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Parashat Hashavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

## **PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA**

**"Do not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites... only do not take my son back to there"**

**By Rabbanit Sharon Rimon**

*Parashat Chayei Sara* describes Avraham's last actions, which epitomize the direction and essence of his life:

### **Purchase of Ma'arat Ha-Makhpela (chapter 23):**

Why does the Torah elaborate at such length on the purchase of the cave? Why is it not enough to state simply, in one single verse, "He purchased the Cave of Makhpela and buried Sara in it?" We must conclude that there is more to this story than just the burial of Sara. The text records the sale in great detail, emphasizing that Avraham did not agree to accept the plot as a gift but rather insisted on paying for it – and a hefty sum, at that.

God had promised Avraham the land of Canaan, but Avraham does not sit back and wait for things to work out. Rather, he knows that he must act in order for the promise to be fulfilled. Therefore, throughout his life he acts not as a person who knows that the land already belongs to him, but rather as a "stranger and sojourner," aware that he must perform actions in order to acquire the land. God tells him, "Arise, walk about in the land, throughout its length and its breadth, for to you shall I give it." Avraham understands that in order to receive the land he must become familiar with it – and this is what he does throughout his life.

In addition, Avraham takes care to start purchasing the land, personally, and for full price. Ma'arat Ha-Makhpela is the first place that is bought for a monetary price in the land.<sup>1[1]</sup>

### **Seeking a Wife for Yitzchak (chapter 24):**

God has promised Avraham that "through Yitzchak shall your seed be called." Yitzchak is meant to continue the dynasty, the host of descendants promised to Avraham. He is meant to father the "great nation" that God has described to Avraham.

Towards the end of his life, Avraham also works to ensure the realization of God's promise of descendants, by seeking a worthy wife for Yitzchak. This act is of

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<sup>1[1]</sup> Every land purchase is significant, but the purchase of a burial plot is an act of profound significance, serving as a powerful bond between the person involved (or family, tribe, etc.) and the earth.

dual significance: firstly, it addresses the need for successors and descendants; secondly, it addresses the need for the coming generations to be worthy of God's covenant. For this reason it is vital that the wife chosen for Yitzchak be worthy of her role.

### **Choosing of a Successor (Chapter 25):**

Before his death, Avraham ensures that there will be no dispute with regard to his estate. He makes it clear that Yitzchak is his heir. The children of the concubines are sent elsewhere, while Yitzchak inherits all of Avraham's vast wealth.

Avraham has received promises from God, concerning the land and concerning his seed. However, these promises are perceived not as "assurances," or gifts, but rather as a destiny requiring that he work towards its fulfillment. Avraham performs concrete acts in order to merit the land and the establishment of a dynasty.

### **A Worthy Wife for Yitzchak**

The search for a wife for Yitzchak begins with the oath that Avraham imposes on his servant, Eliezer:

Avraham was old, advanced in age, and God had blessed Avraham in everything.

And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, who managed all that he had: Place, I pray you, your hand under my thigh.

And I shall cause you to swear by the Lord God of the heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell.

Rather, you shall go to my country and to my birthplace, and you shall take a woman for my son, for Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 24:1-4)

Avraham's words define the woman who will be suitable for Yitzchak:

- a. She is not a Canaanite
- b. She is from Avraham's birthplace

Avraham's specifications demand some explanation. Why is he so opposed to a marriage partner for Yitzchak from among the Canaanites? Is it not possible that there is a good and worthy woman among them (perhaps a daughter of Aner, Eshkol or Mamrei, who were Avraham's allies and disciples)? Is it not possible that a Canaanite woman could be "converted"? (Especially if we bear in mind that Avraham was engaged full-time in proselytizing!)

And why does Avraham want a daughter-in-law who is specifically from his own country and birthplace? God had long ago commanded him, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house." The significance of this command concerns not only a geographical move, but also a shift away from the local culture. Why, then, does Avraham want a woman who has grown up in specifically that same culture that God once commanded him to abandon, while rejecting anyone who has grown up among the Canaanites – from whom God has *not* commanded him to separate himself?

We shall address these questions later on. In the meantime, let us move on to the servant's response:

## Leaving the Land

Then the servant said to him:

Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; shall I then take your son back to the land from whence you came? (8)

Eliezer presents Avraham with a practical question: What is he to do in the event that the woman from Charan is not willing to come to Canaan?

At first glance, this seems to be a simple, technical question. However, the enquiry – and Avraham's response to it – come to clarify the crux of what it is that Avraham wants. If Avraham is not prepared for Yitzchak to marry a Canaanite woman, wanting instead a woman who is specifically from Charan, then the most logical solution is for Yitzchak himself to go to Charan and find a wife. But is Avraham prepared for Yitzchak to go there in order to marry?

Seemingly, this should present no problem. If it is so important that Yitzchak marry a woman from Avraham's own birthplace, then surely it is worth him going there to find a suitable wife! However, the servant understands on his own that the matter is not as simple as that,<sup>2[2]</sup> and therefore he puts the question to Avraham.

Avraham's response shows that Eliezer's question is well founded:

Avraham said to him: Beware lest you take my son back there! (6)

The expression, "*hishamer lekha pen*" ("beware lest you..."), is a sharp one, warning the servant not even to think of doing such a thing. Hence, from the servant's question we discover that the oath includes another element: Yitzchak must not be taken out of the land and led back to Charan. Avraham's stern language makes it clear that this is a matter of fundamental importance.

Why is it so important to Avraham that Yitzchak should not go off to Charan? If we posit that his inflexible stance is based on God's original command to him to leave his native land and its culture, then we must ask why it is that a woman specifically from there will be suitable for Yitzchak - but Yitzchak himself cannot go there to marry her. Perhaps Avraham senses that Yitzchak must stay in the land and never leave.

We will return to these questions further on.

Meantime, it is clear from the conversation between Avraham and Eliezer that the matter of finding a wife for Yitzchak is a complex one, involving two important values:

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<sup>2[2]</sup> For if Yitzchak could go to Charan himself, there would be no need to send Eliezer.

One is finding the most suitable wife for Yitzchak.

The other is that Yitzchak must remain in the land.

These two principles represent the pillars of Avraham's life: the promise of the land, and the promise of seed. He is not prepared to relinquish either of them. For this reason he wants to bring the woman worthy of Yitzchak to the land.

In the event that the two values should conflict with one another, which is to be given preference? Which value should Avraham forego in order to fulfill the other?

The choice is a difficult one. What is Avraham's response?

Avraham will not hear of Yitzchak leaving the land. At the end of his speech, he reiterates this:

If the woman will not be willing to come after you, then you will be exempt from this oath to me; only do not take my son back there. (8)

Avraham's answer would appear to assert that Yitzchak's remaining in the land is the most important principle, and that it must not be compromised at any cost.

What, then, will happen if no woman can be found in Charan who will agree to come to Canaan? Seemingly, Yitzchak will have no choice but to marry a Canaanite wife!

"You will be exempt from this oath to me" – from which oath will the servant be exempt?

Rashi, commenting on verse 8, explains:

"You will be exempt from this oath to me" – then take him a wife from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei."

Who are Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei?

In *Bereishit* 14 these three characters are mentioned as having accompanied Avraham into the battle of the Four Kings. The *midrashim* describe them as his disciples and allies.<sup>3[3]</sup> Apparently they were righteous men, such that their daughters could have been suitable for Yitzchak.<sup>4[4]</sup> Nevertheless, the *midrashim* maintain that the oath "that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of Canaan" referred specifically to the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei.<sup>5[5]</sup> It was specifically concerning these women that there was some room to speculate that Yitzchak might marry one of them, despite their Canaanite upbringing. Yet Avraham makes his servant swear that he will not choose one of them for Yitzchak.

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3[3] See *Pirkei de-Rebbe Eliezer* 27; *Pesikta Zutreta Bereishit* 18

4[4] See *Bereishit Rabba parsha* 57

5[5] See *Bereishit Rabba* 59; *Sekhel Tov Bereishit* 24

According to Rashi's view, if no suitable woman could be found in Charan who would agree to come to Canaan, Avraham would be willing to forego the condition "that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites," and would agree for Yitzchak to marry one of the daughters of Aner, Eshkol or Mamrei, who were Canaanites, but whose conduct was positive. Indeed, in view of the dialogue, it would seem that it is more important to Avraham that Yitzchak remain in the land, than that he avoid any Canaanite woman as a wife. When the servant presents him with the two possibilities, one against the other, he responds harshly against Yitzchak leaving the land, but does not reiterate his opposition to a Canaanite woman. Moreover, he tells the servant, "You will be exempt from this oath to me." What is the oath? The oath is "that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites."

### **The Canaanites**

Is it possible that the idea of Yitzchak staying in the land is really more important to Avraham than the matter of him marrying a woman who is not a Canaanite? It must be borne in mind that the very first thing that Avraham tells his servant, with regard to finding a match for Yitzchak, is, "that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites." If this is the first point, concerning which the servant must swear, then it would appear to be a matter of great importance!

Let us try to understand why Avraham is opposed to intermarriage with the Canaanites, and this will then answer the question of whether he would be prepared to forego this condition.

Avraham received a promise from God that the land would be his. However, Avraham does not wait passively for God to give the land to him; rather, he understands that he must perform concrete actions in order to make the land his own acquisition.

He purchases Ma'arat Ha-Makhpela, thereby taking a first step in buying portion of the land, so that it will be his.

A different way of making the land his own would be to marry a woman who was a native of the land, such that he would naturally become one of the inhabitants of the land, and receive a portion in it. Then, in later generations, his descendants would multiply and would naturally come to inherit the land.

Avraham makes it clear that this is not the path for him. He cannot countenance the idea of marriage to a Canaanite woman, even if such a bond could strengthen his hold on the land. Why not?

Who are the Canaanites, and what is known to us about them?

The first story in which we encounter Canaan is the episode of Noach's drunkenness, as recorded in *Bereishit* 9:

Then Noach began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard.

And he drank of the wine, and was drunk, and he was uncovered inside his tent.

And Cham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and he told his two brothers outside.

And Shem and Yefet took the garment and placed it upon both of their shoulders, and they walked backwards and covered the nakedness of their father, while their faces were backward and they did not see the nakedness of their father.

And when Noach awoke from his wine, he knew what his younger son had done to him. (9:20-24)

The story describes the reactions of Noach's sons to the drunkenness of their father. What was Cham's sin? According to the literal text, he committed two sins:

Firstly, he saw his father's nakedness and did not show him honor by covering him.

Secondly, he scorned his father by going to tell his brothers outside.

However, the implication of verse 24 – "What his younger son **had done** to him" – is that the sin involved not only passive seeing, nor even just speech, but rather some concrete action. Rashi, drawing on the Midrash, therefore adds a further sin:

"Saw the nakedness of his father' – some of our Sages understand this as meaning that he castrated him, while others suggest that he sodomized him."

Cham should have covered his father, but instead he went out and exposed his father's shame in public. Shem and Yefet, in contrast, preserve their father's honor. They cover him and also take care not to see his nakedness: "They walked backwards... but their faces were backward and they did not see their father's nakedness."

Noach's response to his sons' actions is of profound and far-reaching significance:

He said: Cursed is Canaan; he shall be a servant of servants to his brothers.

And he said: Blessed is the Lord God of Shem, and Canaan shall be a servant to him.

God shall enlarge Yefet, and he will dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan will be a servant to him. (25-27)

The curse is most perplexing. Why does Noach curse Canaan, and not Cham?

In light of this difficulty, some commentators<sup>6[6]</sup> conclude that the words "*beno ha-katan*" ("his younger son" - verse 24) mean "his grandson" – i.e., Canaan, and that it was he who committed the sin. However, the majority view rejects this possibility, since the text clearly describes a deed committed not by Canaan, but rather by Cham.

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<sup>6[6]</sup> See Ibn Ezra on verse 24, as well as *Pirkei de-Rebbe Eliezer*, 23

According to the literal text, Cham performed a sinful act, and Canaan was cursed. Why is this so?

Radak, commenting on verse 24, explains:

"He (Noach) saw, in a prophecy, that he would be wicked, and his descendants, forever."

According to this explanation, the curse on Canaan is not a punishment for one particular act of his father, Cham. The matter goes much deeper than this. Noach understands that Cham's act testifies to the negative essence of Cham and of all of his descendants. But why, then, is the curse directed not towards "Cham and all of his descendants," but rather towards Canaan?

It seems that if the curse had been directed towards Cham, perhaps we would not have understood that there is a fundamental evil here that continues through Cham's descendants, and that the curse here is a curse for all generations, because of the defective essence of this entire branch of humanity. The Midrash quoted by Rashi, extending Cham's act from seeing and telling his brothers to a far more serious sin, expresses the view that this story comes to teach us something about Cham's essential character, which is corrupt in the sexual realm. Similarly, Noach's curse of Canaan is not meant personally, but rather as a general definition, for all generations of descendants, who are equally distant from Cham and from Canaan.

Just as Cham's act in the story expresses his corrupt inner essence, passed down to his descendants, so too the act of Shem and Yefet is not a local, specific act, but rather one that expresses their essential nature. Accordingly, Noach's blessing to Shem and to Yefet is a general one, extending to the branch of humanity that will emerge from them.

We shall focus on the blessing to Shem:7[7] "He says: Blessed is the Lord God of Shem."

The essence of Shem is that he is a servant of God; he has a special connection with God.

Hence, the story of Noach's drunkenness is not a personal story, but rather one that gives expression to the three branches of humanity that emerged after the Flood. Accordingly, Noach's words to his three sons are not meant personally, but rather have significance for all generations.

Thus, our first encounter with "Canaan" is in a story that testifies to his negative character, corrupt in the sexual realm, and the text also tells us that he is cursed.

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7[7] Yefet is a character of secondary importance in the story. He does accompany Shem, but he is not the initiator. Similarly, in Noach's blessing to Yefet it is clear that Yefet has some connection to God, but not in a direct manner; rather, he is connected to God via his closeness to Shem.

Indeed, later on, the children of Cham in general and the children of Canaan in particular, are shown to be corrupt in matters of sexual morality,<sup>8[8]</sup> and therefore in exhorting Bnei Yisrael in matters of sexual morality, the Torah warns against imitating the ways of Canaan.<sup>9[9]</sup>

In contrast, one of the descendants of Shem is Avraham, who draws close to God, and he becomes the father of the nation chosen to become God's people.

### **Canaan and the Land**

To our surprise, Canaan himself settles in the land which becomes known to us later on as the land chosen by God!

And the border of the Canaanites was from Tzidon, as you come to Gerar, up to Azza, as you go to Sedom, and Amora, and Adma, and Tzevoyim, as far as Lasha. (*Bereishit* 10:19)

When Avraham is commanded to walk about in the land "which I shall show you," Avraham departs from his land and his birthplace – and where does he go?

And they went out to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan... and the Canaanites were then in the land. (*Bereishit* 12)

Avraham leaves the society where he has lived all his life, among descendants of Shem, and moves to the land of the children of Cham! The land of the Canaanites – the most corrupt and cursed of nations!

Yet God approves this move, and tells Avraham, "I shall give this land to your descendants." It is specifically the land inhabited by the immoral and cursed children of Canaan that Avraham reaches in the wake of God's command. It is specifically this land that has been chosen by God as the place where Avraham will start to "call in God's Name."

This represents an astounding development. Why is it specifically the land of Canaan that is chosen to become "*Eretz Yisrael*," the land that God has chosen for Israel.

Or, conversely: why did the Canaanites receive this special land, worthy of God's Presence? Why was this land not given to the children of Shem in the first place?

A significant lesson is conveyed here. It is not easy for Avraham to receive the land promised to him. He realizes that he has been brought to this land not in order to mingle with the Canaanites and become part of them, but rather the opposite: Avraham has been brought to the land in order to present an alternative to the

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<sup>8[8]</sup> Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov have to contend with Egyptians, Philistines and the people of Shekhem (all of whom are descendants of Cham) in the sexual realm: Sara is taken in Egypt and in Gerar, Rivka is taken in Gerar, Dina is raped in Shekhem.

<sup>9[9]</sup> See below, quotation from *Vayikra* 18

Canaanite culture. The purpose of God bringing him to the land is, ultimately, for the Canaanites to be removed from the land, and for Avraham's descendants to inherit it in their place. The battle for acquisition of the land goes hand-in-hand with the cultural battle. Avraham must wage his battle against Canaanite culture and prevail against it, and through this he will acquire the land. The process will be long and difficult, but it is one with profound significance. The land is not given to Avraham but rather acquired by him – both monetarily and through spiritual development.

Since the Canaanites are known as being inherently corrupt in the realm of sexual morality, when Avraham seeks a wife for his son – a wife who will be his partner in producing the next generation of Avraham's dynasty – it is clear that Avraham will want to avoid the Canaanite women. He has no wish to introduce this moral defect into his line of descent. Avraham is a descendant of Shem, a genealogy whose essence is closeness to God, and therefore he wants his son to marry a woman of similar background, who will possess an inherent tendency towards closeness to God.

In addition, the Torah emphasizes that the Canaanites eventually come to lose their hold on the land because of their sexual immorality. At the same time, Bnei Yisrael will inherit this land only if they succeed in keeping themselves far from prohibited sexual relations and avoiding the moral defects that characterized the Canaanites:

Like the behavior of the land of Egypt<sup>10[10]</sup> where you dwelled – you shall not do, and like the behavior of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, nor shall you follow their ways...

No person shall approach any of his close kin, to uncover nakedness, I am the Lord...

Do not defile yourselves with all of these, for the nations whom I drive out from before you were defiled with all of these.

And the land was defiled, therefore I visit its iniquity upon it, and the land expels its inhabitants...

Of all of these abominations were committed by the people of the land who were (there) before you, and the land was defiled.

So that the land will not expel you for defiling it, as it expelled the nation that was before you. (*Vayikra* 18:3, 6, 24-28)

Avraham understands that his mission is to inherit the land from the Canaanites by creating an alternative culture to the prevailing Canaanite way of life.

Now we can better understand Avraham's instructions. His servant poses a question of priorities: What is more important to you – the ideal of staying in the land, or the ideal of marrying within the descendants of Shem? Avraham makes it clear that there is no question involved; these are two sides of the same coin. Living in the land and remaining apart from the Canaanites are not two values that may conflict with one another, but rather reflect the same principle and ideal. Keeping away from the Canaanites and creating a culture that is different from their corrupt one (especially in matters relating to marriage!) is itself the key to inheriting the land.

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10[10] Mitzrayim is also one of the descendants of Cham.

Avraham is doing whatever he can in order to acquire and inherit the land, and therefore he stipulates that Yitzchak should not leave the land. He also wants Yitzchak to marry a woman who is a descendant of Shem, the sort of woman who will be worthy of continuing Avraham's dynasty. If what he wants is that he and his descendants will be worthy of inheriting the land, then it is unthinkable for Yitzchak to marry a Canaanite woman. It is specifically the distancing from the Canaanites and their behavior that will make them worthy of inheriting the land.

Avraham understands, then, that his two stipulations are not two values that stand separately and which, in the event of conflict, must be weighed against each other. He knows that these two values are two aspects of the same ideal; they complement one another, and neither can be foregone for the sake of the other. Relinquishing one of them represents a negation of the ideal in its entirety.<sup>11</sup>[11]

Therefore Avraham asks both things of his servant. He must not choose a Canaanite wife, but rather a woman who is a descendant of Shem, and at the same time he must not compromise on the idea of dwelling in the land, and therefore must not take Yitzchak away.

Let us now return to the dialogue between Avraham and Eliezer.

The possibility of Yitzchak marrying a Canaanite woman is out of the question. The servant does not even bother to ask, "If the woman will not be willing to follow me, shall I take a woman from the daughters of the Canaanites?" It is clear that the answer to this question will be in the negative; indeed, this is the crux of the oath that Avraham imposes on his servant. No Canaanite woman is worthy of establishing the nation of God together with Yitzchak. Obviously, then, Yitzchak must take a wife from the daughters of Shem – a lineage characterized by an inherent closeness to God.<sup>12</sup>[12]

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<sup>11</sup>[11] An interesting interpretation is offered by Keli Yakar. "It would seem that the reason that Avraham does not want Yitzchak to marry one of the daughters of the Canaanites is so that he will not learn from their behavior.... But if this is so, what does he gain from Yitzchak marrying a woman from the household of Lavan and Betuel, since they too are idolaters, like the Canaanites?"

Therefore it is written, "in whose midst I dwell," and he also says, "lest you take my son back there." Avraham argues: If my son marries a Canaanite woman, then since I live amongst the Canaanites, it is logical to assume that my son, too, will continue to live in their midst, and then there is reason to fear that he will be influenced by their evil ways. However, if he marries a woman from Charan, but lives here, in Canaan, then this danger no longer exists. He will not learn from Lavan and Betuel, for he will not be living with them. Nor will he be influenced by the Canaanites, for he will not be intermingled with them...

He kept himself far from the Canaanites, who were steeped in sexual immorality, as well as several other types of sins that arise from human nature, aside from idolatry. In contrast, he did not keep distant (in marriage) from Lavan and Betuel, for all that they had was idolatry (... idolatry is a matter that is dependent on human intelligence; it is not passed from fathers to sons...)."

<sup>12</sup>[12] Ralbag comments: "He should not take a wife for his son Yitzchak from the daughters of the Canaanites, even though he dwells among them, because God did not choose this land on account of its inhabitants. Rather, it was because it is designed by God in such a way that Divine blessing cleaves in it to those who are ready for it. The conduct of the

## Faith in God

Eliezer, who is appointed to bring this great ideal to realization by finding a worthy wife for Yitzchak and bringing her to Canaan, feels that there are two important ideals involved, and he is concerned lest the practical reality preclude the possibility of realizing all the aspirations at once.

What is Avraham's view of this practical concern?

Firstly, he warns Eliezer not to forego either of the two ideals: A Canaanite woman is out of the question, and the idea of taking Yitzchak to Charan is equally unacceptable.

In fact, what Avraham is telling his servant is that he is certain that God will be with him, and that there will be no need either to take Yitzchak or to resort to seeking a Canaanite wife:

The Lord God of the heaven, Who took me from my father's house and from my homeland, and Who spoke to me and Who swore to me, saying, "I shall give this land to your descendants" – He will send His angel before you, that you may take a wife for my son from there." (7)

It is inconceivable that God will bring about a situation in which Avraham and Yitzchak will not be able to continue their path in the service of God (and, as part of this goal, in conquering the land).

Nevertheless, for the servant's sake, Avraham reassures him:

If the woman will not be willing to follow you, then you will be exempt from this oath to me; only do not take my son back there. (8)

Avraham is telling the servant: if you are not successful in this complex mission, you will be exempt from it. Obviously, you should not take a Canaanite woman (a possibility that is not even raised for discussion), nor should you take Yitzchak back to Charan. Rather, you will be "exempt from the oath" – i.e., you will no longer be required to engage in finding a wife for Yitzchak.

Ramban (24:8) understands the dialogue thus:

"You will be exempt from this oath to me" – He did not permit him to take a woman from the daughters of the Canaanites, but (meant) rather that he (the servant) would be exempt, and God would do as He saw fit...

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Canaanites was extremely depraved... moreover since Canaan had already been cursed... and therefore Avraham wanted to prevent his son from intermarriage with the Canaanites, for God had chosen him in order for the chosen nation to be his descendants, as He had promised. For this reason Avraham preferred the daughters of his native land, and among these his preference was for women from his own extended family. Therefore he instructed his servant to bring a wife for Yitzchak from there; if he could not find a suitable woman from within his family, then he should (at least) seek a woman from that country.

Rather, "you will be exempt from this oath to me" – meaning that he would be exempt, and Avraham knew that the righteous Yitzchak would obey his father and would keep away from them, going instead (to seek a wife) among the descendants of Yishmael, or Lot, or the other nations.

Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch adds:

Only do not act contrary to the Divine will. We can only ensure that we ourselves do nothing wrong... for "if the woman is not willing" – then you are exempt; there is nothing more that you can do. Only do not imagine that you are still charged with doing something, even if it be in the contrary direction...

What might happen if the servant is not successful in finding a wife for Yitzchak? Why does Avraham give no practical guidance for this eventuality, but simply reassure the servant that he will be "exempt from the oath"?

Avraham knows that God has promised him the land, and that God has promised him seed; He has promised that Avraham will be the father of a great nation. Avraham is certain that Yitzchak will remain in the land and will find a suitable wife, not a Canaanite woman. However, he does not wait passively for the blessing of the land to be realized. He acts with a view to acquiring the land, and purchases a plot of land – a burial plot. Similarly, he does not simply wait for the blessing of seed to be fulfilled: he sends Eliezer, equipped with clear and precise instructions. At the same time, Avraham knows that human ability is limited. He can try, he can invest his best efforts, but he cannot be certain that he will be successful. Once he has done all that he is able to do, Avraham is certain of God's help; he is confident that God will fulfill His blessing.

Avraham teaches us an important lesson in faith. Even God's blessing – a blessing in which we can have full confidence – requires effort; it requires that man invest himself. Human effort and initiative are not effective in their own right, but rather by virtue of God's blessing; at the same time, God's blessing is not realized without human effort.

Once he has invested his effort, Avraham is certain that God's blessing will be realized. He is certain that "I will surely bless you, and I shall surely multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens and like the sand that is upon the sea shore" (*Bereishit* 22:17); "And I shall give you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings – all of the land of Canaan – as an everlasting possession, and I shall be their God."

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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