

Geulas Yisrael #76

Chayei Sarah: The Camels

Avraham's servant was dispatched to his former home in Aram Naharayim to secure a bride for Yitzchak. Without a reliable mode of transportation, this lengthy trip to modern-day Iraq would have been impossible. Fortunately, Avraham owned a team of able-bodied camels to facilitate this voyage.

Ten Camels, Three Stories

For some odd reason, the Torah mentions the camels ten times and, moreover, it spotlights these camels during the dramatic scene at the "well". Avraham's servant had declared that the first woman to both feed him and provide water for his thirsty camels, would be selected as a bride for Yitzchak. The Torah describes the servant's original pronouncement, the actual incident of Rivka offering water to the camels and, finally, the retelling of this whole story to Rivka's parents. Effectively, we read about the camels drinking water three times!

Rashi already sensed the disproportionate coverage given to the camels and claimed that Avraham's moral integrity was showcased by the honorable behavior of his camels. Typically, animals in transit graze indiscriminately, from whatever food lies along their path. Unlike most animals however, Avraham's camels were well-trained, only consuming food which belonged to their master. For this reason, they had eaten sparingly along the journey and were probably starving when they finally arrived at the watering hole. Avraham's moral code ran so deep that it even manifested itself in his camels!

Beyond Rashi's view that the camels signal Avraham's moral probity, there are additional reasons that these iconic animals are so prominently featured and so frequently mentioned. Apparently, they symbolize a deeper theme of this narrative.

Going International

In a career dedicated to disseminating knowledge of Hashem, Avraham had traveled extensively, yet, almost of all his travels, were local jaunts within the land of Israel. He fulfilled the instruction of **קום התהלך בארץ**

לארכה ולרחבה and deeply impacted the residents of Israel, shaping both their religious views and their socio-political structures.

Avraham's impact though, was barely noticed outside of Cna'an. His only excursion beyond the boundaries of Israel ended poorly, as he was caught deceiving Pharo and promptly evicted from Egypt. The father of all nations had successfully influenced his local neighbors, but had yet to extend his reach beyond the land of Israel.

This journey to his homeland was his first, and also his final, opportunity to spread his message internationally. This expedition isn't just a quest for a bride for Yitzchak, but is also a cultural exchange, presenting Avraham's religious value system to a broader audience.

Each and every interaction between our Avot and their contemporaries was a multilayered encounter. When they negotiated for land purchases, signed treaties, or went to war, they were also modeling moral behavior and disseminating religious ideas. This trip to Aram Naharayim is no different, and provides Avraham with an opportunity to influence the family he left behind decades ago.

Unfortunately, at this advanced age Avraham is too infirm to personally make the journey, so he dispatches his trusted servant instead. Avraham was capable of quick journeys, such as the trip from the akeidah in Yerushalayim to Chevron to bury Sarah, but lengthier trips to Iraq are simply out of the question. This trip to a distant land is vital to his mission of both inspiring monotheism and delivering prosperity to humanity. Avraham's influence is spread by his servant and for this reason, the name of the servant is suppressed. The servant's journey is, in reality, a migration of Avraham's influence.

Delivering Prosperity

The iconic camels embody both the *distance* of the journey and the *purpose* of the journey. Local travel within Israel, can be navigated by foot, or at most, by donkey, as witnessed during the akeidah outing. By contrast, traveling for weeks through a hot wilderness requires camels, whose bodies are uniquely suited for desert travel and for water retention. Without camels Avraham and his servant had little hope of reaching Aram Naharyaim. The camels underscore how faraway this journey was.

The camels though, also symbolize an essential *agenda* of this journey. Even if in theory, the trip can be managed on foot, camels are still necessary to carry goods and gifts. Some of this wealth laden upon the camels was intended as a wedding gift, but, in a larger sense, the fruit and goods are a manner of bestowing wealth and prosperity upon Avraham's former family. What better way to fulfill *והיה ברכה* than to lavish blessing upon his own family.

The camels then, symbolize the "behind-the-scenes" agenda of this shidduch mission. This long-distance trip afforded Avraham the opportunity to both spread his religious values beyond the borders of Israel and to extend prosperity and welfare to a broader audience. Without camels these important "concealed missions" would have been impossible.

The Next generation

A generation later, Avraham's investment began to pay dividends. Lavan, despite his shadiness and deceit constantly mentions the name of Hashem. Evidently, this pivotal visit of Avraham's servant augmented Lavan's religious awareness. By the time Ya'akov returns a generation later, Lavan has also established a large homestead with cattle and workmen. The arrival of Avraham's servant a generation earlier, converted Avraham's former family into wealthy landowners with a budding sense of a Higher being. Without this journey, Avraham's influence would never have spread beyond Israel. Without the camels the trip would never have occurred.

Two Models of Exile

Every incident in Bereishit sets a template for Jewish history. Avraham's first departure from Israel was fraught with confrontation and struggle. His first journey from Israel established the paradigm for "exile as punishment" for our betrayal of Hashem. When we disobey Hashem, we are expelled from Israel and face hostile enemies, in the same manner than Avraham struggled with Pharo.

This second journey of Avraham – conducted by his servant riding upon his camels– constructs a different model of exile. As we pass through exile, we encounter and influence different cultures. Without question, exile is primarily a punishment, but it also an opportunity for the people

of G-d to pollinate the world with religious education and with moral sensibility. Perhaps, we could have better accomplished this by settling comfortably into our homeland and broadcasting our global message from Israel. However, once we were forced into this historical journey, we capitalized upon the opportunity to spread our historic message.

Exile isn't Shameful

Living in a redeemed stage of history shades our view of exile. Under the intoxicating spell of redemption, we often dismiss the past years of exile as an austere period of divine punishment in which we were subjected to endless suffering. Jewish history was stalled for 2000 years until we were finally resettled in our land and historically re-empowered. Those "lost years" of exile provide little inspiration or meaning for our current redeemed state.

That view is both historically incorrect and religiously dangerous. If the past was pure futility and failure, there is little to learn from this "dark" period devoid of any national accomplishments. This simplistic and dismissive view of exile makes it challenging for a younger generation of Israelis to latch on to our masorah and traditions which developed in exile. Why be inspired by the past when it was all just divine suffering and unending persecution. It is crucial to take a dual view of exile, both as a punishment but also as an excursion into human history and an opportunity to shape the human condition. Avraham provided two models of exile- one model of struggle and a second model of opportunity. The past 2000 years were a little of each.

Exile was a historical detour. We were never intended to leave Israel. However, once our fate was decided and we were cast out of Israel we delivered religion, culture, science, reason and civil society to humanity. We have much to be proud of over the past two thousand years of Jewish history. You can be exiled in chains or on the backs of camels. We traveled with both.