BS”D

Parshas Chayei Sara

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Who Was Qualified to Be Yitzchok’s Wife?

In this week’s Parsha, Avraham entrusts his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchok.

Avraham makes Eliezer swear not to take a wife from among the Canaanites. He must seek a wife from among Avraham’s family in Charan.

And if the young woman refuses to leave her homeland, shall I bring your son to her, Eliezer asks.

Avraham assures him that Hashem will send His angel to help him succeed. However, if the woman refuses, you are free from this oath, Avraham tells Eliezer.

Rashi understands that to mean that Eliezer may take a wife for Yitzchok from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, Avraham’s Canaanite friends and allies.

The Ramban strongly objects to Rashi’s interpretation. How could Avraham possibly allow his son to marry a Canaanite? The absolvement of the oath means that it is no longer Eliezer’s task to find a wife for Yitzchok. Yitzchok will surely not marry a Canaanite and will find a wife from amongst Yishmael’s and Lot’s descendants or from some other nation.

Another possibility, says the Ramban, is that Avraham is absolving Eliezer only from part of the oath. He no longer is obligated to bring back a wife from Charan. But the other part of the oath—not to take a Canaanite wife for Yitzchok—is still fully in force. This is why later, when Eliezer is proposing the match to Rivkah’s family, he says, if you don’t agree to send Rivkah, I’ll turn to the right or to the left. That means he still has to find Yitzchok a wife, but he’ll go elsewhere to find her. It’s interesting that Rashi himself says that to the right or left means from the descendants of Yishmael or Lot.

Even if we say that Rashi feels that when Avraham absolves Eliezer of the oath it means *all* of the oath including the prohibition of marrying a Canaanite, it is still hard to understand his position. Since Avraham was so vehemently opposed to his son marrying someone from Canaan, why would he sanction Yitzchok marrying a daughter of Aner et al?

Some commentaries suggest that although Aner and company lived in Canaan, they were not actually Canaanites. However, as the Ramban points out, the Torah explicitly refers them as Amorites (one of the seven forbidden Canaanite nations). Furthermore, if Rashi held that way, he should have mentioned it at some point.

Before suggesting a way of understanding Rashi’s position, I would like to note another disagreement between Rashi and the Ramban. Although it doesn’t seem related to our issue, I think it may shed some light on their disagreement.

When Avraham first administers the oath to Eliezer, he does it in the name of Hashem, G-d of heaven and of earth. Later, when he refers to how G-d took him out of his homeland and led him to Canaan, he refers to Hashem only as the G-d of heaven.

Rashi explains that now, when Avraham is adjuring Eliezer, G-d is already known in the world. He is not just the G-d of heaven, but of the earth as well. Avraham taught and preached about the One G-d, and many people were now aware of Him. But when Avraham left his homeland, G-d was still unknown by mankind. He was only the G-d of heaven at that time but not recognized as the G-d of earth.

The Ramban says that G-d of the earth means G-d of the Land of Israel (i.e. Canaan). Only in the holy land is His presence felt. He is the G-d of the *land*, i.e., the Land of Israel. When Avraham describes his journey from his homeland, G-d is only the G-d of heaven because only in Israel is there the complete revelation of G-d. More about these interpretations soon.

Many commentaries (Drashos HaRan and others) explain Avraham’s preference for his family and his rejection of the Canaanites. A person may have the correct intellectual perception of the one G-d. But if his or her character is bad, if she or he has bad traits and is basically not a kind and good person, then you would not marry them, for these (bad) traits are deeply ingrained in a person.

Avraham’s family was of good character. Witness Rivkah’s kindness, for example, as she brought water for Eliezer and his men and even for his camels. It would be relatively easy to enlighten such kind people to the truth of monotheism.

But the Canaanites, even if they had the right theology (as indeed Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, Avraham’s allies and disciples had), they had flawed characters. This was embedded and ingrained in them. Therefore, since the priority was good character, the Canaanites were ruled out.

But is it not possible for character to change?

The Rambam (*Hilchot Dai’ot*) posits that a person can mold his or her character and change not only his actions, but his personality for the better. Whether bad character is caused by one’s nature or by his environment, it is changeable.

Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei were described as allies of (*ba’alei bris*—covenanted with) Avraham. Might it not be possible that they and their children were exceptional, not only in their conduct, but also in their characters? Might it not be possible that if Avraham’s kinsmen were not available, the daughters of Aner et al would be acceptable?

Rashi apparently understood the passage, “If the woman does not agree to follow you, you shall be clean of this oath to me,” (Breishis 24:8) literally. The oath is no longer binding. You may take another woman—as long as she is righteous and good—even if she is a Canaanite.

Perhaps the difference in approach between Rashi and the Ramban is reflected in how they translate “the G-d of heaven and earth.”

To Rashi, it means G-d is now recognized on the earth; on *all* of the earth. This is a universalistic approach. Now that G-d is recognized on earth, there may be good people even among the Canaanites.

The Ramban’s approach is more particularistic. G-d of the earth means G-d of the Land of Israel. It is unthinkable to take a Canaanite wife for Yitzchok. The daughters of Aner et al may be Avraham’s allies, but they fall short of the mark of acceptability as a mate for Yitzchok.

Does this interpretation have anything to tell us?

We sometimes engage in wrong or inappropriate conduct. We seek to repent and change our behavior.

But what about our underlying character flaws? If we are lazy or avaricious, or arrogant or anger-filled, are we stuck forever with ourselves?

Perhaps Rashi’s interpretation is giving us hope. If a Canaanite can at least theoretically be worthy of transforming her character to the point that she is worthy of entering Avraham’s family, we, too, can change and grow and rebuild our personalities and character.

Of course, this is no easy job. It is relatively easy to change one’s conduct. Unfortunately, this is usually not long-lasting, and we fall back into our old bad habits and ways. It is only through that most difficult of tasks—the improving of our inner lives, of our character—that permanent change can take place. But it is do-able. It’s a task of a lifetime, but it can be done.

We are blessed to be the people of Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov. We can and we must make ourselves worthy of that tit

le and of that heritage.