

Some Comments and Questions on Hayyei Sarah
Rabbi Eliot Malomet November 19, 2022 25 Heshvan 5783

וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן כָּאֵלֶּים וְהָיָה בְרַךְ אֶת־אֲבְרָהָם כְּכֹל:¹
Now Avraham was old, advanced in days, and God had blessed Avraham in everything.
 (Gen. 24:1)

At this stage of his life, Abraham enjoyed material wealth and a wonderful reputation. But, does he really have **everything**? Consider this comment: וְלֹא הָיָה חֶסֶד דָּבָר רַק לְבַקֵּשׁ אִשָּׁה לְבָנוֹ - *He didn't lack for anything, except to find a wife for his son.*¹ The comment is attentive to the tension here. We should read this verse as if it is the opening of a great folktale: it arouses tension in the audience, and that is a classic storytelling technique.² We are being drawn in. Here the narrator tells us that Abraham has **everything**. But immediately, we ask ourselves, does he really have **everything**?³ Having lost his wife, having sacrificed his relationship with Isaac, having lost his other son, Ishmael, years before, does he really have **everything**? He may have wealth and honor, but he lacks the one thing that truly desires: descendants. This verse also functions as a boundary marker. Because it emphasizes his age, it cues the reader that we are moving to the end of Abraham's life, and that we need to take stock of all the relationships here, and all the lingering and unresolved tension in them, to wit:

Abraham and Sarah	Sarah has died. Abraham had to travel a distance to bury her. They were living apart. Why? Tradition speculates that Sarah died after the Akedah. The plain reading makes that unlikely. Given all the tensions and difficulties in their lives, it's quite plausible that they lived apart because they no longer felt that they could live together.
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Isaac and Sarah	We don't know much about their relationship. But, at the end of this chapter, when Isaac marries Rebekah, the Torah tells us that she was a <i>comfort to him after the loss of his mother</i> (24:67). There's much to speculate here.
Abraham and Isaac	They have no relationship after the Akedah. They never speak. Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for him without his input, never asks him what kind of woman he would be interested in, etc. They are living apart. The man who once made a great feast when his son was weaned, is nowhere to be found when he gets married.
Abraham and God	We know that God blessed Abraham. But God has not spoken to Abraham since the Akedah. Yet, Abraham remains convinced that God will somehow assist in this project. Abraham still trusts God.
Abraham's past, present and future	At Sarah's death, Abraham is 137 years old; he is 62 years into the story since Haran. His best years are behind him. God has promised him abundant progeny, but he's got nothing to show for those promises. And even though rabbinic tradition and Jewish folklore ⁴ imagine God making matches in heaven, that hasn't happened here with Isaac. Abraham has to take matters into his own hands.

¹ Bekhor Shor, similarly Radak.

² *Fiddler on the Roof* uses this technique. In Tevye's opening monologue he concludes with these words: *And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.* That creates tension for the audience: something is going to happen to challenge all of that. Many folktales use that technique. *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* also: *Way, way back many centuries ago, not long after the Bible began, Jacob lived in the land of Canaan, a fine example of a family man.* Sure.

³ In the romantic imagination, if you have love you have **everything**. Perchik sings to Hodel when Tevye permits him to marry her: *Now I have everything/ Not only everything, I have a little bit more/ Besides having everything/ I know what everything's for.*

⁴ Motel sings to Tzeitel, *But of all God's miracles large and small/ The most miraculous one of all/ Is the one I thought could never be - God has given you to me.*

ויאמר אברהם אל-עבדו...
And Abraham said to his servant...(24:2)

If we pause a beat or two between the previous verse and this one, we can begin to get a sense of the depth of Abraham's predicament. God has promised him countless offspring, but he has zero grandchildren! As with every junction point in his life, he could give up and leave Isaac to his own devices. But, in charging his servant with this mission, he demonstrates, perhaps for the final time, how clear, resolute and determined he is. To Abraham's great fortune, this servant is a formidable character in his own right. Having been at the helm of his household for some time, he has absorbed Abraham's faith and fortitude. But most of all he is loyal to him. Dexterous and quick. He is to Abraham what Sancho Panza was to Don Quixote; what Watson was to Sherlock Holmes; Sam to Rick Blaine; Mel Brooks to Carl Reiner.

הו אלהי השמים אשר לקחני מבית אבי ומארץ מולדתי
 ואשר דבר לי ואשר נשבע לי לאמר לנרעה אתן את
 הארץ הזאת הוא ישלח מלאכו לפני ולקחת אשה לבני
 משם:
God, the God of Heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my kindred, who spoke to me, who swore to me, saying: I give this land to your seed, he himself will send his messenger (angel) on before you, so that you take a wife for my son from there (24:7)

Abraham says this in response to his servant's query: *what if the woman I find doesn't want to come back to this land?* As we saw last week, Abraham truly believed that God *will provide a sheep for the offering* (22:8) and here, he truly believes that God - **He will send is messenger (angel)** to accompany his servant back to Haran. What did Abraham mean by this? In the narrowest sense, the **messenger-מלאך (angel)** is a kind of scout or divine GPS for the servant. But we note with curiosity that this exact expression **send a messenger/angel - שלח מלאך** occurs later in the Torah⁵ as part of God's promise to Israel at Mount Sinai: **הנה אנכי שלח מלאך לפני - Here, I am sending a messenger before you to care for**

you on the way, to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Let's compare the verses:

Here: Genesis 24:7	There: Exod. 23:20
Abraham makes an oath with his servant.	God makes a covenant with Israel.
Abraham promises his servant that God will send an angel.	God promises Israel that He will send an angel.
The angel's purpose here: to guide the servant's journey on the way to Haran.	The angel's purpose there: to protect Israel's journey on the way to its land.

The servant is to Abraham what Israel is to God. The objective of the servant's journey to Haran is to acquire a wife for Isaac. The objective of Israel's journey in the desert, is to arrive in the land. Both objectives are consummations. In both though, the angel is responsible for the journey, not the outcome. Israel is responsible for arrival in the land, and here, the servant is responsible for finding Isaac a wife. He himself, must make it happen. He must rely on himself, his ingenuity, skill, and craftiness, and perhaps some of the wisdom he has learned from his boss and mentor, Abraham. And he, like Abraham, trusts in God.

ויברך הגמלים מחוץ לעיר אל-באר המים לעת ערב
 לעת צאת השאבה:
He had the camels kneel outside the town at the water well at Sunset, at the time when the female water-drawers go out, (24:11).

Does he orchestrate his arrival at the well to coincide with nightfall? Is the timing deliberate or accidental? In two weeks we will read another 'Arrival-At-A-Well' story in which Jacob arrives at a well during the day.⁶ Let's give some credit to the servant. He knows exactly what he's doing. He's deliberately setting up a situation in which he has to rely on the kindness of others, in the form of the provision of huge amounts of water, for him and his camels, and kindness in terms of lodging. Read the story closely. Is he passively accepting what happens, or, did he make up his mind that Rebekah was The One from the moment he saw her, and is he orchestrating the outcome with his guile, wit, and loquaciousness?⁷

⁵ Parashat Mishpatim, Exod. 23:20
⁶ ויאמר הן עוד היום גדול לא יצת האספה המקנה השקו הנצון
 He said, "It is still broad daylight, too early ולכו רעו:

to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture."
⁷ Of course he is! Absolutely!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by the Tondow family in honor of Al Tondow's birthday and the anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah and to commemorate the yearzeit of Al's mother, Fannie Tondow z"l. Shabbat Shalom!