Three Contemporary Lessons from Chayei Sarah

Chayei Sarah is actually not about Sarah, but about Rivka. The message is clear: there is no “Chayei Sarah” without the continuity, without the “Chayei Rivka.” Avraham and Sarah will be a passing episode if there is no one to continue what they began.

Here are three special lessons from our first Abba and Ima that we can continue to apply today:

Facing Up to Assimilation

This may not be politically correct, but this is how the story of the post-Avraham and Sarah generation begins. First and foremost, Avraham demands that his children do not marry the children of another people. He is establishing something new here, and despite his desire for friendship and cooperation with the peoples of the region, there are red lines, and this is what he says to Eliezer when he sends him on his mission to find a wife for Yitzchak:

“And I will make you swear by the L-rd, the G-d of heaven and the G-d of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Yitzchak.’ And the servant said to him, ‘What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?’ Avraham answered him, ‘On no account must you take my son back there! The L-rd, the G-d of heaven, who took me from my father’s house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’ – He will send His angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son from there. And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do not take my son back there.’”

On this point, there are no compromises. And nothing has changed since Avraham’s times. If anything, the situation is much worse. In my opinion, we are dealing too much with other issues and neglecting this issue, which should be the issue on the Jewish people’s agenda. In the United States, the sad reality for some time has been more than 60% intermarriage. We have seen this up close, and it is our responsibility to continue Avraham Avinu’s sacred mission.
Preserving Our Culture

Avraham and Sarah are establishing a new culture in the world: "Then the servant took 10 of his master’s camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor."

Rashi tells us that “his master’s camels” were distinguished from other camels by being muzzled so they should not graze in other peoples’ fields.

This detail is mentioned again when the servant arrives at Rivka’s house: “So the man entered the house, and the camels were ungirded [he removed their muzzles - Rashi]. The camels were given straw and feed, and water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men with him."

You may remember we have already encountered this very detail in Parashat Lech Lecha, when Avraham enters the stage of history. It is one of the first things we hear about him. Lot’s shepherds were wicked and grazed their animals in other fields, and because of this, Avraham’s shepherds rebuked them for this act of robbery (Rashi).

Lot chose to go to Sodom, and Avraham parted from him to build a society with a different culture. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe writes: This is Avraham Avinu’s innovation. Truth is not some abstract ideal, in thought only. Truth is expressed in the smallest deeds of man. Avraham Avinu renewed leadership in the world, how camels should walk, and when anyone saw a camel with his mouth muzzled, they said: This camel belongs to Avraham Avinu.

When building a Jewish home, these are its foundations. Put a muzzle over the mouth of your camel. And in today’s terms, that can refer to one’s car, one’s home, one’s cell phone. We have been building an alternative culture here for 4,000 years.

This is why it is clear to Eliezer that the first test of any intended bride for Yitzchak - who will continue the culture of Avraham and Sarah - is a test of kindness. This is the only way she will fit into this special family: “Let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ – let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Yitzchak. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.”

Today too, young men and women look for many character traits in their prospective dates. Eliezer reminds us the first attribute we should be looking for in a descendant of Avraham and Sarah – chesed. Generosity. Thinking of others. Good midot.

Connecting Heaven and Earth

None of this works without emunah and tefillah. Eliezer, Avraham’s servant, sets out and knows what he must do first: “And he said, ‘O L-rd, G-d of my master Avraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Avraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your pitcher that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ – let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Yitzchak. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.’”

Rabbi Shabtai Sabato writes that Rivka left her house even before Eliezer began to pray! Even before he arranged his prayer, reality was moving in the way he wanted, so to speak.

Eliezer is not the only one to pray in this episode of course. Yitzchak, the chatan, also prayed. When Eliezer and Rivka and the whole caravan arrive, Yitzchak has just established tefillat Mincha and Rivka is impressed as she sees a person praying for the first time.

For sure we should be acting in a practical way, but let us pray to G-d before every step we take.

In Conclusion

We have discussed three elements that appear in Chayei Sarah – vehement opposition to assimilation and souls being detached from the Jewish people, a culture counterintuitive to the accepted world culture, a world rooted in self-sacrifice, chesed and generosity, and of course prayer, constantly linking our actions to G-d. May we continue in this path and, as her sons and daughters, be a worthy continuation of Chayei Sarah.

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