

# Lessons in Loving Kindness: Eliezer & Rebecca at the Well

In memory of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks - לזכרו של הרב יעקב צבי בן דוד אריה ז"ל -

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*Eliezer and Rebecca at the well – Nicholas Poussin*

## 1. Avraham, Eliezer and Rivka, Bereishit 24

And Abraham was old, advanced in days, and the Lord had blessed Abraham with everything. <sup>2</sup> And Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his house, who ruled over all that was his, "Please place your hand under my thigh.<sup>3</sup> And I will adjure you by the Lord, the 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, in whose midst I dwell. <sup>4</sup> But you shall go to my land and to my birthplace, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Isaac" . . .

א ואברהם זָמַן בָּא בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּרַךְ אֶת־  
אֲבִרְהָם כּוֹל: ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם אֶל־עֲבָדָו נָקֹן  
בֵּיתוֹ הַמְּשָׁל כְּבִלְאִשׁוּם שְׂיִם־נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת  
יָרְכִי: ג וַאֲשַׁבְּעֶנְךָ בְּה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֱלֹהֵי  
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִקַּח אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִבְּנוֹת  
הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּקִרְבָּן: ד כִּי אֶל־  
אֶרֶץ וְאֶל־מִוְלַדְתִּי תֵלֵךְ וְלִקְחָתְךָ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי  
לִי־צִדִק . . . י וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד עֶשְׂרָה גַמְלִים  
מִגַּמְלֵי אֲדָנָיו, וַיֵּלֶךְ, וְכָל־טוֹב אֲדָנָיו, בְּיָדוֹ;  
וַיִּקַּם, וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־אֲרָם נְהֲרִים--אֶל־עֵיר נְחוֹר.

<sup>10</sup> Then the servant left, taking with him ten of his master's camels loaded with all kinds of good things from his master. He set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor. <sup>11</sup> He made the camels kneel down near the well outside the town; it was toward evening, the time the women go out to draw water.

<sup>12</sup> Then he prayed, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. <sup>13</sup> See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. <sup>14</sup> May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master." <sup>15</sup> He had scarcely finished speaking when Rebekah—who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor—came out with a jug on her shoulder.

## 2. Sinister motivations, Sforno

*Avraham was old and Hashem had blessed Avraham* The Torah explains the reasons which motivated Abraham to send his servant to another land to find a wife for his wife for his son, and why he had to adjure him with an oath.

Firstly, since he was old, he was concerned lest he die before a match was arranged for his son, and since he was convinced that there was no worthy

יא ויברך הגמלים מחוץ לעיר, אל-באר המים, לעת ערב, לעת צאת השאבת. יב ויאמר—ה" אלקי אדני אברהם, הקרה-נא לפני היום; ועשה-חסד, עם אדני אברהם. יג הנה אנכי נצב, על-עין המים; ובנות אנשי העיר, יצאת לשאב מים. יד והיה הנער, אשר אמר אליה הטי-נא כדך ואשתה, ואמרה שתה, וגם-גמליך אשקה--אתה הכחת, לעבדך ליצחק, ובה אדע, כי-עשית חסד עם-אדני. טו ויהי-הוא, טרם פלה לנדר, והנה רבקה יצאת אשר ילדה לבתואל בן-מלכה, אשת נחור אחי אברהם; וכדה, על-שכמה. טז והנער, טבת מראה מאד--בתולה, ואיש לא ידעה; ותרד העינה, ותמלא כדה ותעל.

ואברהם זקן... וה' ברך את אברהם – באר הסבות שהכריחו את אברהם לשלוח את עבדו עתה אל ארץ אחרת בעד אשה לבנו, ושהוצרך להשביעו על כך.

כי לסבת הזקנה דאג שימות ולא יראה בחופת בנו, והסכים שלא לאחר עוד, ומבלי אין בארצו אשה הגונה לבנו, הוצרך לשלוח אל ארץ אחרת.

wife for his son in Canaan, he sent Eliezer to another land.

And since Avraham was wealthy, he feared that a dishonest person might bribe his servant to choose his daughter and rather than put in the effort to secure a good wife for his son. That is why he needed to make his servant swear an oath about all these things.

ומפני עשרו דאג שמא איזה אדם בלתי הגון ירבה שוחד לעבדו כדי שיבחר בבתו, ולא ישתדל להשיג אשה הגונה לבנו, ולכן הוצרך להשביע את עבדו על כל אלה.

### 3. Eliezer appears as a poor servant, Rabbi S.R. Hirsch

Eliezer himself made his way with his feet ("and he went"), and carried presents in his hands. From the book of Kohelet (10: 7) it seems that slaves would not ride, but would walk on the ground, thus being seen as slaves. On the return journey too, Eliezer walked and led Rivka's camel . . .

Eliezer therefore did not appear as a rich merchant with ten camels laden with heavy burdens, but as a heavily laden slave who led his master's camels to their destination. Only in this way, will the examination of the young woman's character be a real test. Behaviour that attests to pure human feelings towards a tired and heavily laden slave can come for completely different motives when shown to a wealthy noble.

אליעזר עצמו עשה את הדרך ברגליו ("וילך"), ונשא מתנות בידיו. מספר קהלת (י: ז) נראה שעבדים לא היו רוכבים, אלא הולכים על הקרקע, ובכך היו ניכרים כעבדים. גם בדרך חזרה צעד אליעזר ברגליו והנהיג את גמלה של רבקה. נראה שהגשים שלנו לא היו רוכבות מנוסות, אלא היו זקוקות לאחד שינהיג את בהמותיהן; ראה גם במעשה האשה השונמית (מלכים ב' ד: כד)

אליעזר אם כן לא הופיע כסוחר עשיר עם עשרה גמלים הטעונים משא כבד, אלא כעבד שמתענו בידו המוליך את גמלי אדוניו לייעדם. רק כך תהיה בחינת מידות הנערה בחינה אמיתית. התנהגות המעידה על רגשות אנושיים טהורים כלפי עבד עייף וטעון, יכולה לבוא מסיבות שונות לחלוטין כשהמדובר בשר עשיר.

### 4. Searching for a poor woman, Malbim

*And he made the camels kneel* this teaches that he agreed to take a woman from among the poor women and therefore he made the camels kneel near the well where the water-drawers would come.

ויברך – זאת שנית הסכים שיקח אשה מבנות עניים, וע"כ הבריך הגמלים אצל הבאר שלשם יבואו השואבות, וזה מבואר שהעשירים אין שולחים את בנותיהם לשאוב מים כי יש להם עבדים

And the rich do not send their daughters to draw water because they have slaves and handmaids, and there are people everywhere who will cut wood and draw water for money. Only the poor send their daughters to draw water. He calculated that whoever sends their daughters to draw water especially when the well is outside the city will not prevent their daughter from going to another land and marrying a man as rich and great as Isaac. And they will not be afraid to let her travel with a servant since they were unconcerned about her honour and allowed her to go in the evening among the drawers of water. Therefore, he only asked that the girl be beautiful and have good personality. He asked God's help and providence regarding this sign that he had made for himself.

ושפחות, ויש בכ"מ חוטבי עצים ושואבי מים בשכר, רק העניים שולחים את בנותיהם לשאוב ושיער כי מי ששולח בתו לשאוב מים ובפרט שהבאר חוץ לעיר הוא לא יחשוך את בתו מלכת לארץ אחרת לקחת איש עשיר וגדול כיצחק, ולא ירע בעיניו מה שהולכקת עם עבד, אחר שאינה חוששת על כבוד והולכת לעת ערב בין משאבים, ואחר שאז אינו מבקש מן הנערה רק שתהיה יפת תואר וטובה במדות, ע"ז בקש מה' שיופיע עזר ההשגחה לזה בסימן שעשה לעצמו בזה.

## 5. The Torah as a book of *hessed*, Talmud Sotah 14 a

The Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness. It begins with God clothing the naked: *The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them*, and it ends with Him caring for the dead: *And He [God] buried [Moses] in the Valley*.

דרש ר' שמלאי תורה תחלתה גמילות חסדים וסופה גמילות חסדים תחילתה גמילות חסדים ויעש ה' אלהים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם וסופה גמילות חסדים דכתיב ויקבר אותו בגיא

## 6. What is '*hessed*'? Rabbi J. Sacks, *To heal a fractured world*, pp. 45-46

What is *hessed*? It is usually translated as 'kindness'; but it also means love – not love as an emotion or passion, but love expressed as deed . . . *Hessed* is love that is loyalty and the loyalty that is love. It is born in the generosity of faithfulness, the love that means being ever-present for the other, in hard times as well as good, love that grows stronger, not weaker over time. It is love moralized into small gestures of help and understanding, support and friendship: the poetry of everyday life written in the language of simple deeds.

Those who know it experience the world differently from those who do not. It is not for them a threatening and dangerous place. It is one where trust is rewarded precisely because it does not seek reward. *Hessed* is the gift of love that begets love.

## 7. The power of *hessed*, Avot De Rebbe Natan 4

Once, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, left Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yehoshua followed him. When he saw the destruction of the Holy Temple, Rabbi Yehoshua said: 'Woe to us, for the place where all of Israel's sins are forgiven has been destroyed'.

Rabbi Yohanan said to him: 'My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement which is like it. And what is that? Acts of kindness, as it says, *For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering* (Psalms 89:3).

And so we find that the delightful Daniel, would busy himself with acts of kindness. And what were these acts of kindness that he was so busy with? If you suggest that he brought burnt offerings and other sacrifices in Babylon, doesn't it say, *Take care not to bring burnt offerings in just any place you see, but only in the place that the Eternal will choose in one of your tribal territories shall you bring burnt offerings* (Deuteronomy 12:13–14). So what were the acts of kindness he busied himself with? He would help a bride and make her happy, he would escort the dead, and he would always give a *perutah* to a poor person. And he would pray three times a day, and his prayers would be gladly accepted

פעם אחת היה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים והיה רבי יהושע הולך אחריו וראה בית המקדש חרב אר"י אוי לנו על זה שהוא חרב מקום שמכפרים בו עונותיהם של ישראל.

א"ל בני אל ירע לך יש לנו כפרה אחת שהיא כמותה ואיזה זה גמ"ח שנאמר כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח שכן מצינו בדניאל איש חמודות שהיה מתעסק בגמ"ח ומה הן גמ"ח שהיה דניאל מתעסק בהם אם תאמר עולות וזבחים מקריב בבבל והלא כבר נאמר (דברים יב) השמר לך פן תעלה עולותיך בכל מקום אשר תראה כי אם במקום אשר יבחר ה' באחד שבטיך שם תעלה עולותיך. אלא מה הן גמ"ח שהיה מתעסק בהן היה מתקן את הכלה ומשמחה ומלווה את המת ונותן פרוטה לעני ומתפלל ג' פעמים בכל יום ותפלתו מתקבלת ברצון

## 8. Rabbi Sacks, Chayei Sarah (5774) – Beginning the Journey

*God promises, but we have to act.* God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham

had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, “Jewish grandchildren.”

*Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone.* By the very act of self-limitation (*tzimtzum*) through which He creates the space for human freedom, He gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the flood, but Noah had to make the ark. He gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is *not what God does for us but what we do for God.*

That is what leaders understand, and it is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take responsibility for creating the conditions through which God’s purposes can be fulfilled.

<https://rabbisacks.org/chayei-sarah-5774/>