

Profiles in Extraordinary Acts of Human Kindness

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Parashat chayyei Sarah gives us a warm and beautiful vision of interpersonal relationships. It is a vision in which family members do incredibly loving acts for other family members. It is a vision in which strangers do incredibly loving acts for other strangers. You can't read this Torah portion without feeling inspired by the goodness in some people's hearts. You can't read this Torah portion without asking yourself, 'Gee, when was the last time I did an incredibly loving gesture for somebody?'

Let's learn Torah together. The parashah for this Shabbat is called *Chayyei Sarah*. *Chayyei Sarah* is chock full of action. It describes four key events:

1) Ephron the Hittite sells the cave of Machpelah to Abraham so that he can bury his wife Sarah, 2) Abraham asks his servant Eliezer to travel to Mesopotamia to find a wife for his son, Isaac, 3) Rebecca agrees to leave her homeland and family and move to the land of Israel to marry Isaac, and 4) Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father, Abraham.

Now what theme unifies all four stories? We don't have time to study all four narratives. So let's see if we can figure out the common denominator among all four by doing a close reading of just one.

It makes sense to learn about Rebecca, who would soon become one of our four great matriarchs. Here are some good things to know about Rebecca: first off, she and Isaac are related. They are distant cousins. Secondly we learn that Rebecca is beautiful. We learn that Rebecca is very gracious, courteous, and hospitable, offering Eliezer, Abraham's servant, lodging and food for the night. Finally, we learn something else about Rebecca in chapter 24, verses 17-20.

We read, "The servant ran toward her and said, 'Please, let me sip a little water from your jar.' 'Drink, my lord,' she said and she quickly lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. When she had let him drink his fill she said, 'I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking.' Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she ran back to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels."

What do these verses teach us? Do you know how much water 10 camels drink? Do you know how heavy water is? This passage teaches us that Rebecca was incredibly physically strong. She was an Amazon woman!

Why does the Torah tell us about all of Rebecca's great qualities? Well, who does Rebecca succeed? Sarah! By informing us of her many impressive qualities, the Torah is teaching us that Rebecca is a worthy successor to Sarah as the next matriarch.

So let me summarize the famous betrothal story of Isaac and Rebecca. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, believes that God has chosen Rebecca to marry Isaac. Even though Isaac and Rebecca are distant cousins, Rebecca doesn't know Isaac from a hole in the wall. Nevertheless, Eliezer asks Rebecca to come with him to the land of Israel.

Let's read Genesis chapter 24, verse 58. Does Rebecca agree to go to the land of Israel? Yes. Did she have to? No. So why did she do it?

Let's read chapter 24, verse 67. Why did Rebecca agree to go to a foreign land to marry a man she did not know? Rebecca wanted to bring comfort to Isaac after his mother's death. She wanted to help him to find healing and peace after the loss of his mother.

What Rebecca did was an extraordinary act of loving kindness for Isaac. In Hebrew, we call such an act a *gemilut chesed*. The doing of extraordinary acts of loving kindness, incredibly loving gestures, is the theme that unites all four stories.

Did Ephron have to sell the cave of Machpelah to Abraham? No. It was a *gemilut chesed*. Did Eliezer have to schlep all the way to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac? No. It was a *gemilut chesed*. Did Ishmael, who had been kicked out of the family, have to join with Isaac to bury their father Abraham? No. It was a *gemilut chesed*.

Parashat *Chayyei Sarah* gives us a warm and beautiful vision of interpersonal human relationships. It is a vision in which family members do incredibly loving acts for other family members. It is a vision in which strangers do incredibly loving acts for other strangers. You can't read this Torah portion without feeling inspired by the goodness in some people's hearts. You can't read this Torah portion without asking yourself, "Gee, when was the last time I did an incredibly loving gesture?"

I hope this Torah portion inspires you to want to get out there and do something incredibly loving for someone right away!