

Chayei Sarah: Eliezer's Oath

- Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks.

Avraham trusts his friend and steward Eliezer, but trust isn't enough when it comes to the future of children, the most important thing in life. The same applies to nations and to communities, as well as our own families...

CHAYE SARA : ELIEZER'S OATH

Who was the most trusted of Avraham's household? Eliezer! Who was the oldest of his servants and his friends who had been with Avraham virtually all his life? Again Eliezer. Of all the people who attached themselves to Avraham in Haran and accompanied him, who remained most faithful? Again, Eliezer.

Yet when Avraham commands him to find a wife for Isaac he requires a solemn oath. Why? Isn't Eliezer to be trusted? Isn't he Avraham's lifelong disciple, remaining Avraham's follower as long, and longer, than Joshua with Moses?

The Rabbis were troubled by this. One answer they gave is that perhaps Eliezer had an ulterior motive, a daughter that he would have liked to marry to Isaac. In such circumstances, we can excuse even an Eliezer to be reticent in finding a wife for Isaac elsewhere, and so Avraham made him swear.

I would like to suggest another answer. Friends are important, even vital, life saving.

It is so for individuals. Consider the help, encouragement, business advantage and comfort of truly close friends. On September 11th, for example, we saw great sacrifice, even sacrifice of life itself, for the sake of friendship. Whatever halakhah says about any particular situation, the refusal to abandon a crippled friend struggling down the stairs must be considered a great example of *mesirat nefesh*.

And it is so for nations too. Consider where Israel would be without her major friends, even despite the support of our own people all over the world. How important is her friendship with America, and how vital her valiant efforts all over the world to win friends and create sorely needed allies. In today's climate it is especially critical for us to do everything we can to strengthen bonds of friendship and alliance with the United States, particularly now, when our enemies are doing all that they can to destroy this vital alliance. And at the beginning of our nation's history, Avraham's most faithful ally and friend was Eliezer of Damascus. It was Avraham who taught us to cement strong bonds to make them even stronger. He didn't rely on Eliezer's friendship alone, but required an oath as well.

For Avraham knew that he would not live forever. He knew conditions could change, as they had done times without number. And he knew that "All's fair in love and war." This is obviously so in times of national danger, such as in a war or when threatened by terrorism. But it is also true in "love": what is more important than a "shiduch" for Isaac? Life and death for our people

depended on it!

So friendship and loyalty wasn't enough. He required an oath, but even that wasn't enough for him! He sent gifts. He laid out a plan. He acted. He required above all that Rifka's future life be in his own home, not far away. This was a solid condition, irrevocable, unalterable.

Many of us badly need this lesson.

Two factors determine our people's future; 1) how we live among other nations and people; 2) and how we live among ourselves as families and communities.

Israel has learned many lessons about how to live amongst others, about which Avraham showed the first example: its search for alliances; its awareness that in the last analysis it must develop the power and the morale to rely on itself; the faith that God would protect it. And the knowledge that faith alone is not enough, but that God Himself wants us, like Avraham, to make every kind of effort to make it happen.

Once, when times were particularly bad in the United Nations, Chaim Hezog, then UN Ambassador of Israel, entered into the protocol and the official record of the United Nations the transaction at the beginning of this week's portion demonstrating that Avraham had bought and his children had therefore inherited and owned a legal right to the area of Hevron as well as other Bible promises that God gave Israel to us. He demanded that the Bible be placed in the record of the United Nations!

In international relationships we have learned not to rely only on friendship, and not only on oaths and agreements, even peace treaties. Even our friends can overlook agreements or misinterpret them.

Guarantees were never of great value, except the guarantee of the Lord God of Israel in His providence over us, and also the guarantee that Hashem oz leamo yiten, Hashem yevarech et amo bashalom, The He would give us the power to achieve and maintain the ultimate goal of peace. These are important lessons to have learned, and they can be perceived in our portion even at the dawn of our history.

What about the way we live amongst ourselves? Have we truly learned Avraham's lesson of how to insure our own inner continuation as a community, as a people and as individuals?

In business, I daresay, you don't take everything your stockbrokers and business agents tell you without question, despite all their knowledge; especially nowadays. You check up on them, don't you? Because it is money. I think we all agree that our children are even more precious and important!

So do we accept the friends they have and the company they keep without question? Or shouldn't we do a little checking now and then?

Do we entrust them and their development to our schools without question about what and how

well they are learning, , or do we check on what they are learning?

And since inspiration for Jewish loyalty to God, to our people and to Israel is the most vital part of our Jewish continuity, do we sufficiently check on that? Do we make sure they learn enough and are inspired enough to remain loyal Jews on into the future? Or do we relax and just let it happen, however it might?

And if our own children are important, what about the children of others? They too are important because we rely on them for a viable Jewish community future here, and on many of them for Jewish leadership in the future. The prophet was quite right. In the future, "A little child shall lead them." The children of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. They shall, indeed, lead us. The question is "Where to"?

Do we attempt to do for those parents what Eliezer did for Avraham? That would be in Avraham's words, hesed shel emet, a "true act of love", an act of devotion that goes far beyond education and learning and reaches into the homes of our future, of the next Jewish generation, by insuring the right kind of shiduch. For in our Jewish society we are bound by an oath and more than an oath -- to provide Jewish surroundings for our children and grandchildren through education, through involvement in their social life, through guidance towards marriage of the right kind, and therefore to assure their loyalty to God, Israel, Torah and Tradition.

Eliezer was successful. But only with the help of the Almighty. Many times, from many points of view, the miraculous story is unfolded. The Bible uses the barest minimum of language. It doesn't use an extra, unnecessary word. Yet I daresay there is no episode in the Bible that is told and retold in greater detail, than Eliezer's search for a wife for Isaac. Because the Torah wants to stress the miraculous nature of it all. It all seems so natural, the shiduch of a young man and woman. But no, it is really the expression of God's providence watching over our people. And also because the Torah wants to stress the importance of it all; the importance of the Jewish marriage upon which depends the Jewish future through our Jewish families; upon which depends Israel's national survival as well as the survival of our communities and every Jew who comprises them. Nothing is more important. In the past, nothing has been more miraculous. And in the future the challenge to make this miracle continue and happen again in our time is placed before each and all of us.

If we are to live up to our responsibility, it must be to create a time when venaar katan noheg bam, a little child shall lead us. All our children shall lead us into a bright and beautiful tomorrow, provided we do what we must, in the spirit of Avraham and Eliezer.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman