

The Power of Chesed

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the major themes of our *parasha* is Eliezer's choice of a wife for Isaac from the daughters of Abraham's birthplace:

And Abraham said to his servant [identified by tradition as Eliezer], the elder of his house, who ruled over all that was his: "Please place your hand under my thigh. And I will adjure you by the L-rd, the G-d of the heaven and the G-d of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell. But you shall go to my land and to my birthplace, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Isaac." ... And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels, and he went, and all the best of his master was in his hand; and he arose, and he went to Aram Naharaim, to the city of Nahor. (*Sefer Bereishit* 24:2-4, 10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

It is fascinating that Abraham gave Eliezer only one criterion for choosing the next matriarch of the Jewish people, namely, that she must not descend "from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell." This is quite perplexing, since we would have expected him to give his loyal servant a detailed list of the qualities that Isaac's spouse must possess. As such, how did Eliezer know which outstanding *middah* (ethical characteristic) was necessary for Isaac's future wife?

The Chasidic *rebbe*, Rav Chaim ben Solomon Tyrer *zatzal* (1740 circ.-1860), known as "the Be'er Mayim Chaim" after the name of his most famous work, suggests the following answer to our question. He notes that everyone during Abraham's time knew that he was the personification of

chesed (lovingkindness). Indeed, Eliezer had witnessed countless examples of his master's overwhelming care and concern for all those in need. Therefore, he focused upon this *middah* as the decisive element in his search for Isaac's life partner:

Behold, our father Abraham was known to everyone as the first *ba'al chesed* (master of loving-kindness) in world history. Abraham, throughout his entire life and with all his strength, pursued opportunities wherein he could bring guests to his home in order to give them food and drink...as the verse states, "Now the L-rd appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot." (18:1) [The correct interpretation of this verse is that] at first Abraham sent Eliezer to see if there were any potential guests traveling on their way – and he did not believe him when he stated there was no one to be found. Therefore, Abraham, himself, went to ascertain whether or not he might be able to find any [desert travelers]. (*Commentary on Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Chayeh Sarah 24:14, this, and all translations and markings my own)

Given Abraham's marked emphasis upon *chesed*, Eliezer knew full well that this was the singular *middah* that Isaac's spouse needed to demonstrate if she was to enter into and become a leader of the Covenantal Community:

And he [Eliezer] said, "O L-rd, the G-d of my master Abraham, please cause to happen to me today, and perform loving-kindness with my master, Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the water fountain, and the daughters of the people of the city are coming out to draw water. And it will be, [that] the maiden to whom I will say, 'Lower your pitcher and I will drink' and she will say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels, she is the one that You designated for Your servant, for Isaac, and through her may I know that You have performed loving-kindness with my master.'" (24:12-14)

The Be'er Mayim Chaim explicates this passage in the following manner:

[Given the unique import of *chesed* in Abraham's family, Eliezer] wanted to test Rebecca as to whether or not she was a practitioner of loving-kindness, for only if this were to be the case would she be fitting to enter the house of Abraham. Therefore, if he would say to her, "Please give me a little bit of water to drink," and she would respond, "Drink and I will also provide water for your camels," [i.e. more than that which was requested] then, You [Hashem], will have proven incontrovertibly that she has the ethical characteristic of loving-kindness within her...

The Be'er Mayim Chaim concludes his penetrating analysis with a deep insight into the nature of genuine *chesed*: "The authentic sign of *gemilut chasadim* (lovingkindness) is that one runs after

the unfortunate and dispirited [to help them], and if such an individual should come on their own – one goes beyond their immediate request [in order to truly provide for their needs].” As we have seen, Rebecca’s behavior with Eliezer and his camels projected this understanding of lovingkindness. As such, she was privileged to be one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people.

Long ago *David Hamelech* (King David) declared in *Sefer Tehillim*:

The kindnesses of the L-rd I shall sing forever (*chasdei Hashem olam ashirah*); to generation after generation I shall make known Your faithfulness, with my mouth. For I said, “Forever will it be built with kindness (*olam chesed yibaneh*); as the heavens, with which You will establish Your faithfulness.” (89:2-3)

While the phrase “*olam chesed yibaneh*” may be translated as “forever will it be built in kindness,” one may accurately render it, as well, as “the world will be built through kindness,” since, depending upon the context, “*olam*” may be translated as either “forever” or “world.” In my estimation, this was precisely Abraham’s, Sarah’s, Isaac’s and Rebecca’s task – to build the world through kindness, so that, one day, we may witness the fulfillment of the *Aleinu*’s stirring phrase, “*l’takane olam b’malchut Shakai*” (“to improve the world through the kingship of the Almighty”). With Hashem’s help may this time come soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

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*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.