



GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Chayei Sara — The Moral Architecture of Our Nation

Every year at the Seder, we begin the section of *Tzei U'lemad* by recalling that Pharaoh was not the first to seek our annihilation, nor was he the worst. Pharaoh targeted the males, but Lavan sought to uproot everything — *la'akor et hakol*. On Pesach night, Lavan is portrayed as the super-villain of Jewish history.

Yet Avraham preferred that Yitzchak marry Lavan's sister rather than a local Canaanite woman. He was so adamant that he made his trusted servant swear not to choose a wife for Yitzchak from among the daughters of Canaan. This choice is striking. After all, Avraham had spent many years among the Canaanites, forming alliances with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre — described as *ba'alei brit*, partners in covenant. He had also forged treaties with Avimelech. Why, then, was he unwilling to join his family to theirs?

Evidently, there was something in the Canaanite spirit that Avraham would not allow to enter the bloodstream of his family — an influence that could erode the purity and moral strength he hoped to preserve.

To understand why he turned away from Canaan, we must first examine the moral landscape in which he lived.

THE LAND THAT FORGOT CHESED

We have previously encountered the people

of Canaan — skilled in warfare and diplomacy, yet impoverished in morality. They are guided by calculation and self-gain, but they have not discovered the value of *chesed*.

After Avraham rescued the kingdom of Sedom from four tyrants, one might have expected the king of Sedom to respond with gratitude, or at least a gesture of kindness. Instead, he engaged Avraham in routine post-war negotiations — population exchanges and payment for military aid — as though nothing extraordinary had occurred. Gratitude and compassion were foreign to his world.

Only Malki-Tzedek — a solitary spiritual figure whom Chazal identify as Shem, the son of Noach — greets Avraham with bread and wine after the wearying battle. One act of *chesed* shining in a moral wasteland.

Sedom, in particular, would become infamous for its hostility to generosity, embracing a doctrine described by Chazal as *sheli sheli v'shelcha shelach* — “what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.” They revered law and property rights but lacked the courage to transcend legality for compassion. A society unable to act beyond justice toward kindness is doomed to decay.

Similarly, Avimelech, king of the Plishtim

and Avraham's newfound ally, boasts that the financial payment he offered Avraham was "the *chesed* I performed for you." His gesture was not an act of kindness, only restitution for abducting Sarah. *Chesed* means meeting another's needs, not balancing accounts. Avimelech never grasped that distinction.

Subsequently, Avraham encounters the same moral emptiness in Chevron when seeking a burial place for Sarah. This was a humanitarian need — simple human decency should have prompted an immediate offer of land. Yet Avraham is forced into three rounds of negotiations before he can secure a small plot to bury his wife.

Avraham gradually realizes that kindness is not part of the moral instinct of this land. There may be rare exceptions, such as his friends Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre, or Malki-Tzedek, but the moral landscape of Canaan is barren. Avraham now knows that the future of his family cannot be rooted in this society. He must seek a woman from a different world — one where compassion, not calculation, shapes the fabric of life.

Having witnessed a land bereft of compassion, Avraham now sends his servant to seek a home where kindness still lives.

HEART OF CHESED

Avraham dispatches his servant with this mission — to find a wife for Yitzchak from a culture that appreciates *chesed*. The servant therefore chooses his test carefully: the suitable woman will be the one who runs to perform an act of kindness. Rivka's *chesed* is so deeply ingrained that she doesn't merely offer water to a weary traveler; she insists on drawing water for his camels as well.

When the servant is later welcomed and hosted with warmth by Rivka's family, he

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recognizes that this society, though lacking in theological awareness and unable to fully perceive Hashem, nevertheless excels in *chesed*. They may not yet understand divine truth, but they understand human kindness. And that moral foundation — compassion for others — can become part of the spiritual DNA of the Jewish nation Avraham is constructing.

Yet kindness alone could not complete Avraham's vision. A people built on compassion must also rest upon the strength of family.

BROKEN HOMES

Avraham now recognizes another moral void in Canaan — the collapse of family life. Until this point, the Torah has not described a single functioning family among the peoples of Canaan. We have seen political structures — kings, priests, and civic elders. In Sedom, Avraham encounters Ephron, a local judge and public official. But there are no examples of enduring, loyal family relationships.

Egypt and the land of the Plishtim are moral free-for-alls, where every visiting woman becomes a target for manipulation. A society that preys on women cannot sustain trust, loyalty, or love — the foundations of family. Without dignity and restraint, family life collapses into chaos.

This depravity reaches its ugliest

expression in Sedom, when the mob gathers outside Lot's home, demanding that his guests be handed over to satisfy their desires.

Lot's own behavior is a microcosm of the moral decay of Canaanite family life — and a foil to the model Avraham is trying to create. At first, Lot appears to have learned from Avraham: he is married and has two married daughters who live under his roof. On the surface, there is a framework of family.

Yet as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Lot sees his other daughters as bargaining tools to pacify the mob. Worse, after Sedom's destruction, he loses his wife and descends into the most shameful and tragic scene in *Sefer Bereishit* — one that exposes how the concept of family has lost all sanctity in his world.

THE FIRST FAMILY OF BELIEF

Avraham cannot allow his son Yitzchak to join a society that disregards the sanctity of family life. Avraham himself has already built a functioning family structure, most vividly displayed in the opening scene of *Parashat Vayeira*. The primary motif of that scene is Avraham's longing to perform *chesed*, yet it also highlights a family united in that mission. He instructs his household to prepare food quickly, urging Sarah to knead and bake bread, while he himself runs to prepare the meat. It is not merely Avraham's personal generosity on display, but a family mobilized for *chesed*.

Later in the parasha, we again encounter this sense of family cohesion. Though he has sent away Hagar and Yishmael by divine command, Avraham does not face the *Akeidah* in isolation; he travels with “two youths” at his side. These were servants, yet the Torah deliberately calls them *ne'arim*, presenting

the journey to Har HaMoriah as a family procession, not a solitary march.

Even the *brit milah*, a mitzvah addressed personally to Avraham, is framed as a commandment to be fulfilled by every member of his household. Avraham's covenant with Hashem is never private — it is always shared, always familial.

Avraham's strong and stable family becomes the vehicle through which he transmits the values he has discovered. When Hashem decides to destroy Sedom, He declares that He must first inform Avraham — “for he has trained his children and his household after him to follow the way of Hashem, to perform charity and uphold justice.” Avraham is not only a man of faith but a father who passes his beliefs to those who will carry them forward.

Avraham now seeks this second value — family integrity — in Aram Naharayim, a virtue completely missing from the culture of Canaan. At the end of *Parashat Vayeira*, following the *Akeidah*, the Torah lists the twelve children born to Nachor, Avraham's brother. Though distant from Avraham religiously, Nachor has managed to build a stable and functioning family. Avraham, who has seen the moral chaos of Canaanite society, now yearns to link his son to a family where loyalty, commitment, and structure still exist.

For this reason, Avraham's servant is not satisfied with identifying a woman of *chesed*; he must also learn about her family. When he discovers that Rivka's father, Betuel, and her brother, Lavan, have maintained a household of order and continuity, he understands why Avraham had chosen this land. Still, he does not rush to leave with Rivka. He waits to receive the family's consent, seeking their

blessing before departure. Avraham had chosen this culture because of its devotion to family. It would be hypocritical — and ultimately self-destructive — to found the next generation of *Am Yisrael* by undermining the very family harmony he sought to preserve.

FAMILY AND FAITH

We would expect *Sefer Bereishit* to be a book of theology and philosophy — a treatise on the creation of the world and Avraham's discovery of Hashem. Yet overwhelmingly, *Bereishit* is a book about family life: husbands and wives, parents and children, rivalries, and struggles over succession.

Bereishit teaches that healthy family life is the template for monotheism. Cultures that tolerate multiple spouses easily tolerate multiple gods. A society that preaches fidelity within the family — between husbands and wives, parents and children, and among siblings — is also capable of fidelity to one G-d.

Remarkably, the visit of Avraham's servant succeeds in planting the early seeds of monotheism within Lavan's family. Rashi notes that when the servant arrived, Lavan cleared his house of idols — perhaps out of respect for his distinguished guest, who would not lodge in a home filled with pagan symbols. Even if done out of courtesy, this act forced Lavan to distance himself, however briefly, from idolatry. Such gestures often leave a trace, softening the hold of pagan habit.

More significantly, Lavan and Betuel mention Hashem's name three times, acknowledging that Hashem has guided this emissary to bring Rivka to her destined role. No one in the mainstream culture of Canaan had yet uttered the name of Hashem with such recognition. Within a single day, Lavan sensed the presence of one G-d. Evidently, the path

toward faith in Hashem begins within the bonds of family — for loyalty to family is the first school of loyalty to Hashem.

Avraham seeks to build the foundation of his family — and ultimately, of his nation. The two traits he deems indispensable are an appreciation of *chesed* and a loyal commitment to family life. He knows that the societies of Canaan lack both qualities, and so he looks elsewhere. His relatives in Aram Naharayim may not be paragons of faith, but they embody these essential virtues.

These two traits — *chesed* and devotion to family — have become the enduring hallmarks of our people. They have carried us through the centuries of exile and ensured our survival under unthinkable conditions. We cared for one another, we nurtured families, and through those families we transmitted our timeless values. *Chesed* and family — Avraham's twin legacies — have preserved the moral and spiritual heartbeat of *Am Yisrael*. ■



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