

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

Ham's not Kosher!!

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Eliezer had a tough assignment.

Sarah was dead. Abraham was a widower with a 37-year-old unmarried son. The future of Abraham's legacy was dependent upon Isaac marrying and raising the next generation of G-d-fearing "Jews." It was imperative that Isaac marry a woman who shared his values. In narrowing the field of applicants, Abraham engaged in a bit of "racial profiling." Canaanites need not apply.

Abraham was a Semite, a descendant of Shem, the son of Noah. Noah had blessed Shem and his progeny. Noah cursed the Canaanites, and condemned them to be slaves.

"Do not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites..." (Genesis, 24:3)

Abraham made Eliezer swear that he would not take a local girl as a wife for Isaac. Instead, he was to travel to Abraham's birthplace to find an appropriate bride for Isaac.

This restriction affected Eliezer personally. This dedicated servant of Abraham had a daughter. He would have loved to have made a "Shidduch" between his daughter and his beloved master's son. However, it was not to be. Eliezer, you see, was a Canaanite. The Canaanites had been cursed. Isaac was blessed. It was not a good match. (Midrash Rabbah, quoted by Rashi)

Who was this Eliezer, whom Abraham entrusted with the sacred task of finding our righteous mother Rebecca as a wife for Isaac?

Abraham referred to him as *"...the caretaker of my house, Eliezer of Damascus."* (Ibid, 15:2)

The term Damascus, according to the Talmud (Yoma, 28b), is a combination of two words—*"Doleh uMashkeh* - He would draw water and give to drink – from his master's Torah to others." One of my teachers, quoting one of his teachers, said that Eliezer was the "Rosh Yeshiva, the dean, of Abraham's Yeshiva."

Abraham's goal in life was to teach the world to be G-dly. Eliezer was Abraham's right-hand man, and Abraham trusted him implicitly. He helped Abraham teach the world. He understood the Abrahamic mission. He would not let his master down.

Eliezer went to Abraham's birthplace, and found a nice Semitic girl, Rebecca. She was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother. (She was also Sarah's first cousin, once removed.) She was everything that Abraham was looking for in a wife for Isaac. Abraham's legacy was secure. (See "Walk a Mile for a Camel" and "Do You REALLY Believe That?!")

"Maasei avos siman l'banim — the actions of parents are a sign for their children." When we do good things, we elevate ourselves spiritually, and pass on positive influences to our children. As well, when people act negatively, that too gets passed on.

Noah had too much to drink. His grandson Canaan saw that that he was drunk and naked in his tent. Canaan reported it to his father Ham. Ham entered the tent and "...saw his father's nakedness." (Ibid, 9:22) Ham did more than look. He molested his own father! (Sanhedrin, 70a)

When Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth heard that their father had been humiliated, they brought a blanket into the tent to cover him. They entered the tent walking backwards, so that they wouldn't see him in his compromised state.

Noah woke up and realized what had happened. He was furious with his son Ham and his grandson Canaan, who had been the instigator:

"Cursed is Canaan! ...Blessed is the G-d of Shem..." (Ibid, verses 25-26) (...Who will someday give the Land of Canaan to the descendants of Shem — Rashi)

"Maasei avos siman l'banim — the actions of parents are a sign for their children." Ham and his son Canaan had perpetrated a horrific deed. This action would taint their offspring forever.

Eliezer, according to some commentaries, was not just a Canaanite; he was Canaan's son. Others suggest that he may have been Canaan himself, the son of Ham! (See the Saperstein Edition of Rashi, page 258, note 1)

Eliezer was forced to bear the curse brought on by the disgraceful deeds of his forebear(s). He carried Noah's Canaanite curse; it was in his blood. His daughter was not qualified to marry Isaac, who carried the Semitic blessings of Noah.

Yet, Eliezer was the devoted servant of Abraham. He raised himself above his cursed status, and performed his assigned task with integrity and self-sacrifice.

Rabbi Elazar Shach once attended a Bris at Yeshiva Aish Hatorah in Jerusalem. Aish Hatorah is a yeshiva for “Baalei Teshuvah” — “returnees” — young men with non-religious backgrounds who have decided to become religious. Rabbi Shach was overwhelmed by their advanced level of Torah scholarship; he was amazed that they had accomplished so much in so little time.

Rabbi Shach spoke at the Bris. He pointed out how Hitler had changed the world. One evil man, obsessed with an evil idea, organized a nation and a military that brought unimaginable destruction to the world. One man with a mission turned the whole world upside-down.

Our Sages tell us that whatever applies to the negative applies all the more so to the positive. If one evil man can accomplish so much, it is all the more so for a good man. “You Yeshiva students,” said Rabbi Shach, “who have worked so hard to change yourselves, can change the world!”

Ham and Canaan were evil men. They re-introduced vile corruption into the world after the Flood. The Canaanite Nation carried this evil in their genes. Eliezer was the ultimate “Baal Teshuvah — returnee.” With his devotion to Abraham, he managed to overcome much of the negative influences of his past.

We are Semites. We are the children of Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Let us not fool ourselves; we too have the ability to emulate the Canaanites. Many of the champions of causes that are an anathema to Torah values come from our own camp.

But there is, within us, the ability to rise to levels of scholarship, righteousness, and holiness. It’s in our genes.

We can change the world. We can bring honesty and integrity to the world. We can bring holiness to the world. We can bring Torah to the world. We can bring the Messiah to the world.

Let’s do it!

Have a great Shabbos.

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