"⁹ That name of God was only used by Am Yisrael whereas non-Jews typically refer to God by the name Elokim (אלקים). It is so unusual that some commentaries claim that those are not Lavan's actual words, but rather they were later superimposed on whatever name of God he had utilized.⁹ The icing on the cake is when Avraham's servant finishes retelling his entire ordeal, Rivka's brother and father declare, "The matter was decreed by God,¹⁰ we cannot speak to you good or bad (וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוֹאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ) (מִי־יִקְוֶה יָצָא הַדְּבָר לֹא נוֹכַל דְּבַר אֵלֶיךָ רַע אוֹ טוֹב"?)¹¹ Without hesitation, they declare the Shidduch divinely ordained beyond their interference. They completely and unconditionally submit to the will

¹ ואשביעך ביקוק אלקי השמים ואלקי הארץ אשר לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הפנעני אשר אנכי יושב בקרבן: כי אל-ארצי ואל-מולדתי תלך ולקחת אשה לבני ליצחק: (בראשית כד, ג-ד)

² עיין רס"ג, ר"י בכור שור ושד"ל שם ורש"י שם כד, לט ועיין בראשית כז, מז וְתֵאמֶר רבקה אל-יצחק קצתי בחי מפני בנות חת אמ-לךח יעקב אשה מבנות-חת כאלה מבנות הארץ למה לי חיים

³ ויקוק אלקי השמים אשר לקחתי מביית אבי ומארץ מולדתי ואשר דבר-לי ואשר גשבע-לי לאמר לזרעך אתן את-הארץ הזאת הוא ישלח מלאכו לפניך ולקחת אשה לבני משם (בראשית כד, ז)

⁴ עיין רש"י ורמב"ן שם וגם רס"ג רשב"ם ואבן עזרא ור' אברהם בן הרמב"ם שם כד, ד וישבעני אדני לאמר לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הפנעני אשר אנכי יושב בארצו: אם-לא אל-בית-אבי תלך ואל-משפחתי ולקחת אשה לבני: ואמר אל-אדני אלי לא-תלך

האשה אחרי: ויאמר אלי יקוק אשר-התהלכתי לפניו ישלח מלאכו אתך והצליח דרכך ולקחת אשה לבני ממשפחתי ומבית אבי: (בראשית כד, לז-מ)

⁶ ותאמר שתה אדני ותמהר ותרד כדה על ידה ותשקהו: ותכל להשקותו ותאמר גם לגמליך אשאב עד אם כלו לשתת: (שם, יח-יט)

⁷ שם, כה

⁸ שם, לא

⁹ ברוך ה' - אין צורך שיהיה זה ממש באמר לבן כי התורה העתיקה הדבור זה מלשון המדבר ללשון ישראל, וכן אמרה ברוך ה', גם כי לבן לא ידע את ה', ואמר ברוך ה' אלקים או כיוצא בזה (שד"ל שם)

¹⁰ גם פה משתמשים בשם יקוק שהוא נדיר אבל כאן יכול להיות שהם רק שכפלו דברי עבד אברהם

¹¹ שם, נ

of God which is reminiscent of the way Avraham loyally heeds God's call throughout his life.

It would seem from this that Avraham's Chesed was a product of his familial upbringing rather than his being an exceptional autodidact. There is more evidence of this from Lot's behavior in S'dom. He also generously offers the Mal'achim accommodations and presses them to be his guests. One could argue that Lot was just a protégé of Avraham, but in the Pesukim, Lot and Avraham have already parted ways long before Avraham has settled anywhere for any duration and prior to the famed stories of Avraham's exceptional hospitality.

It is also apparent later in Sefer Breishit when Lavan graciously greets his nephew Yaakov who at his mother's behest escapes the wrath of his brother Eisav by running away to his uncle. "He ran out to greet him, he hugged him, kissed him and brought him into the house... (וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע לְבָן) ¹²." (אֶת שְׁמַע יַעֲקֹב בֶּן אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָץ לִקְרָאתוֹ וַיַּחֲבֹק לּוֹ וַיִּנָּשֶׁק לוֹ) ¹². This is only compounded by the fact that Rivka insists to Yitzhak that Yaakov take a wife from her family rather than from amongst the local women. ¹³

There is clearly something unusual and special about Avraham's family that is evident from all of these stories. ¹⁴ The Torah corroborates this conclusion when it introduces Avraham. In Sefer Breishit, the term "Eleh Toldot (אלה תולדות)" is used to indicate the beginning of a new era and the focus on a particular individual. If the Torah follows such an opening with a quick listing of that individual's familial lineage, then it is indicative of a dismissal of that person or family from the continuing narrative. ¹⁵ On the other hand, if the Torah begins to relate a series of more in-depth stories after such an introduction then it implies that the particular individual has been anointed by God to be the inheritor and progenitor of the Chosen lineage. ¹⁶ Interestingly, the section of Sefer Breishit that begins the stories of Avraham does not open with "Eleh Toldot Avraham (אלה תולדות אברהם)," but rather with "Eleh Toldot Terach (אלה תולדות תרח)." This would imply that

Terach's family was chosen to be the successor to Noach and his son Shem. This helps to explain why Avraham was so keen to find a wife for his son Yitzchak from among his family, but it also triggers a much bigger question as to what distinguishes Avraham and his descendants from the rest of Terach's family who were similarly paradigms of kindness. ¹⁷

The key to answering this question is found at the end of Parshat Vayetze. There the Torah relates that Lavan finally catches up with the escaping Yaakov and his family. The night before he confronts Yaakov, the two groups are encamped on adjacent mountains, and God appears to Lavan in a dream and tells him how he would like Lavan to deal with the situation. "And God appeared to Lavan the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, 'Beware of attempting to speak with Jacob, from good or bad' (הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ פֶּן) ¹⁸." In essence, God instructs Lavan to walk away from the situation. ¹⁹ From Lavan's previous reactions, one would expect Lavan to acquiesce to God's demand and let Yaakov continue on his way without interfering. Surprisingly, instead, the next morning, Lavan, ignoring God's request, confronts Yaakov with a series of accusations which culminates in "I have the power to do you harm, had it not been for your God appearing to me last night and warning me of attempting anything with Yaakov, good or bad (הַשְׁמֵר לָךְ מִדַּבֵּר עִם יַעֲקֹב מִטוֹב עַד רָע) ²⁰." After Yaakov defends his actions, Lavan finally points out to Yaakov that "the daughters (your wives) are my daughters, the children are my children and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine... (הַבָּנוֹת בְּנֹתַי וְהַבָּנִים בְּנֵי וְהָצֹאן צֹאנִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר אֵתָּה רְאֵה) ²¹." Why does Lavan's behavior in this situation deviate from his seeming submission to the will of God in the case of the marriage of his sister? It is interesting to note that the words "good and bad (טוב ורע)" appear in both stories about Lavan – in Lavan's response to Avraham's servant searching for a wife for Yitzchak (וַיַּעַן לְבָן) ²² and in God's directive to Lavan in the showdown with Yaakov on Har Ha'Gil'ad (הַשְׁמֵר) ²³ (לָךְ פֶּן תִּדְבַּר עִם יַעֲקֹב מִטוֹב עַד רָע).

¹² שם כט, ג-ד

¹³ ותאמר רבקה אל-יחזק קצתי בחיי מפני בנות חת אם-לקח יעקב אשה מבנות-חת כאלה מבנות הארץ למה לי חיים: ויקרא יחזק אל-יעקב ויברך אתו ויצוהו ויאמר לו לא-תקח אשה מבנות כנען: קום לך פדגה ארם ביתה בתואל אבי אמך וקח-לך משם אשה מבנות לבן אחי אמך: (שם כז, לא כח, א-ב)

¹⁴ גם יש לעיין בשימוש של לבן בביטוי אלהי נחור ואלהי אביהם בבראשית לא, נג אלקי אברהם אלהי נחור... אלהי אביהם... וישבע יעקב בפחד אביו יחזק שהמפרשים חולקים על טיב האלהות הזאת אם הוא חול או קודש (עיין ר' יוסף קרא ור' אברהם בן הרמב"ם וברד"ץ הופמן) וגם עיין יהושע כד, ב

¹⁵ בראשית י, א (בני נח) שם כה, יב (ישמעאל) שם לו, א (עשו)

¹⁶ בראשית ב, ד שם ה, א שם ט, ט (נח), שם י, א (שם) שם יא, כז (תרח) שם כה, יט

(יחזק) שם לז, ב (יעקב)

¹⁷ כי ידעתי למען אשר יצוה את-בניו ואת-ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך יקוק לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען הביא יקוק עלי-אברהם את אשר-דבר עלי: (שם יח, יט)

¹⁸ ויבא אלהים אל לבן הארמי בחלום הלילה ויאמר לו השמר לך פן תדבר עם יעקב מטוב עד רע (שם לא, כד)

¹⁹ ופשוטו, השמר לך פן תדבר עמו לעשות לו טובה אם ישוב עמך מדרכו, או פן תפחידנו לעשות לו רעה אם לא יבא עמך, כי אני צויתי לשוב אל ארצו (רמב"ן שם)

²⁰ יש לקל ידי לעשות עמכם רע ואלקי אביכם אמש אמר אלי לאמר השמר לך מדבר עם יעקב מטוב עד רע (שם לא, כט)

²¹ ויען לבן ויאמר אל יעקב הבנות בנותי והבנים בני והצאן צאני וכל אשר אתה ראה לי הוא ולבתי מה אעשה לאלה היום או לבניהן אשר ילדו (שם מג)

The phrase “good and/or bad” appears numerous times in the Torah and Tanach.²² The first time it is manifest is in the Garden of Eden where there is the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad (עֵץ הַדַּעַת) (טוב ורע).²³ Man is instructed to abstain from partaking of the fruits from this tree, but fails to adhere to this directive and eats the forbidden fruit. God then says “Now that man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!”²⁴ The Ramban explains that man’s natural disposition was to unemotionally comply with that which was asked of him similar to the way that the heavens and earth always loyally follow the laws of nature embedded by God in the creation. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge generated a newfound personal will within the individual that allowed them to make choices whether the consequences were good or bad; whether it aligned with God’s will or (if) opposed it. The Tree of Knowledge granted man the freedom to choose to do what would be good or bad for themselves or to others. In one sense this ability to choose is a Godly feature, but on the other hand it is bad for man who now has personal drives, interests and desires that color his decisions.

The phrase “good and/or bad” also appears numerous times in connection with the Mitzva of T’mura.²⁵ At the end of Sefer Vayikra, the Torah says one may not exchange one sacrifice for another whether it is an upgrade or a downgrade (לא יחליפנו ולא ימיר אתו טוב ברע או רע בטוב). There too, it is dealing with “possessions” of the Godly domain and the Torah does not want individuals making trades or assessments on behalf of Hekdesh. While the person is supposedly acting on behalf of Hekdesh’s interests, it is clear that the person is self-dealing and they therefore will be colored by their personal motivations. In order to objectify the process, the Torah enjoins that there be no exchanges, whether it is an “upgrade” or a “downgrade”.

The words “good and bad” also appear with regards to the description of the children of the Dor HaMidbar after the sin of the Meraglim. God says “those little ones that you claimed would be taken into captivity, your children who do not yet

know good from bad (ובניכם אשר לא ידעו היום טוב ורע), they will enter [into the Land of Israel]...”²⁶ Again here, it is a reference to the youngsters who do not yet have a developed personal will or the gumption to deviate from the will of God. Since they did not reject God’s directives, they will be the ones that carry God’s flag forward and successfully enter the Land of Israel.

Bil’am also utilizes the words “good and bad” in order to describe his being shackled by God in his disclaimer to Balak. He justifies his inability to repeatedly comply with Balak’s wish that he curse Am Yisrael by telling Balak that from the outset “I even told the messengers you sent to me; ‘Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not of my own accord do anything good or bad contrary to God’s command (לא אוכל לעבר את פי יקוק לעשות טובה או רעה מלבי). What God says, that I must say’.”²⁷ Here too, good and bad describes the ability to defy God’s will. That choice was taken from Bil’am which compelled him, seemingly against his will, to have to comply with whatever God demanded of him – even if it was to his own detriment and even if it meant blessing Am Yisrael.

With this, we can better understand the response of Lavan and his father to the retelling of the story by the servant of Avraham with regards to his mission to obtain a wife for Yitzchak. They state that “The matter was decreed by God, we cannot speak to you good or bad (ויען לכן ובתואל ויאמרו).” In invoking the phrase “good or bad”, they were declaring their submission to God’s will that their sister or daughter was destined to be Yitzchak’s wife. Irrespective of whether they thought it was good or bad, or whether it was in their best interests or not, it would be pointless to object. They recognized the hand of God and subjugated any personal interest in compliance with God’s will. Similarly, when God appears to Lavan as he is chasing after Yaakov, he tells Lavan not to engage with Yaakov whether for “good or bad”. God is asking Lavan to stand down and once again comply with God’s will. God instructed Yaakov to return home and Lavan should not interfere with that process. This time, in contrast, Lavan ignores the explicit instruction of God to disengage. What causes Lavan to see the hand

²² עיין עוד שמואל ב, יט, לו ירמיהו מב, א-ו איכה ג, לח

²³ ויצמח יקוק אלקים מן האדמה כל עץ נחמד למראה וטוב למאכל ועץ החיים בתוך הגן ועץ הדעת טוב ורע (שם ב, ט)

²⁴ ויאמר יקוק אלקים הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע ועתה פן ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים ואכל וחי לעולם (שם ג, כב)

²⁵ לא יחליפנו ולא ימיר אתו טוב ברע או רע בטוב (ויקרא כז, י) והעריך הפה אתה בין טוב ובין רע קערקך הפה פן יהיה (שם יב) לא יבקר בין טוב לרע ולא ימירנו ואם המר ימירנו והיה הוא ויתמורתו יהיה קדש לא יגאל (שם לג)

²⁶ וטפכם אשר אמרתם לבז יהיה ובניכם אשר לא ידעו היום טוב ורע המה יבאו שמה ולהם אתננה והם יירשוהו (דברים א, לט)

²⁷ ויאמר בלעם אל בלק הלא גם אל מלאכיך אשר שלחת אלי דברתי לאמר: אם יתן לי בלק מלא ביתו כסף וזהב לא אוכל לעבר את פי יקוק לעשות טובה או רעה מלבי אשר דבר יקוק אתו אדבר: (במדבר כד, יג)

of God when it was just implicit while unable to comply when God explicitly instructs him to withdraw? The answer is personal interest. This time Lavan stood to lose a great worker, his family and all the blessings of wealth that had come along with Yaakov. In that situation, Lavan was unable to stoically pronounce that "the matter was decreed by God," how can I act contrarily? Nachor's family (presumably learnt from Terach) were paragons of Chesed and compliance when it was in their best interests or on someone else's back, but not when it would come at a personal cost to them. Lavan clearly saw God's hand when it involved his sister and she would bear the burden of compliance, but had blurred vision when it came to his own matters or sacrifices.

The same is true for Lot's generosity towards the visiting Mal'achim in S'dom. He is willing to house them and protect them even at the expense of his own daughters. He offers his daughters to the people of S'dom as long as they leave his guests alone and unharmed. As the Ramban points out from the praise of this individual, it exposes his flaws.²⁸ He was exceptional at Hachnasat Orchim to save those that he had sheltered in his home, but to do this by subjecting his daughters to licentiousness is really evidence of someone with a bad heart. He did not see anything wrong with the cruelty and injustice he was perpetrating upon his daughters for the sake of his guests.

Similarly, Lavan graciously greets the fugitive Yaakov and provides him refuge, but not for free. He immediately puts him to work and then swindles him over and over again. In addition, he uses his daughters to bait Yaakov and cheat him without consideration for their well-being or feelings. Lavan was able to be generous when it suited his purposes, but when it came at a real cost to him personally, he no longer was magnanimous or capable of hearing God speaking directly to him.

Avraham differentiates himself from the remainder of his family when he performs Chesed at his own expense and complies with God's will even at a steep personal cost. In his successful campaign against the four kings, he eschews taking any of the material bounty for himself. He sees it as a moral obligation to act justly and intercede to protect his nephew and those that

were vulnerable from being oppressed by the four kings. Taking from the booty, which was well within his right, would have tainted his message and undermined the Kiddush Hashem he was trying to create.²⁹ He was willing to forgo personal enrichment and set aside his own interests in order to do that which was right. It also true in Avraham's attempt to save S'dom even though they were the antithesis of everything he stood for. This is most evident at the Akeida where Avraham shows absolute compliance with the word of God even though it was at a huge personal cost to his reputation and future. At the well, Rivka demonstrates that same altruistic kindness which is why she is a befitting wife for Avraham's family.³⁰

Avraham, not Terach or Nachor, is the forefather of our nation and that is because God believed that Avraham would convey these principles to his children. True Chesed and compliance with God's will do not come at other's expense, but are born out of a partnership of cooperation and sacrifice. It is giving and kindness that focuses on the benefit to the recipient rather than the utility garnered by the giver. This type of generosity requires one to subordinate their personal interests and to do that which is right, kind and just even when it involves personal cost. There is more to say but my wife is away this Shabbos and my family needs me!³¹

Shabbat Shalom

²⁸ מתוך שבחו של האיש הזה באנו לידי גנותו, שהיה טורח מאד על אכסניא שלו להציל אותם מפני שבאו בצל קורתו, אבל שיפייס אנשי העיר בהפקר בנותיו אין זה כי אם רוע לב, שלא היה ענין הזמה בנשים מרוחק בעיניו, ולא היה עושה לבנותיו חמס גדול כפי דעתו (רמב"ן בראשית י"ח).
²⁹ ...כיון דמן הדין זכה בהרכוש, כמו דקיי"ל המציל מן העובד כוכבים ומן הלסטים הרי הוא שלו, וצ"ל דעשה בזה כדי לקדש השם, ובאופן כזה חייבים להחזיר בכל אופן (תורה מימה הערות בראשית י"ט)

³⁰ ע"פ המדרשים גם נמצא תכונה זאת ברחל ולאחיה. מסירת הסימנים ע"י רחל לאחותה להציל את לאה מבושה למרות המחיר הגבוהה לרחל וגם תפילת לאה שהריונה יהפוך לנקבה כדי לאפשר לאחותה רחל לפחות שני שבטים.
³¹ אפשר שאברהם התחיל בדרך תרח אביו באומרו לשרה אשתו אמרי נא אחתי את למען ייטב לי בעבורך וחייתה נפשי בגללך (בראשית י"ג) שאברהם מראש מתכנן להרוויח כספית ולא רק להציל את חייו מההצגה ששרה היא אחותו ולא אשתו אבל אח"כ התפרח והתגדל עד שהגיע לאיש החסד שנגדר כאברהם אוהבי