In Parashat Chayei Sarah, Avraham sends his servant to his ‘home-town’ of Charan in search of a wife for his son Yitzchak. To guarantee that Eliezer will faithfully fulfill that mission, Avraham makes his servant take an oath in the Name of: “Hashem, the G-d of the Heavens, and the G-d of the Earth.”

However, two verses later, when Avraham must allay Eliezer’s fear that the wife he finds may prefer to stay in Charan, he promises his servant that: “Hashem, the G-d of the Heavens, who had taken him [Avraham] from his homeland...” will send an ‘angel’ to assist him.

The classical commentators are troubled by two problems. First of all, Avraham’s description of G-d as “Hashem, the G-d of the Heavens and the G-d of the Earth” seems to imply there may be multiple gods, i.e. one of the heavens and one of the earth! Why couldn’t Avraham simply have stated “Hashem, the G-d of ‘heaven and earth’”?

Secondly, why does Avraham ‘shorten’ his second description of G-d to simply “the G-d of the Heavens,” without mentioning ‘the earth’ at all?

Heavens ‘and’ Earth

Radak offers a philosophical explanation, claiming that Avraham is worried that his servant – even though he believes in ‘the G-d of the heavens’ – may not believe G-d’s Providence extends over mundane matters ‘down on earth’ as well. Therefore, Avraham emphasizes this point in his opening statement, that He is not only the G-d overseeing what happens in the heavens, but He also oversees what happens on earth. However, when Avraham later explains to Eliezer how G-d had earlier spoken to him, it is sufficient for Avraham to mention only ‘the G-d of the Heavens.’

SeferoNo explains that Avraham must impress upon his servant the severity of this oath. To assure his servant will keep it, he reminds him that G-d controls not only the matters of the ‘earth’ – and hence his fate in ‘this world’ – but also the matters of ‘heaven,’ which implies his fate in the world to come. By this statement, Avraham warns his servant that should he break this oath, he could expect not only punishment in this world but also in the world to come!

Ibn Ezra relates to the fact that Avraham is sending his servant on a mission to find a wife. Even though finding a spouse may appear to Eliezer as a mundane event taking place on ‘earth,’ Avraham must convince Eliezer that this marriage has been decided upon in the ‘heavens.’

Finally, Ramban offers a very ‘Zionistic’ explanation. Unlike the other commentators who understand aretz as referring to the ‘earth,’ i.e. to events taking place down here on earth, Ramban understands aretz as referring to the Land of Israel. Therefore, because his servant is now leaving Eretz Yisrael, Avraham adds specifically the phrase Elokei haAretz to the standard phrase of Elokei haShamayim.

One might also suggest that by using these two phrases to describe G-d, Avraham may be alluding to the opening line of Sefer Bereishit, and hence to a thematic connection between the purpose of Creation and G-d’s involvement in the process of Am Yisrael becoming a Nation to serve Him.

Elokei HaShamayim

Rashi differentiates between Man’s perception of G-d before Avraham was chosen and Man’s perception of G-d now. Back when G-d first commanded Avraham to leave his homeland, no one on earth had yet recognized G-d. Hence His Kingdom was only in Heaven, as reflected in 24:7. But now, when Avraham sends Eliezer on his mission (see 24:3), he had already begun to proclaim G-d’s Name to the public, hence Hashem can now be referred to as both Elokei haShamayim and Elokei haAretz.

Just as our forefathers referred to G-d in different ways based on the context of their relationship with Him, we also refer to G-d in many different ways in the 19 blessings of the daily Amidah – reflecting His various attributes in our relationship with Him. Next time you daven, take note!