

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

Do You REALLY Believe That?!

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

It was time for Isaac to marry. Abraham sent his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac. Eliezer set off for Abraham's homeland, in search of an appropriate wife from Abraham's family. He prayed to G-d for a sign from Heaven. G-d granted his wish.

He saw a young lady; he had no idea who she was. Her name was Rebecca. First he saw the water from the well rise to meet her. Then he asked Rebecca for a drink of water. She complied, and also gave water to his camels. This exact response was the very sign that Eliezer had requested from G-d. (This part of the story is discussed in greater detail in a previous message, "Walk a Mile for a Camel".) Eliezer now knew what he had to do.

When the camels finished drinking, he (gave her) a gold ring ... and two gold bracelets ... (Genesis, 24:22-24)

Eliezer was overjoyed; Bethuel was Isaac's first cousin!! (On both sides — Bethuel's father Nachar was Abraham's brother, and his mother Milkah was Sarah's sister.) G-d had answered his prayers!

Eliezer had found a fitting and willing wife for Isaac. Now all that remained was for him to convince her family.

Rebecca's brother saw his sister's new jewelry and invited the stranger into their home. Eliezer got down to business. He told the family about his master's wealth and prominence. He explained how G-d had blessed Abraham with a son in his old age. Then he told them of his assignment to find a wife and of his prayer for Divine assistance. He told them that he had asked G-d for a miracle; he had requested that G-d show him a girl who would respond to his request for a drink by offering to water his camels. He described in detail how Rebecca had been the answer to his prayers. He had asked her for water and she had given water to his camels.

"I asked her, 'whose daughter are you?' She responded, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel...' ... I gave her the ring ... and the bracelets ... I bowed to G-d ... and blessed G-d for sending me ... to find my master's niece for his son!" (verses 47-48)

They were impressed. *"This has come from G-d ... Let her be a wife for your master's son, as G-d has spoken."* (verses 50-51)

What a beautiful story of faith and miracles! What a marvelous episode of Divine intervention and human acceptance of G-d's will ... What a LIE!!

Did you see what happened? Did you see what Eliezer did? He lied to them! He misled them! What he told them is NOT the way it happened!

Let's look again at what Eliezer told Rebecca's family: *"I asked her, 'whose daughter are you?' She responded, 'I am the daughter of Bethuel...' ... I gave her the ring... and the bracelets..."*

Now let's look at the events as they actually transpired: *When the camels finished drinking, he (gave her) a gold ring ... and two gold bracelets ... "Whose daughter are you?" he asked.*

Eliezer changed the order of the story! He gave her the gifts first; then he asked whose daughter she was. When telling the story to Rebecca's family, he claimed to have asked who she was before giving her the gifts. Why did he do that?

Rashi explains that Eliezer had to deal with Rebecca's family very carefully. He felt that they would think he had been rash and overly impulsive by giving her the gifts before knowing for sure that she was a relative. They would not understand how he could have been so irresponsible. They would not have understood such faith.

Rashi's explanation is difficult. These were not people without faith; they were obviously NOT non-believers: *"This has come from G-d!... Let her be a wife for your master's son, as G-d has spoken."* They recognized that it was a miracle. They acknowledged that G-d had shown the way. Why should they object to Eliezer's gift to Rebecca before confirming her identity?

The answer, I believe, is that there is faith and there is faith. We all believe in G-d. We accept the fact that He created the world and that He runs the world. But some of us find it easier than others to see His involvement in EVERY aspect of life. Eliezer discerned that while they could accept the events as he described them, they would not be able to deal with the events as they had actually occurred. Bethuel and his family were not atheists. But they weren't exactly rabbis and rebbetzins either!

Eliezer was a man who lived in Abraham's home. Angels and miracles and prophecy were normal events where Eliezer lived. It didn't take much to convince Eliezer that G-d was guiding him in his quest. Bethuel et al could accept that G-d was directing the events, but they needed more convincing than Eliezer did. They would have felt that giving the gifts without identifying Rebecca's family would have been a reckless leap of faith.

(Just for the record, I should point out that there are commentaries who discuss the question of what RIGHT Eliezer had to stretch the truth. A lie is a lie! That question, although it is a valid one, is not the point of this week's message.

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been focused on the so-called "Torah Codes." Computer studies have allegedly proved, by the mathematical arrangements of words and letters in the Torah, that it could only have been written by G-d. The claim is that the Torah accurately predicted many earth-shattering events. Some people maintain that this proves the divinity of the Torah. I have met people who were so impressed by this phenomenon that they immediately became observant. Others claim that it's all done by manipulation. Some of the detractors are religious themselves.

(I personally am unimpressed. I don't know enough about the system to pass judgment at all. But I look at it this way. If the "Codes" are a farce, I'll still believe in the Torah. If the "Codes" are for real, so what? I already believe in the Torah! Would I be impressed if DNA testing proved that I am the father of my children?! I know that already!! -- What would impress me, a New England boy, would be if the "Codes" could predict if the Red Sox will ever win another Series!!! :-)) Some people find it easier to be inspired than others. Yeshiva Aish Hatorah runs a wonderful educational program called Discovery Seminars. Many complex theological and philosophical questions are addressed and raised. Some people walk out of a Discovery Seminar motivated and energized. Some people walk out of a Discovery Seminar and kosher their homes and become Sabbath observers. Others walk out of a Discovery Seminar and say, "How nice."

Those who are open to being inspired will find things to inspire them. Those who are not interested in being inspired will see well water rise to meet Rebecca and write it off as "high tide."

Faith doesn't happen by itself; it is a learned trait. Jewish life is a journey. As we grow in Torah, we grow in faith. The more exposure we have to Torah Judaism, the more easily we learn to accept the difficulties. No, it's not that we become complacent and "brainwashed." Rather, it is because we see the whole picture

There is a story told about a group of university students in Berlin who were very skeptical about several Torah laws and philosophies. These intellectuals felt that the Torah was replete with inconsistencies that could not be reconciled. They decided to pool their resources and pay for one of them, named Ludwig, to travel to the great yeshiva of Volozhin. There he would confront the scholars of the yeshiva with their challenges.

Ludwig bade his colleagues farewell and set off for Volozhin. Months went by, and they heard very little from their fellow agnostic. They received an occasional letter, wishing them well, but no real information about his mission.

Finally, after two years, Ludwig returned for a visit. His friends eagerly awaited the opportunity to discover what he had accomplished. They went to his home one morning, but he wasn't home. To their utter shock, he was in Shul!! When he came home, with hat, Tzitzis, and "the whole nine yards," they were concerned, but they wrote it off as part of his efforts to "infiltrate" the yeshiva.

They sat down with him to receive a full report. "Volozhin is wonderful!" he said. "First of all, "we have Morning Services at 7 a.m. Then we study Halacha (Jewish Law) for about a half-hour before breakfast. After breakfast, we prepare for the "Gemorah Shiur." (Lecture in Talmud) After the lecture we have lunch. After lunch, we have the Afternoon Service and study Jewish Ethics followed by more Talmud, followed by supper and more Talmud and the Evening Service. The Rosh Yeshiva (dean) gives the most uplifting lectures and **TorahTalks** I've ever heard!"

His friends were incredulous. They had sent him away as a cynic; he had returned as a "Yeshiva Bochur." What had happened? Where did they fail? What had gone wrong?

"Ludwig!" they cried ... "Leibel," he corrected them. "What has happened to you? Where is the free-thinking, non-believing, non-observant Ludwig we sent off to Volozhin two years ago? What has happened to you?!"

"Torah has happened to me," he said. "I have had the privilege to see what a Torah lifestyle really is. I see G-d in all around me, and I want to live my life the way He wants me to."

"But what about our questions," they asked. "What about all the discrepancies and disproofs we found? Did you get answers to those questions?"

"Not all of them," he responded. "But you know what? Now that I see the whole picture, those questions don't bother me any more."

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz