

PARASHAH TWENTY-ONE

Genesis 24:1–41; Judges 19:16–21; Ephesians 5:15–33

Notes by Tim Hegg

Maintaining the Covenant

Our *parashah* focuses upon Abraham’s intention to see that the covenant promises given to him by HaShem should be carried on into the next generation through Isaac. Though HaShem had “blessed him with everything” (v. 1), in Abraham’s eyes this meant that the covenant would be maintained in the coming generations through Isaac, which meant that Isaac must be married and have a son to whom the covenant promises would be maintained (cf. 15:2ff). Rashi notes that “everything” (בְּכֹל) has the same numerical value (52) as “son” (בֵּן). Thus, “everything,” in Abraham’s eyes surely included the divine promise of לְדוֹר וָדוֹר, “from generation to generation.” Ultimately, this emphasizes the most significant aspect of the covenant, the promise of blessing which encompasses “all the families of the earth,” something that could be realized only in the coming of the Messiah. Thus, the generational aspect of the covenant is the necessary bedrock upon which all of the other blessings are founded.

What is significant at this point in the story is the central role Eliezar plays in Abraham’s intentions. Granted, Eliezar is not specifically named in our *parashah*, but it appears most likely that he is the servant Abraham entrusts with finding a wife for Isaac, since the servant is identified as “the oldest of his household.” Remember that in 15:2 he describes Eliezar as the “heir of his house.” So it is almost certain that Eliezar is the servant in our *parashah*.

Abraham, in his final days, wants to secure the longevity of his line through Isaac, and in so doing to see the covenant promises which God made to him fulfilled. Yet it is Eliezar, a non-Jew, who having come to faith in Abraham’s God, was now entrusted with this awesome task. Here, the covenant bond between Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, and Eliezar, a Gentile, foreshadows the eventual ingathering of the Gentiles and the essential role they would play in the covenant itself.

In typical midrashic fashion, the Sages teach that this Eliezar was the Rosh Yeshiva of Abraham’s household, teaching the Torah and the ways of faith to all of Abraham’s family and servants. Who better, then, to look for a wife for the promised son? In confessing faith in the God of Abraham, he was to be used of God to bring about the very promises of the covenant!

Eliezar takes an oath by placing his hand under Abraham’s thigh. This strange oath ceremony most likely seeks to connect the oath to the sign of the covenant, i.e., circumcision, given to Abraham. The Sages teach that the term “thigh” (יָרֵךְ) is sometimes used symbolically of procreation, children being described as “coming out of the thigh (loins)” [יוֹצְאֵי יָרֵךְ] (cf. Gen 46:26; Ex 1:5; Judg 8:30). Like oaths in later days, which would be taken in connection with sacred objects (altar, Temple), this oath was taken with the very sign of the covenant in mind, a sign which especially was forward-looking to the Messiah Whose birth, similar to that of Isaac, would come about by a special miracle. The requiring of an oath also showed that Abraham, being advanced in years, expected Eliezar to complete his mission at all costs, even if Abraham were to die before its completion.

The oath that Abraham has Eliezar take relates directly to the need for Abraham’s lineage to be kept pure. “...that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell.” The covenant made to Abraham and to all of his seed was, by nature, a covenant which separated Abraham and his lineage from all other nations. As the prophets would teach (Amos 3:2, for example), God had chosen Israel out of all the nations and had given His covenant to the nation of Israel and that nation alone. Only Israel, and those who would be brought into her through participation in the covenant through faith, would receive His covenant blessings. What is more, the descendants of Jacob would ultimately be identified as “Israel” through her own par-

participation in the covenant. Each generation as well as individual within the nation would find his or her connection to the covenant as the vital link to the promises that God had made. Apart from covenant participation, there are no blessings from HaShem. Indeed, the “promise” is entirely wrapped up in the covenant, for the covenant as a whole finds its completion in the Messiah, Yeshua.

By what means does an individual receive the eternal blessings of the covenant? By exercising the same faith which Abraham himself had, i.e., faith in the Messiah—faith in Yeshua. “Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad!” (Jn 8:56). This reality should alert us all to the fact that genuine faith in Yeshua cannot be separated from covenant membership in Abraham’s covenant. In fact, it was for this very reason that Paul could teach (Rom 4) that Abraham was the father of all who believed. Like his illustration of the olive tree (Rom 11), there is only one established fountain of God’s blessing, and that is the covenant into which all believers, whether from the offspring of Jacob or from the nations, are brought. Furthermore, it is in this context that true unity or oneness between Jew and non-Jew exists, for we are all one in Yeshua, in whom the covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment.

The main characters of this story demonstrate a key characteristic of saving faith in the God of Abraham, namely, the willingness to live in accordance with God’s leading. The single phrase that summarizes the overall perspective of true faith is that a person should live “according to the will of God.” But how one discerns the will of God in each area of life becomes a major challenge. Here we come face to face with two major and different approaches. One we may describe as “objective” and the other “subjective.” Whichever one chooses will change the entire scope of how he or she approaches relationship with God. The objective approach is simply that God leads His children through revelation given to His chosen prophets (culminating in the written Scriptures), while the subjective viewpoint waits for personal revelation given to each individual at each decisive juncture. Eliezar is clearly of the former, for he acts upon the commands given to him by Abraham. Yet the subjective reality of the will of God in guiding the child of God in life’s decisions are also evident: “While I was on the road HaShem guided me” (v. 27). Thus, as illustrated by this story, the choice is not an “either-or” but a “both-and.” God’s will, revealed to His prophets and apostles, and eventually written down as inspired Scripture, forms the touchstone against which the individual leading of the Spirit is tested.

The faith of Bethuel and Laban, and especially that of Rivka, is also evident. When Eliezar describes the manner in which God made the choice of Rivka known, they both respond “The matter comes from Adonai.” And, as we will see in the next *parashah*, the faith of Rivka is especially remarkable, as she submits to the authority of her father and brother, and ultimately to Adonai.

The text gives us a clear picture of Eliezar’s fears in terms of the whole mission he was sent to accomplish. “What happens if the girl doesn’t want to return with me?”; “how will I know which girl is the right one?” Can you just imagine being put to such a task? This is a job which allows for no mistakes! Yet the trusted servant, acting in the same faithfulness he had seen demonstrated by Abraham time and again, sets out on the trip, awaiting God’s direct leading in the things for which he lacked knowledge and/or ability. He could have stayed at home awaiting a revelation, or he could have put himself to fasting and praying until God spoke to him and told him who the young lady was, what she would like, how she would respond, and so forth. Like the priests who would put their feet in the water before the path was made clear for them to cross the Jordon into the promised land, so Eliezar obeys first, and waits for God’s leading to be forthcoming. Like a boat that cannot be steered until it is moving, so we must act upon what we know God has commanded and then await His specific instructions as we move forward.

Was this not the example of Abraham, who left his land and family to go to a land “which God would show him”? Did not Abraham set out to sacrifice Isaac, waiting for God to direct him to the exact place of his ultimate test? And so we see often in the Tanach that God expects His children to obey the directions He has already given before He will give additional instructions. How upside-down, then, to sit and wait for something new to come from the Holy One while those things He

has already commanded are left undone. We simply cannot expect God to bless us with a new revelation of His face when we have neglected or even despised the portrait He's already given. After all, living life "according to the will of God" means being faithful in the small things before we are entrusted with the greater things. Eliezar had been with Abraham for over 60 years! He had been tested and was therefore trusted. Why? Because he had faithfully performed the daily *mitzvot* of his master and was therefore entrusted with one of the most important tasks Abraham would ever assign.

This, then, gives a new perspective on the *mitzvot*. It is in the consistent doing of those things which God has commanded us that will stand us in good stead to hear His voice when He calls us to carry other significant tasks. We should be diligent to perform a "light" precept, knowing that this will fit and prepare us to keep a "heavy" one. Let us strive to emulate the faith of Abraham, a faith given beautiful example in Abraham's servant, Eliezar.

One more lesson can be learned from the example of Eliezar: he is in constant communion with God as he travels to complete the assigned task. In v. 27, while relating his mission to Bethuel and Laban, Eliezar says: "Adonai has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers." Indeed, Abraham had said to Eliezar: "God will send His angel before you" (v. 7). Because Eliezar trusted that God would lead him as he humbly sought to accomplish the task Abraham had given him, he was always in a "listening mode" as he travelled. Thus, he anticipated God's leading as the normal experience of faith. When we feel that God is not leading us in our lives, it may be that we have stopped listening or we don't like the direction in which He is leading us. Sometimes we don't "hear" the leading of God because the drone of the world has become too loud. In seeking to satisfy our deep longings with the transitory glitter of the world, the melody that plays in our mind drowns out the music of the Master. What is needful, then, is to find the time and place to be alone with God and listen, not just now and then, but often and with regularity. This is all the more a necessity in our fast-paced world. He is leading us as He promised. The question is whether we are willing to do what is necessary to listen.

Trust in Adonai with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. (Prov 3:5-6)