

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

CHAYEI SARA 5785

In addressing the obvious question as to why the Torah devotes so many verses (24:10-60) to narrate - in duplicate - the story of Eliezer's seeking a wife for Yitzchak, the Midrash makes this unusual statement (B'reishit Rabba 60:8) -

"The conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs is more pleasing before Gd than the Torah of their descendants, for the episode of Eliezer's [quest for Yitzchak's wife] is doubled in the Torah while many essential elements of the Torah were given only by allusion."

But why should this be so? While the stories of our great Biblical ancestors are certainly of great consequence and meaning, how can they compare in importance to Gd's subsequent mitzvot which are the very foundation of our entire Jewish identity?

Of the many interesting answers proposed, let us present three approaches, all of which are not mutually exclusive. In these explanations, it is important to note that while the Midrash makes specific mention of the "servants of the Patriarchs", our Sages expanded this reference to include the happenings of all our great Biblical figures.

Let us first introduce these answers with a clever and ingenious reading of the Midrash which underlies all of these solutions. Rav Chaim Haber-stam (the Sanzer Rebbe, 19th cent.) would have us understand the Midrash as stating not that one was more important than the other - the "conversations" over the Torah, but rather that the second would be the cause for the first; namely, that the reason why the conversations of our ancestors are so significant is precisely because of the Torah - the interpretations - of these narratives by their descendants.

To begin: R. Yitzchok Arama (15th cent. Spain) takes notice of something quite obvious (Akeidat Yitzchak, Chayei Sara, 22, s.v. U'MEI'ATA) when he observes that the repetition of the story deals specifically with shidduchim - match-making. The Midrash is thus coming to underscore the vital and central importance of choosing the right marriage partner, and how critical such a choice is for the perpetuation of the great Patriarchal covenant culminating at Sinai with the birth of the Jewish people. When we consider, how throughout the Bible, the topic of marriage is frequently discussed, e.g., Yaakov & Rachel and Leah, Yehuda & Tamar, Amram & Yocheved, Boaz & Ruth, David & Michal and Bat Sheva - the axiological significance of marriage and family

should be abundantly clear. It is then for this reason in particular that the story of the first shidduch is repeated and why the Midrash deems this as so very appropriate.

The Chofetz Chayim offers another answer to explain the Midrash and the doubling of the story (Chovat HaShemira, ch. 2, s.v. V'HENAI). He focuses on the word **SICHA**, meaning speech, to advance and accentuate one his most noteworthy and outstanding contributions to the ethical treasure house of our people - the supreme importance of using our words properly and wisely: no **LASHON HARA**, no gossiping, no verbal abuse, making every word count, etc. The reason why such **sicha** is so very pleasing to the Almighty is because all of Torah - the Torah of the children" - is predicated upon the word, the right word, the sacred word. For, after all, what distinguishes man from the beast is our sophisticated speech.

A final, but by no means the last of the answers to explain the Midrash is suggested by the Imrei Kohen (R. Yechiel Michel Holner, 20th cent.). While the importance of mitzvot cannot be gainsaid, it is extremely valuable to read of the deeds and words of our Forefathers, for in so doing, we are inspired to emulate their attributes, and this in turn brings us closer in sanctity and love to the Almighty Himself. A similar

idea is mentioned by the Nachalat Yaakov (R. Yaakov M'Lisa, 18th-19th cent.), referencing the prophet (Yirmiyahu 9:23) who declares: "But let him... understand and know Me, for I am the Lord who exercise faithful love, justice, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, says the Lord." If one wishes to appreciate the grandeur and wonders of HaShem, let him reflect upon the imposing and courageous lives of our noble and heroic Biblical ancestors. Therefore, we are enjoined to read the Biblical narratives, for in so doing, we happily discover that, even in duplicate, the many seemingly slight textual differences in the repletion, offer elegant moral lessons, nuanced and cloaked, but nevertheless, profoundly meaningful.

Reflecting upon this last insight, it should come as no surprise to note the vastly popular biographies of our celebrated rabbinic figures, both past and present, and, even more widespread, the abundance of books, each recounting true and inspiring stories of both simple and great people. The immense popularity of these publications can perhaps be explained by the pressing need - I would say, the religious thirst - that we, as Jews, have to not only study the halachic "dos and don'ts" of our religious way of life, but to connect with the real people who lived such lives.

As Rav Soloveitchik often expressed

it: the mechanical halacha can frequently appear dry and routine. It can be compared to the concrete, steel skeleton of a building - not all that appealing, but without such a strong and durable structure, nothing can be fashioned. Even so, the scaffolding of a building does not a home make. Once the framework is complete, it's the interior design with its aesthetic furnishings and beautiful colors that creates the experience of a place to live in and enjoy. So too with our religious life. The mitzvot are fundamental and foundational, both in their observance and study, but they are just the outer platform and shell - absolutely necessary, but not nearly enough. To tap into the experiential dimension of our Judaism, to experience the passion and ecstasy of being Jewish, to feel the excitement and live in the moment of our spiritual journeys - all this and more is achieved by identifying on some level with those great religious personalities, along with the simple yet extraordinary Jews, who have each acted with moral excellence and deep faith. Hence, the plethora of biographies and stories, all of which together bring the halacha to life and make being Jewish a thrilling and profoundly meaningful existence!

The narrative sections of the Bible are about our people, each with their virtues and flaws, their brilliant achievements and their failures, their

spiritual heights and tormenting lows. And if what our Sages say is true, that MAASEI AVOT SIMAN LABANIM, that the deeds of our ancestors foreshadow our own, then they are us! We would therefore do well by reading carefully the "conversations" of our ancestors so that we can enter into their lives and accompany them on their journeys, all the while learning the timeless lessons their stories teach. And if we succeed with that exercise, we will merit filling the stately majestic halachic structure of Torah with the glorious and magnificent experience, the wondrous moral and spiritual exhilaration of being totally Jewish! 🙌