

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

The Speech and the Silence of Avraham's Servant

)Bereishit 24(

By Rav Elchanan Samet

I. WHO IS AVRAHAM'S SERVANT? WHY IS HIS NAME NOT MENTIONED?

In this week's parasha, we encounter a very strange phenomenon. A main character - "Avraham's servant," the "elder of his household, in charge of all that was his," who stands at the center of the story of Yitzchak's betrothal - is not identified by name! It seems that he is not an anonymous character whom we have not yet encountered; rather, it is someone who was mentioned many years ago in a conversation between Avraham and God, prior to the brit bein ha-betarim:

"And Avram said: My Lord God, what will You give me, for I go childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damesek?" (15:2(

It is Eliezer who ran Avraham's household then (and he would therefore have been the natural heir, had Avraham not later had a son), and after this lengthy period he is called "the elder" of Avraham's house, "in charge of all that was his." This was the understanding of Chazal (Bereishit Rabba 59:9), and Rashi interprets verse 39 in the same vein. Why, then, does the parsha hide the identity of the servant throughout the story?

We encountered a similar phenomenon in last week's parasha. There can be no doubt that the son of Hagar who is observed "mocking," who is eventually banished with his mother to the desert, is Yishmael. But his name isn't mentioned even once in the entire story (21:1-21)! Obviously, we need to ask ourselves why this is the case.

It is a separate question why the Torah chooses, in certain circumstances and in contrast with accepted narrative practice, to leave the characters in some stories nameless (e.g. the man of God and the old prophet from Beit El in Melakhim I 13). But we are asking here about something else: the name of the character is known to us, since it is mentioned either before or after the event in question, but in a particular narrative his name is absent, and he is called instead by some fixed title or alias. (For example, in Melakhim I 20 an anonymous prophet

stands before Achav and he is a central character in the story, but his name is not mentioned. In chapter 22, it becomes clear that his name is Mikhayahu ben Yimla{.

## II. CHANGING TITLES IN BIBLICAL STORIES

In order to answer this question, we need first to turn our attention to an important biblical literary technique: the changing of someone's title or designation during the course of a story. The first systematic enunciation of this stylistic phenomenon in the Torah was made by Nechama Leibowitz z"l in her article, "How to Read a Chapter of Tanakh":

"The same person ... is designated by different titles in the Torah... and the ancient commentators addressed the lessons hidden behind the change in appellations. This... is an important rule, and attention should be paid to it while one reads... Not only the speakers but also the Torah narrative itself (sometimes) changes the appellation by which a person is known, thus hinting at important issues, relations and ideas".

Her article brings three examples to illustrate this principle, and we will discuss here the third one, which deals with the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael:

"Yishmael is not mentioned by name even once; rather, he is given various designations, which reflect the relations of others to him".

Let us list the various designations of Yishmael, and highlight from whose perspective these descriptions derive:

21:9 And SARAH saw the SON OF HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN whom she had borne to Avraham, mocking.

21:11 And the thing was very bad in AVRAHAM'S eyes because of HIS SON.

21:14 And [AVRAHAM] took bread and a flask of water and he gave it to Hagar and put it onto her shoulder, and THE CHILD (ha-yeled...{

21:15 And [HAGAR] cast THE CHILD under one of the shrubs.

21:16 ]HAGAR] said: Let me not see the death of THE CHILD...

21:17 And GOD heard the voice of THE YOUTH (ha-na'ar...{

21:20 And GOD was with THE YOUTH...

Here we see how his title changes, and how each title reflects his relations with the various people around him, from a subjective point of view. In Sarah's eyes, he is the son of Hagar; Avraham regards him as his own son; Hagar sees him as a young child who will always be her baby, even when he grows up; and in God's eyes, he is a "youth," a young man.

### III. DELIBERATE ANONYMITY AS A MEANS OF CHANGING APPELLATIONS

In accordance with the above, we can answer our question regarding the absence of Yishmael's name from the story in chapter 21. It seems like a deliberate technique to allow for a variety of descriptive appellations of Yishmael (employed by both the various speakers as well as by the Torah's narrative), hinting at the different perspectives of him on the part of the actors in the story. By means of this systematic exchange of titles, we also witness the mutual relations existing between the personalities in the story themselves. The use of the name "Yishmael," even only in some places in the story, would have distracted us from paying attention to the exchange of titles according to a fixed system.

Likewise, in the story of Yitzchak's marriage, the absence of Eliezer's name is meant to serve a similar purpose: to allow us to follow the exchange of his titles throughout the course of the story, in order that we may learn from this how the servant functions in fulfilling his assignment in accordance with the changing circumstances. The change of circumstances includes a change in Eliezer's perspective as well as a change in the attitude towards him on the part of the characters in the story. Let us look at these changes and attempt to understand them, and then to draw conclusions as to what the Torah is trying to teach us through them.

### IV. DESCRIPTIONS OF THE SERVANT IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE STORY (24:1-33)

The various appellations for Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, appear a total of twenty-four times throughout the story, out of which the great majority – nineteen times – he is described by the narrative itself; only five times is he referred to by other characters in the story: twice by Rivka (verses 18 and 30), once by Lavan (31), once by himself (34), and once by the family (58).

He is first mentioned in verse 2, by a long and impressive title appropriate to his introduction at the story's beginning as its central hero: "And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, in charge of all that was his"....

From here onwards, he is called "the servant" four more times by the text – in verses 5 and 9, which describe him in relation to Avraham his master, who makes him swear to fulfill his mission, and also in verses 10 and 17, which describe his efforts to do so. His first action is: "And the servant took ten camels..." and his last action before the focus moves from him to Rivka is: "And the servant ran towards her, and he said, Please let me drink a little water from your pitcher".

Thereafter, Rivka becomes the active character in the story, until verse 28. The servant, who has temporarily concluded his action by running towards her and addressing her, now stands "wondering at her, holding his silence..." (21), and his actions and words are now simply an "addendum" to her energetic action. The verbs used concerning Rivka serve to replace the servant's previous haste: "And she hurried..." (verses 18 and 20), "And she ran again to the well..." (20), and finally – "And the girl ran to tell her mother's household" (28.)

Then the focus of action moves to Lavan, Rivka's brother: "And he ran..." (29), "And he brought..." (30), "And he said..." (31). We have the impression of a sort of "relay race" – the hurry is passed from one character to the next.

By what title is the servant called in these sections in which Rivka and Lavan are the central characters? To our surprise, from verse 18 until verse 33 he is not called "servant" even once. Instead, other unexpected titles are used:

Rivka reacts to his request to drink by saying (18): "Drink, my master"....

From here onwards the text refers to him as "the man," a total of seven times until verse 33: "And the man, wondering at her, held his silence..." (21); "And the man took a gold nose ring..." (22); "And the man bowed his head and prostrated himself before God..." (27); "And Lavan ran to the man" (29); "And when he heard the words of Rivka his sister, saying, So said the man to me..." (30), "And he came to the man..." (30), "And the man came to the house" (32.)

An additional title is mentioned by Lavan in his words to "the man" in verse 31: "Come, blessed one of God, why do you stand outside"...

Verse 33 concludes the first half of the story, during the course of which Eliezer has come from Avraham's tent to Betuel's house, locating on the way the woman worthy of Yitzchak, and half of his mission has been accomplished. In this half, Eliezer is mentioned by the various titles a total of fourteen times, with the servant undergoing a strange metamorphosis: from "servant of Avraham" he has become a "master" in Rivka's words. But "master" is the

unchanging title of Avraham throughout the story (nine times during the first half). Likewise, he is called "blessed one of God" by Lavan – and this title, too, is more appropriate for Avraham, about whom we read in the introduction to the story: "And God blessed Avraham with everything." In seven other places, he is called "the man" – a title also generally not used for a servant, but only for a free man.

This is not difficult to understand: the change in the servant's title results from Rivka's and Lavan's new perspectives as they arise. After all, they are not aware that the elderly and dignified man leading a train of ten camels laden with all kinds of good things and overseeing others as well (verse 32), is in fact a servant. From their point of view, Eliezer appears to be a rich merchant who happens to pass through their city. Therefore they address him as "master" and "blessed one of God" – titles of honor appropriate for a dignified stranger. Hence the Torah, too, adapts its language and calls him "the man," in keeping with Rivka's and Lavan's perception of him. This is what an important and unfamiliar person is called. (Compare, for example, the conversation between Yaakov and his sons in chapter 43: Yosef, who hides his identity from his brothers and is thus unfamiliar to them, is called "the man" by them and by Yaakov seven times).

Nevertheless, this leaves us with an important question: how can this servant allow Rivka and Lavan to continue to hold a mistaken impression of him for all this time? In terms of the text, this lasts from verse 18 until 33, about a quarter of the entire length of the story. In "real time," this must have taken at least several hours (the time to draw water for ten camels, plus the time it took Rivka to run home and for Lavan to come out, plus the time it took for the entire group to reach Betuel's house). Should he not have objected to Rivka's very first words to him, "Drink, my master" (verse 18), correcting her mistake by saying, "I am not a master, but a slave"?

## V. "THE SERVANT OF THE KING IS LIKE THE KING"

Although Rivka and Lavan hold a mistaken impression of him, this in no way changes his own self-image as a servant fulfilling his master's mission. This we learn not only from his constant turning to God (see verses 21 and 26), but also, principally, from the words of the silent prayer of thanks which he utters in verse 27:

"And he said, Blessed is the Lord, God of MY MASTER Avraham,

who has not held back his love and his truth from MY MASTER;

I was on my way and God has guided me to the house of the brethren of MY MASTER".

The hiding of his true identity from Rivka and her family is done for the sake of the success of his mission. If he had corrected Rivka's mistake in calling him "my master," identifying himself as a slave, his mission would have suffered. The enthusiastic interest displayed by Rivka's family upon his arrival would have paled, the welcome he received would have been somewhat dampened, and the chances of them being prepared to listen to his message – which would have lost its key element of surprise – would be small.

By allowing their illusion to continue, he allows Lavan's expansive welcome while preparing (with an ironic inner smile that none of them see) his "surprise" for them. But he will not reveal his true identity and the purpose of his visit before exploiting to the full the enthusiasm and curiosity surrounding him: when they place food before him, he refuses, saying, "I shall not eat until I say my piece." Thus, he creates excited anticipation of what he is about to say. Rivka and her family do not know that they are what the stranger was seeking; that he has found the purpose of his journey. In their innocence, they believe that they are simply offering a stop-over to a rich merchant who happened to find his way to their city (perhaps an unexpected opportunity for the family to make some money), and why would this respectable stranger wish to make a speech? What does he have to do with them? The servant's speech makes it clear to them that their connection with "the man" who stands before them, as well as with the person who sent him, is a more fateful one than they could ever have imagined.

The beginning of the revolution which he is about to cause in their consciousness is encapsulated in one short sentence (verse 34): "And he said: I am Avraham's servant".

By thus revealing his true identity to them, he creates a dramatic turning point in the story. Firstly, in this sentence he all at once directs all the honor that has been showered upon him by the family towards its proper address: Avraham, his master. "The servant of a king is like the king," according to a Talmudic adage (Shevuot 47b). The servant of a king is also entitled to royal treatment, for he represents his king. But the honor is not really bestowed on the servant himself; it is meant for the king whom he represents.

Secondly, by mentioning the name "Avraham," the servant builds up tremendous excitement at what he is about to say. They know that Avraham is their relative, but they have no idea how he has fared in the distant Canaan. Now his dignified servant stands before them, at the head of a caravan of ten camels laden with all kinds of luxuries, and he has something important to tell them. They realize that he has not come to their city by accident; it is no coincidence that he gave expensive gifts to Rivka at the well and no coincidence that he asked to stay specifically at their house. What, then, is the purpose of his visit to them?

Following his opening sentence, the servant has already advanced somewhat towards achieving his goal in the rest of his speech: persuading the family to agree to Rivka's

accompanying him to the land of Canaan in order to become Yitzchak's wife. This is achieved thanks to the deliberate postponement of revealing his true identity, and his readiness to play the role of the mysterious "man" up until the moment of the big surprise which opens his speech.

The continuation of the servant's speech is an abbreviated review of the events described in the first half of the story, from the beginning until verse 27, to the point where the family entered the scene (verse 28). Early and later commentators alike have discussed the wisdom invested in this speech, which finds expression in the many adjustments which the servant makes to the story as related by the text (which reflects the objective reality). All of these changes are directed at a single purpose: to persuade Rivka's family to agree to the match and to its conditions, and to remove any objections which they may raise. The same psychological insight and tactical shrewdness displayed by the servant in his speech here before Rivka's family was also evident in his previous silence and the way in which he waited to reveal his identity before the family in the previous section of the story.

He, the changing titles for the servant are not only an expression of the changing perspective of him on the part of characters who join the story; they also serve as a way of promoting the objectives of his mission. The servant makes wise use of the different perceptions of his identity, and the story makes use of them for the development of the plot.

## VI. CHANGES IN THE SERVANT'S TITLE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE STORY

During the course of his long speech (verses 35-49), Eliezer's title of "servant" is missing, simply because he is speaking about himself in the first person. However, he betrays a constant awareness of his status through his continual references to Avraham as his "master" (ten times.)

The next time he is referred to as a "servant" is in verse 52, "And when Avraham's servant heard their words, he prostrated himself on the ground before God," and immediately thereafter in verse 53, "And the servant took out vessels of silver...." Both are parts of the narrative; now that his identity has become clear, the text also returns to referring to him by his true identity.

Surprisingly enough, when Rivka's family members ask her opinion, they go back to using the same title which they attached to him before he revealed himself to them: "And they called Rivka and said to her, Will you go with this man?" (58)

We cannot suggest that they are still harboring a mistaken impression of him, since in the next verse (59) we read, "And they sent Rivka... and Avraham's servant and his men," and this verse clearly reflects the perspective of the family. Therefore, the wording of the question posed to Rivka hints to us that no real argument took place between the family members and the servant with regard to Rivka's betrothal. Their demand in verse 55, "Let the girl remain with us some days (i.e., a year), or at least ten, and thereafter she will go," is the obligatory honor which they owe her. The Mishna (Ketubot 5:2), "A virgin is given twelve months from the time when the groom asks her hand to [prepare for the marriage and] bedeck herself [with clothing and jewelry for the wedding]," must reflect an ancient custom which was prevalent among the people of the biblical period.

This custom is the pretext for the family's demand that Rivka remain with them "some days," i.e. a year, as was customary. Had they not demanded this, it would have represented dishonor to Rivka and to themselves. But even in the midst of this very demand, they hint at their readiness to be lenient with regard to fulfilling this custom, as they are prepared to compromise at "ten," i.e. ten months. But the servant is not satisfied with this, and demands that Rivka accompany him immediately (verse 56). Rejection of the servant's demand will endanger the match (see verse 49), and the family does not wish to give up this opportunity simply in order to fulfill in detail this custom of honor. They are therefore prepared to leave the decision to Rivka herself. But they do not ask her, "Will you go with the servant of Avraham," but rather: "Will you go with this man?" – this is "the man" who gave you expensive gifts (verses 22 and 53), and whose appearance is that of a wealthy and dignified master. Thus, they hint to Rivka how worthwhile it would be to go with him, and the response expected of her.

Here, too, the servant accepts their description of him as "the man" without objection, for it serves the purposes of his mission, just as it did in the first half of the story.

In one other place (verse 61), the servant is called "the man:" "And Rivka and her maids arose... and they went after the man." Rivka, in her innocence, still relates to him as a respectable "man" – the impression he made on her at their first encounter, and the way her family refers to him in her presence. But Rivka's attitude towards him does not change the servant's own self-image, just as it did not affect him in any way at the well, and therefore verse 61 concludes, "And the servant took Rivka and he went".

At the end of their journey, with the appearance of Yitzchak before her, it becomes clear to Rivka, too, that "the man" with whom she traveled is a mere servant: "And Rivka lifted her eyes and she saw Yitzchak... and she said to the servant: Who is this man who walks in the field towards us? And the servant said, He is my master".



The servant's mission has concluded with complete success, and the characters finally go back to their proper places, even in Rivka's consciousness. Upon seeing Yitzchak, she immediately understands that YITZCHAK is "the man," while the person with whom she traveled is "the servant." And the servant himself confirms this when he tells her, "He is my master".

Twenty-two times during the story, the title "master" refers to Avraham (while Yitzchak is generally referred to as "the son of the master"), and here suddenly this title has become attached to Yitzchak. What is hinted at here is that in bringing Rivka to Yitzchak, the servant has completed the "changing of the guard:" Rivka is brought to Sarah's tent and she takes her place (verse 67), and Yitzchak, after taking Rivka as his wife, is now worthy of taking Avraham's place. The elderly and loyal servant has merited to bring about the passing of the flame from one generation to the next, thanks to the assignment which he fulfilled with such outstanding success and with such complete devotion.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

"Servant," "master" and "man" are three titles of Eliezer in our story. Which other character in the story is called these three names? Who calls him this name in each instance? What is the connection between these three names for Eliezer and the similar names of the other person?

In our discussion, we pointed out that the various names for the servant appear a total of twenty-four times throughout the story. There is another character in the story whose name and various titles appear a total of twenty-four times (if we count the name and accompanying title as two). Who is this?

The subject of verses 55-61 is "the argument about Rivka's betrothal and her decision." Rivka is the most important character in this fragment. Twice she is called "young woman" (na'ara) at the beginning of the fragment, and five times thereafter she is called by her name. What is the reason for this change?

With regard to Lavan's words in verse 31, "Come in, blessed one of God," Bereishit Rabba (60:7) offers two explanations: "[Lavan] was convinced that this was Avraham himself, for his face resembled him. R. Yossi son of R. Dosa said: Eliezer was a Canaanite, and because he loyally served that righteous one he left the category of the cursed and was counted in the category of the blessed".

What problem did the Midrash answer by means of this explanation?

What is the connection between the two solutions given in the Midrash for this problem?

Which of these two solutions fits better with our discussion above?

.5Who is Rivka's "nurse," mentioned in verse 59? Why is her name not mentioned here?

