



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# Why Go Back?

The story has been with us since childhood.

As Avraham's life draws near its end, he turns to his trusted servant (identified by the Rabbis as Eliezer) and instructs him to return to Avraham's homeland, Aram Naharaim, to find a wife for Yitzchak. He specifies that he does not want Yitzchak to marry a woman from the surrounding Canaanite nations.

And yet, when we re-examine the story as adults, Avraham's decision seems completely counterintuitive.

Why send Eliezer back to Aram Naharaim to find a match for Yitzchak? After all, isn't this the very land from which Avraham was commanded to depart at the dawn of his career? The Patriarch's own journey was launched when God commanded him to separate himself from his homeland, his birthplace and the home of his father. What possible reason could there now be to return to that land?

When I learned this narrative as a child, it

seemed to make sense. Avraham, I reasoned, does not want his son to intermarry.

But that explanation doesn't work. After all, these events unfold centuries before the birth of the Jewish nation. There are no "Hebrews" in either location. There would seem to be no moral difference between the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan and the Idolatrous inhabitants of Aram Naharaim!?

Some classical commentaries suggest that Avraham specifically wanted a wife to be chosen for Yitzchak from his own extended family in Aram Naharaim.

A careful review of the text, however, reveals that Avraham never clearly makes that request of his servant. He simply tells Eliezer to return to Avraham's land and birthplace and to search for a wife there.

Avraham's family first appears as a possible criterion when Eliezer veers from the exact text of his master's instructions during his bargaining with Rivka's father and brother, Betuel and Lavan. And while it is certainly possible that Avraham did issue an unrecorded request that a member of his family be chosen as Yitzchak's wife, it is equally possible that Eliezer fabricates the existence of such a request as part of a subtle ploy to curry favor across the bargaining table. Some commentaries note, in fact, that this is one of a number of variations between Avraham's actual instructions and Eliezer's repetition of those instructions. These alterations, they claim, demonstrate Eliezer's diplomatic skill as he tries to endear himself to Rivka's family.

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So, back to our initial question: Why does Avraham direct Eliezer to return to Aram Naharaim to find a match for Yitzchak?

While numerous answers have been proposed to this question, I'd like to suggest yet another. This approach depends upon seeing Parshat Chayei Sara as a cohesive whole with one overarching theme; a theme that marks the culmination of Avraham's career.

Parshat Chayei Sara can be neatly divided into two major sections: The purchase of the Cave of Machpela as a burial site for Sara and the selection of Rivka as Yitzchak's wife.

In the first of these sections, Avraham opens the critical negotiations for Ma'arat Ha-Machpela with a delineation of his own unique position in Hittite society.

*"Ger V'toshav anochi imachem,"* the patriarch proclaims. *"I am a Stranger and a Citizen together with you."*

And, with that statement, a quiet battle is joined.

On one side, Avraham: Insistent upon maintaining his delicate position; simultaneously, *a part of and apart from* surrounding society.

On the opposing side, B'nei Het (the Hittites): Intent upon pulling Avraham completely into their world. *"Nesei Elohim ata b'tocheinu,* they argue. *"You are a prince of god in our midst" Why the need to maintain this delicate balance? You are welcome to become one of us!*

Back and forth the drama unfolds, with everything riding on the outcome.

If Avraham concedes, the story will be over. He and his descendants will become Hittites, and disappear into the mists of history. If he stands his ground, he will become the progenitor of a people who will define themselves across time by his own self-definition. They will survive as a nation only if they maintain

their posture as *Geirim V'toshavim*, Strangers and Citizens, in whichever society they will find themselves.

Now perhaps we can offer an answer to our original question emerging from the second half of Parshat Chayei Sara. Why does Avraham instruct his servant to return to the land that Hashem told Avraham to leave?

Perhaps, upon emerging whole from the struggle with the Hittites, Avraham is struck with a sudden fear:

*I have been able to strike the balance necessary for my survival, because I began in this land as a stranger. I came from a foreign land, and have therefore always been able to maintain my distance from those within Canaan.*

*Yitzchak, however, is different. My son was born here. He is too close to those around him. He is familiar only with this culture, with this population and with this land. How do I know that he will learn to discern the dangers that surround him? How do I know that he will be able to distance himself from elements of this society counterproductive to his spiritual development? How do I know that he will maintain the appropriate balance and truly be a Ger V'Toshav?"*

Avraham then sets about guaranteeing the continuation of his legacy. *He determines that at least one member of the next generation must make the same journey that he made, from Aram Naharaim to Canaan.*

More important than the physical journey, will be the philosophical journey. Yitzchak's wife will, hopefully, be able to see herself as "a Stranger and a Citizen." She will begin with a natural distance from the Canaanites surrounding her. Given her foreign background, she will have a head start in maintaining the perspective needed to discern and confront

the dangers around them.

In short, Avraham does have a deep ulterior motive for sending Eliezer back to his birthplace to find a wife for Yitzchak. The Patriarch hopes that Yitzchak's wife will ensure the survival of the Jewish people by maintaining the delicate balance of self-definition that he himself has achieved.

Avraham's decision ultimately proves to be on the mark. In the next generation it will be Rivka, not Yitzchak, who will see her surroundings

and its challenges clearly. It will be Rivka who will then act to ensure that Avraham's legacy is transmitted to the "right child."

Avraham, in his wisdom, recognized a fundamental truth. Every generation must continue to maintain the balance reached by our ancestors at the dawn of our history. But, at the same time, the task of preserving that balance is iterated differently to each generation, in a way that factors in that generation's world.

Today, monumental changes unfold around us at the speed of light. The world confronting our children is vastly different from the world in which we were shaped. And, the world that will face our grandchildren will differ greatly from the world of their parents, our children.

And yet, the underlying challenge remains the same. We must consciously teach our children and grandchildren to attain the delicate balance that has preserved us repeatedly in multiple turbulent worlds. Only if we actively train them to become "part of and apart from" the world around them will Avraham's legacy survive. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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