

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

I don't recall the exact year, but it was in the late eighties, and the summer just did not seem to want to end. The Jewish holiday of Sukkot had long since come and gone, and still there was no rain. The Kinneret Lake, Israel's only freshwater lake, and source of fully a third of Israel's drinking water, was dangerously low, as was the aquifer, and the crops were dry in the fields.

The Rabbinic authorities had already declared two public fast days, to no avail; sunny blue skies prevailed and still the rains would not come. Newscasters spoke of the worst drought in a century, and you could see people were getting worried.

In the west, when black rain clouds fill the sky, people get depressed and annoyed about having to wear rain gear, while outings are cancelled. But in Israel when the skies open up, you can still see people singing in the rain; Israel is a country that naturally attunes you to appreciate the finer gifts of life, which was why you could sense the tension in the air that came with the prolonged dry season.

Finally, the chief rabbinate of the State of Israel, in conjunction with the various Rabbinic leaders in the country, declared a special public fast day that would culminate in a mass community prayer at the Kotel, the Western wall.

I was studying in Yeshiva at the time, and I still remember the Roshei (heads of the) Yeshiva declaring that everyone in the Yeshiva was expected to fast, and that there would be buses to take all who wished, to the Kotel. Needless to say, we all went.

I remember arriving at the Kotel, seeing hundreds of buses disgorging thousands upon thousands of Jews from all over the country, all of whom had come out of a sense of communal responsibility; there was a powerful sense of togetherness that afternoon.

Most of all, I remember seeing an elderly gentleman, dressed in a long black coat and hat and carrying an umbrella. I laughed and commented that he obviously had a lot of faith, to assume the prayers would work so quickly. He told me that when he was a boy, he remembered hearing a story of Rav Shmuel Salant, the revered sage who had been the rabbi of Jerusalem a century earlier, showing up to a similar prayer event with an umbrella, and that in the end, it began to rain that very afternoon. Here was a chance to mimic the actions of great Rabbis; and besides he continued, if you don't believe it will work, then what was the point of it all?

I contemplated what he had said as we began to pray, and soon lost myself in the power of the experience of forty thousand Jews saying Psalms all together.

Here we were, in a modern state of Israel, all together, repeating the words our ancestors had been saying for thousands of years, and experiencing a moment described in the Talmud almost as in a dream.

Had I not been there I would probably not believe it happened, but I promise you, that very afternoon, at approximately 4 P.M., right in the middle of the prayers... it began to rain! There was a brief pause, and everyone's faces filled with smiles, and then we continued the prayer service, only this time, though we were still reciting the same psalm we had been reciting a moment earlier, the words were no longer words of beseeching and entreaty, they were words of thanksgiving and gratitude.

I cannot begin to describe the intensity of that experience: the feeling of being in the moment, completely at one and together with forty thousand people at the Western wall in Jerusalem. Afterwards, on the bus back, we couldn't stop talking about it; and someone remarked about the power of prayer, to which someone else responded: Obviously, G-d wanted to bring the rain; He was just waiting to see if we wanted it enough!

Although I looked for him, I did not see that elderly gentleman again that afternoon, but I know what I saw; and I will always believe that the rain that day came in no small part because of an old man with an umbrella.

How much of what we do, is really about what we do? Do things really happen in this world as a result of what we do, or are our actions simply an excuse for G-d to do what he wants to do anyway?

This week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*, in one of the Torah's classic stories, is a perfect example of this question.

Chayei Sarah begins with the burial of Sarah, dealing essentially with the challenges of death; a topic that seems to be all about fate and destiny. After all, we don't get to decide when, or for that matter, how we die, much as some of us would like to believe otherwise.

As soon as Sarah is buried, the very next story is the choosing of a wife for Yitzchak, almost as if the Torah is trying to remind us that even in death, life must go on.

Perhaps death is also an inescapable part of life, but as well, these two stories seem to contrast the experiences that are out of our hands, and those that seem to be within our power to change; or are they?

In short, Avraham realizes his son is of marriageable age (according to Jewish tradition he is thirty- six), and does not want his son marrying into a local Canaanite family, for whatever the reason, so he entrusts his faithful servant, Eliezer, with the task of finding a bride for Yitzchak back home in Charan, where Avraham originally comes from.

Now remember, this is the same Avraham who had no children along with his wife Sarah, until the ripe old age of one hundred, and then, only as a result of G-d's direct promise and intervention. So why is he so concerned with setting out to find a wife for his son now? Did not Hashem promise Avraham that "through *Yitzchak will you have seed*", and that the descendants of Yitzchak would one day inherit the land?

Indeed, it was this very promise, which seems to have formed the basis for Avraham's faith in the fact that he would one day have a son. Avraham was originally challenged by the fact that he had no children, and asks G-d:

"And Avraham said: G-d, what can you give me, and I am childless, and the head of my household is Eliezer of Damascus... You have not given me seed, and the head of my household will inherit me." (Bereishit 14:2)

To which G-d responds:

"... This one (Eliezer) will not inherit you; but (a child) that will come from your own loins, he will inherit you." (14:3)

Hashem has already promised Avraham that through Yitzchak the Jewish people will be born (see also 17:16,19,21), and indeed miraculously, Yitzchak is born to Avraham and Sarah, despite the fact that Sarah is already ninety years old, and long past menopause (18:11). So why does Avraham doubt the fact that Hashem will provide a suitable mate for his son Yitzchak, even, if necessary, through miraculous intervention?

And, if Avraham is already concerned with the practical aspects of finding the right wife for Yitzchak, why is he sending Eliezer? Why does he not attend to this critical task himself, with Yitzchak in tow? Should not Yitzchak have the opportunity to search himself for the person he will spend the rest of his life with?

Incredibly, the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivkah (the woman Eliezer ultimately finds and brings back home) is sealed before Yitzchak ever meets his betrothed! Indeed, when Rivkah, riding on a camel, arrives in the southern Negev, she spies a man in the field coming their way, and falls off her camel! And only when she asks the servant Eliezer who the 'fellow' is, does she discover it is Yitzchak, her husband to be!

Should not the decision regarding such an important relationship as marriage be a process of exploring common dreams, not to mention that shared feeling of love that goes beyond the definable? Is there no room for *'that loving feeling'*? How can the Torah hold up for us as a model of courtship, essentially what amounts to the purchase of a bride? (And, if we accept the Midrash, a child bride at that!)

And how exactly does Eliezer decide that this girl is the one for Yitzchak? No doubt the manner in which Eliezer chooses Rivkah as Yitzchak's bride is one of the strangest stories in the entire Torah:

Avraham first swears Eliezer to his mission, warning him not to create a situation wherein Yitzchak ends up following his wife back to *Aram Na'haraim* (in Mesopotamia); he must find a woman who will follow Eliezer back to Canaan. It would seem the issue here is not finding a woman who does not come from an idolatrous family, but rather removing the woman from the influence of such an environment.

This, however, makes the task of finding someone virtuous enough to be worthy of continuing the dream of Avraham, all the more challenging. So Eliezer comes up with a simple test:

*“And he (Eliezer) said: ‘Hashem, G-d of my master Avraham, please **happen** (**Hakreh**’ Nah’) before me this day and do kindness with my master Avraham.*

“Behold I will stand by the wellspring, where the maidens come to draw water. And it shall be that the girl to whom I say: ‘Please tilt your pitcher that I might drink’, who then responds: ‘Drink, and I will give water to your camels as well’, she will be the one You (G-d) have proven to be the one for Your servant, Yitzchak, and of her will I know that You have done kindness with my master.” (24:12-14)

Recall that Eliezer is going back into a foreign culture; very different from the world of monotheistic ethics and sensitivities Avraham has created. He is faced with no small challenge: how will he find, in the midst of the morass of pagan idolatry, the woman worthy not just of marrying the righteous Yitzchak, and not even just the woman who can live in the shadow of the tent of Avraham? This is the woman who will ultimately be the matriarch of the entire Jewish people! How will he recognize, in a short time, a woman with that kind of potential? So he has devised what, upon closer inspection, is no small challenge.

Imagine a strong man, dusty from the road, asking a young girl to “*tilt her pitcher*” so that he might drink! “Do it yourself!” would be the average response, yet he expects to find someone who will be glad to do this, and he expects to find her, it seems, at a specific place, and at a specific time! He is just going to show up at this particular well, and wait for this impressive woman or girl to appear!

And that’s not all; she will not only agree to give him the water she has drawn for herself, she will then offer, without even being asked, *to water all of his camels*! Drawing enough water, bucket by bucket, to quench the thirst of ten thirsty camels would seem to be an incredible amount of work, yet Eliezer expects to find a girl willing to do all this without even being asked! Eliezer, it seems, is not just setting up a test; he wants no less than a minor miracle!

Which brings us back to our original question: If Eliezer is essentially giving voice to the fact that finding an appropriate wife for Yitzchak amidst the heathens of Mesopotamia would be a miracle, then why send Eliezer off in the first place? If a miracle is needed, can’t Hashem just perform the miracle in Canaan? Why not ask Hashem to cause such a unique girl to get lost and show up at the well in Be’er Sheva (in Canaan)?

In fact, isn’t finding the right person *always* a miracle of sorts? So once a miracle is necessary, what difference does it make how big (and how noticeable) the miracle actually is?

Needless to say, this is not just a question concerning Eliezer and Yitzchak; this is a question we face every single day. Visit any singles event and you will readily see how many people there are today dreaming and often praying for just such a miracle. When considering how many different series of circumstances must come together for two people to meet and decide that they are meant for each other, is not every successful marriage a miracle?

And yet, you won't meet the right person in your life if you sit at home in a closet playing violin; but why not? If in reality the result is nothing short of miraculous, why do we need to be so involved in what ultimately is nothing short of a miracle?

Ask Yossi Ben Chanan whether he believes miracles are possible, and he may well go back, in his mind's eye to the long night he spent on Tel Shams in October 1973. Having been wounded already in the head, he nonetheless rejoined his men and his commander, Yanosh Ben Gal, for the drive towards Damascus. A week after the disastrous surprise Syrian attack on the Golan, the Israeli troops had repulsed the invaders and were fighting the retreating Syrian Armored Corps along the highway to Damascus, when they encountered opposition in the form of the well entrenched and fortified hilltop at Tel Shams. The Israelis, determined to send a message to Syria that would make them think twice before ever crossing the border again were set on reaching the outskirts of Damascus, which could not be accomplished as long as the Syrians controlled the road from their vantage high atop Tel Shams.

After a failed frontal assault, a closer look at the aerial recon photos revealed a weak spot in the Syrian defenses; there was a shepherd's path that might be approachable from the rear, so Yossi Ben Chanan volunteered to take his seven tanks up what amounted to an almost impossible approach in order to surprise the Syrians from the valley behind them. Although his plan succeeded, his tank was hit in the battle and he was thrown nearly twenty feet in the air from his burning tank, breaking his leg in three places. The rest of the unit (or what was left of them) pulled back, having succeeded in their mission to disable the tanks and guns on top of Tel Shams.

Ben Chanan's tank driver, Tzvika, also on foot having escaped after the tank was destroyed, risked his life to jump back into the burning tank and remove the radio, enabling them to get word to Ben Gal's unit that they were alone and wounded, behind enemy lines. In the middle of what he would later describe as the longest and loneliest night of his life, Yossi Ben Chanan described being able to hear Arab voices walking the hilltop and being sure his life would end that night.

It should have; with no troops to send, and no armor to back them up, not to mention all the other places what few forces remained were needed, there was no hope that Ben Chanan would make it through the night, let alone survive the Syrians who would obviously find him once dawn broke.

Yanosh Ben Gal was sure he was saying goodbye to his closest friend, because after all, there are no such things as miracles. At least he thought there weren't, until Yoni Netanyahu (he who would later be of Entebbe fame) arrived at their position, and walked into the radio room. A Captain in the Matkal recon unit, the most elite unit in the Israeli army, he immediately volunteered to get Yossi and his soldier out.

Anyone watching this would have seen all the arched eyebrows and realized this was not just an impossible mission, it was a suicidal one. But someone forgot to tell that to Yoni, who had been at Yossi's only a few months earlier.

With no real backup, and no vehicles capable of getting them up there, they came up the same rear approach to Tel Shams ... on foot! When they finally found Ben Chanan with dawn about to break, they realized they would never be able to get him down off the hill;

his legs were too badly broken, and first light was approaching. Again, they were all doomed, but, for whatever the reason, G-d seemed to have different plans. So Ben Gal found, in the middle of the battlefield... a helicopter! Commandeering it himself, they flew in, picked Yossi and his soldier out from the heart of the enemy position, and brought them back to base. (Yoni and his men, for whom there was no room in the small helicopter, simply turned and walked back down the mountain!)

So if Yossi Ben Chanan was supposed to survive, why did Hashem need Netanyahu's commandos to head up the hill? Why not just send the helicopter in to begin with?

What is this balance between the seemingly natural and the observably miraculous, that always lies intertwined at the heart of life's experiences and challenges?

Indeed, why did Eliezer ask G-d for such a complicated verification of what he was looking for? Why not simply say that the girl who approaches him and offers him water will be the one for Yitzchak?

The Talmud suggests that Eliezer's request was not entirely correct:

*“Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rav Yonatan: Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, even though he asked an unreasonable request, was responded to reasonably: (He said :) **‘The girl to whom I say: ‘Please tilt your pitcher....’**”, which could have been any girl, even ... a mentally imbalanced girl, yet Rivkah opportuned to come to him.”*
(Tractate Ta'anit 4a)

In other words, explains **Rav Baruch Ha'Levi Epstein** in his *Torah Temimah*:

“Ein Somchin Al Ha'Nes”, “We are not supposed to rely on miracles”.

And when we pray for something we are actually meant to specify what it is we need (and not just assume Hashem will figure it out and provide the right thing).

Yet, if one is not supposed to expect the miraculous, then why is Eliezer asking for such a farfetched sign, to determine the correct bride for Yitzchak?

This is complicated even further by the fact that there seems to be a specific injunction in the Torah against just such a weighted request, known as **Nichush**, or Divination.

The Torah tells us one is not supposed to declare in advance that if certain events transpire they are signs meant to imply specific forms of behavior. In other words, if I declare, that if a black bird lands on my balcony in the next five minutes, I will take it as a sign that I am meant to pursue a particular business deal, even if a black bird does indeed land on my balcony two minutes later, I have transgressed the prohibition of *“Lo' Te'Nachshu' ”* (*“Thou shall not Divine”*). We are meant to trust in G-d, and not give our lives over to the random forces of nature. So why wasn't Eliezer's declared 'test' not a form of *Nichush* (Divination)?

In fact, the Talmud uses this very story of Eliezer finding Rivkah as the prime example of what *Nichush* really is! :

“Rav said, any case of **Nichush** which is not like the case of Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, is not **Nichush**.” (Chullin 95b)

In other words, any divination wherein a person does not completely rely on a given occurrence, as opposed to what Eliezer did here (declaring he would only pursue a girl as a potential bride if she behaved exactly as he described in advance...) is not forbidden (as a form of idolatry). Which leaves us wondering why Eliezer was not in fact guilty of *Nichush* (Divination)? Or was he? Was Rivkah, the bride of Yitzchak and the matriarch of the Jewish people, chosen by way of witchcraft?

The *Torah Temimah* suggests an explanation that may help us to unlock this entire puzzle: The fundamental difference between Divination, and what Eliezer did, was in the simple inclusion of one additional ‘detail’: the name of G-d.

Nichush is when a person seeks a particular occurrence or event on which he can rely; it refers to a person’s declaration that such an occurrence can be used to steer one’s path in life. The seemingly random occurrences in the world are then declared to be the basis for our actions in this world, and indeed they represent the sum total of all that is real in this world.

That is why Divination is so closely associated with pagan idolatry, relying as it does on the pattern of events and activity in the natural order of the world. Paganism is in fact the worship of nature, and is centered on the worship of all things in nature: the power and the beauty, and even the stream of activity so much a part of nature and the natural order.

Ultimately, then, *Nichush*, or divination, is the suggestion that the natural order is the source of reality in this world.

Eliezer, however, was not declaring such actions to be the **source** of reality; he was simply requesting of (praying to) the true source of all reality, Hashem, those actions as a demonstration that he was on the right path. This, then, is not divination, but in fact a form of affirmation that it is really G-d that runs the world.

If it is merely actions that determine reality, then the source of such activity is unimportant. Judaism suggests, however, that the challenge is to recognize that all the events that unfold in this world are ultimately steered by the source of all reality, towards a common goal.

Indeed, suggests the *Torah Temimah*, perhaps the word *Nichush* is also related to the root *Kachash*, which means denial, because assuming the events that we see to be the sum total of all reality, is to deny the higher reality (G-d) from whence they stem.

This brings us back full circle to the story of Eliezer.

Ultimately, Eliezer (and through him Avraham, and for that matter Yitzchak as well) could not sit at home and wait for the proper bride to show up on their doorstep. If we are not partnered somehow with G-d in making the world a better place, then there is no purpose to our being here. The question, however, is how much we are willing to stand up and do our share in changing the world, and *impacting* reality.

However, in our pursuit of such a partnership with G-d we are forced to make challenging decisions and choices, which leaves us with a dilemma: how do we know the choices we have made are indeed correct?

If G-d always tells us what choices to make, then they are no longer our choices, and we are not serving any purpose in this world, and certainly we are not living up to our potential as partners with G-d.

Yet, when we are faced with such difficult decisions, how are we to know that we are indeed on the right path, pursuing the correct course of action? How can we be sure we are following the path G-d created for us?

It is in this respect, once we have struggled with such choices, that we have the right to ask G-d's help. In effect, we want to be Hashem's partners, and we want Hashem to help us be the best partners we can be.

To quote the **Vilna Gaon** (in his *Even Sheleimah*), to assume G-d's help, and believe with perfect faith that G-d will respond to our prayers, if we have done nothing to help make those prayers come true, is not faith; it is the height of arrogance.

Who says we are worthy of G-d helping us? What have we really done, in fact, to deserve or expect such help? Only once we have done everything in our power (including struggling with all the possibilities inherent in such difficult decisions) do we then have the right, and perhaps even the responsibility, to ask Hashem's help. At this point, a person has the right to say: 'I have done everything I possibly can; now I need Your help.'

In fact, this is the essence of what true partnership is all about: the willingness to step up and do everything you can to ensure success, while at the same time recognizing, and even appreciating, that you cannot do it alone.

This then, is perhaps why Avraham feels, now Sarah is gone, that he has to do everything in his power to live up to the partnership G-d has entrusted him with. Yet, at the same time, the woman who will be a worthy partner for the likes of a Yitzchak, brought up in the tent of Avraham, an environment of extreme ethics and loving kindness, will need character traits that are far above average.

To live up to the responsibility of entering the family of the same Avraham who is willing to pray for the wicked people of *Sodom*; the man who runs to greet guests in the desert heat immediately after his circumcision, and whose shepherds refuse to allow their flocks to graze on Canaanite land, idolaters though they be, (for fear of taking that which is not theirs,) is no simple task. Such a woman would have to be extraordinary; and so Eliezer realizes that he can only go so far; ultimately it will be up to G-d to provide such a unique person.

And maybe this is the essence of what finding the right people and projects in our life is all about.

Indeed, Yitzchak has little or nothing to do with meeting and marrying his wife. Eliezer is sent to find an appropriate mate for the future father of the Jewish people. He finds her,

sees that she ‘fits the profile’ and brings her home, whereupon Rivkah and Yitzchak see each other, and get married! In fact, the Torah tells us that Yitzchak does not even love Rivkah until after they are married!

“And the servant (Eliezer) told to Yitzchak all the things he had done, and Yitzchak brought her (Rivkah) into the tent of Sarah his mother, and he took (read: married) Rivkah, and she became unto him a wife, and he loved her....” (24:66-67)

How could Yitzchak only love Rivkah *after* they were married? Isn’t love a prerequisite for a successful marriage? In truth, what the Torah is perhaps suggesting here is an entirely different understanding of what relationships are all about. What is love, and for that matter what is marriage?

We live in a society that views relationship as based first and foremost on some ‘loving feeling’; on the here and now; if I am not enjoying this moment with you, then why should I pursue a relationship into the future? Which is why Hollywood portrays people so often meeting and almost immediately ‘making love’ without even knowing each other’s names.

But that is not what love is all about. We make the mistake in thinking that love is something you find, hence you can ‘*lose that loving feeling*’. But love isn’t a noun; it’s a verb, and it isn’t something you find, it’s something you build.

In fact, love is all about giving (hence the relationship between the Aramaic *Hav*, giving, and the Hebrew *Ahava*, love.), as opposed to lust, which is all about taking. The more I give to something, the more I love it. This is why the assumption that you can love someone on first sight is mistaken. The feeling we sometimes have in such moments is not true love; it is rather the excitement at the potential for love. But that potential takes a lot of work if it is ever to become real.

Hence Yitzchak can marry Rivkah, once Eliezer has ascertained that the awesome potential for love is there. But that love will only come later, once they are both willing to put in the work.

In fact, it is this work that is the essence of all loving relationships. We have made love and marriage so complicated, with so much scrutiny and analysis, that it is a wonder anyone gets married!

What indeed do two people need to be sure of before getting married? It’s not as complicated as one might think, and essentially boils down to three things:

1. They need to trust and respect each other.
2. They need to share common goals and dreams.
- And 3. They need to be willing to put in the long hard years of work that allow for such trust and respect to grow, and such dreams to be achieved, together.

Most people think once they have found the right person, the hard part is done; but the marriage of Yitzchak suggests that the work has just begun.

And of course, this is the secret of every relationship, including our relationship with G-d. Do we trust G-d? Do we respect G-d? Do we share the same goals as G-d? And do we want a relationship with Him? Are we prepared to put in the work? Do we love Hashem? Do we believe Hashem (G-d) loves us?

Perhaps, if we are willing to make the effort, in this as in all relationships, Hashem will more than meet us half-way. And what an amazing world that would be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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