

TIMELESS TORAH

CHAYEI SARAH: Balancing Completion With Continuity

The Ship of Theseus

The philosophical problem of the ‘Ship of Theseus’, first described by the Greek philosopher Plutarch (1st century CE), examines the problem of a ship whose component parts are gradually replaced until none of the original pieces remain. Can this ship, wondered Plutarch, be considered the original vessel, or has it transformed into something else entirely? In many ways, Parshat Chayei Sarah mirrors this paradox and offers a vital perspective on it.

While the parshah begins and ends with the deaths of both Sarah and Avraham – an indication of finality – the main theme of the parshah is actually the continuity of their legacy. Indeed, the Midrash, commenting on the name of the parshah, ‘Chayei Sarah – the Life of Sarah’, teaches that Sarah’s soul was informed of its allotted time before it descended to this world. Sarah lived her life knowing that her time was limited and that her eventual death would be a culmination of her achievements. Ultimately, the totality of her life was defined by the principles she had perfected during her time on Earth.

This perspective on the parshah allows us to suggest an answer to a central problem in these passages. The Sages teach (see Rashi 23:2) that Sarah’s death occurred directly after, and was indeed a direct result of, the Akeidah. When she heard that her son had been brought as a sacrifice, the shock killed her before she even had time to hear that Yitzchak had remained alive. Avraham, then, would have returned immediately to attend to organise her burial, but puzzlingly, Yitzchak is absent from this whole episode. Rabbeinu Bachya (d.1340) suggests that Sarah’s death might have been hidden from him out of concern that

he would have found the grief unbearable, knowing that the Akeidah itself was the cause. Following our theme, however, we can add that at this juncture, after the loss of such a pivotal personality, the absence of Yitzchak from the story is meant to highlight the fact that he had to remain focused on building the future. The void left by the passing of Sarah had to be filled, not ruminated upon, so that her values could continue. Like the Ship of Theseus, Yitzchak was to provide the new timbers for the vessel built by his parents.

Blessing of Giving

When looking for a suitable marriage partner for Yitzchak, Avraham was so deeply concerned that Yitzchak should not end up marrying a Canaanite woman that he sent his servant, Eliezer, to far-off Aram Naharayim, hoping to find a wife for him there. Eliezer, wanting to be sure of the precise details of his mission, asked Avraham what he should do if no suitable marriage partner would be willing to come back with him to Eretz Canaan: *‘U’lai lo toveh ha’ishah lalech-et* – perhaps the woman will not desire to go’. Rashi comments on the unusual spelling of the word *u’lai*, written not אולי but אלי, missing the letter vav. As such, the word could be read as *eilai* (to me), instead of *u’lai* (perhaps). Eliezer was secretly hopeful that he would be unsuccessful in his mission and that his own daughter would merit to marry Yitzchak. Avraham responded that this was not an option: Eliezer was a descendant of Canaan, who had been cursed by Noach, and would never be a suitable match for Yitzchak, who had been blessed.

Interestingly, though, this missing vav is found only when Eliezer recounts the story to Lavan (24:39), but when the conversation



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

actually took place (24:5), the word is spelled correctly. Rav Shimon Schwab (d.1995) suggests that this is because Eliezer's query was actually justified; it was appropriate for him to inquire what to do if he would not find an ideal match for Yitzchak, and his own vested interest was thus not apparent at that point. When he repeated the conversation to Lavan, however, it was already abundantly clear that Rivkah was the one destined to marry Yitzchak, and by omitting the *vav*, the Torah is telling us that Eliezer nevertheless was giving Lavan an opening to refuse the match. Here, Eliezer's personal bias, however subtly nuanced, was revealed.

This, explains Rav Schwab, was the manifestation of the unsuitability of a marriage union between Eliezer's family and Yitzchak. Despite all of Eliezer's achievements in Avraham's household, the characteristic of a blessed person is that they are not only generous and trustworthy, but truly selfless, acting only for the objective good.

With this in mind, Rivkah, who personified unstinting giving, was the most suitable marriage partner for Yitzchak, a point that was highlighted by Lavan himself. When he and the rest of his family blessed Rivkah before she left, they said to her, 'Our sister, may you be to thousands of myriads (24:60)'. This is a curious blessing: what does it mean to be 'to thousands of myriads'? The Kli Yakar (d.1619) explains that they were not blessing Rivkah that she should merit innumerable descendants, but that she should continue in her ways of generosity, **giving to** innumerable people. In this way, Rivkah's family was telling her, she would be emulating the house of Avraham, who had built his life around giving and teaching others with remarkable self-sacrifice.

A Seaworthy Tent

In 1656, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes developed a new facet to the Ship of Theseus paradox. If the custodians of the ship were to gather the discarded material from the old vessel and use it to build a new ship, which would now be considered the original ship? This is a fundamental question of identity: is the original form, preserved in the renovated ship, the essence, or is it the matter that now composes a new structure that is essential?

Through our discussion of continuity in this parshah, we find this question echoing in the background. The verse states that 'Yitzchak brought her [Rivkah] into his mother's tent, and he was comforted after his mother' (24:67). The Sages teach that there were three miracles to which Sarah was accustomed – a light that continued burning throughout the week, a blessing in the dough that she prepared and the Divine Presence on top of her tent. Although they had stopped when Sarah died, all of these blessings renewed themselves with Rivkah. Here, we again find underscored the message of continuity in the second generation of the Avot. Yitzchak had been absent during the episode of his mother's death, returning only to marry Rivkah and bring her into Sarah's tent. Was this the actual tent in which Sarah lived? Possibly, the significance of the identity of the 'tent' is really in the values that Rivkah espoused, as manifested by the three blessings that found their place within it. Although the tent had entirely new inhabitants, through maintaining the values of the first generation in their original form, the 'ship' remained the same.

Next Week - TOLEDOT: The Quest for Truth