

# The Path To Follow

Chayei Sarah

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## The Reason Behind Eliezer's Oath to Abraham

**I**t is written, "Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, who controlled all that he had: 'Please place your hand under my thigh, and I will have you swear by Hashem, the G-d of Heaven and G-d of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. Rather, to my land and to my family shall you go and take a wife for my son, for Isaac'" (Bereshith 24:2-4).

Abraham asked Eliezer to find a wife for his son Isaac in his land and among his family, and especially not to bring Isaac a woman from among the Canaanites, where he dwelled. True, he lived among Canaanites, but he was not like them. The Canaanite was cursed, whereas Abraham was blessed, and the cursed cannot adhere to the blessed.

The Ohr HaChaim writes, "[Abraham said] 'Although I am living in his land and the people are blessed in me, it nevertheless does not free the accursed from his curse.' He also wanted to prevent people from saying that since he lived among them, he would not harm his neighbor and therefore they could marry them. It is in regards to this that he said 'among whom I dwell' – Yes, I dwell among them, but that is still not enough to marry them."

In his request to Eliezer, Abraham was not content with just a promise, but wanted an oath. And not just a simple oath, but one that requires an explanation, for if Abraham was afraid that Eliezer would not keep his word, then what purpose would an oath serve? However if Abraham did trust him, then why make him take an oath?

We may explain this by saying that Abraham was afraid that Eliezer would break his word out of self-interest, as the Sages explain in the Midrash: "Thus it is written: Canaan, the balances of deceit are in his hand. He loves to oppress [Hosea 12:8]. Canaan – this was Eliezer; the balances of deceit are in his hand – for he sat and weighed his daughter: Is she fit [to be Isaac's wife] or is she unfit? He loves to oppress – to oppress the beloved one of the world, namely Isaac. So he spoke to him until he came to the word 'perhaps' [Bereshith 24:5], i.e., 'I will then give him my own daughter.' 'You are cursed,' said [Abraham] to him, 'but my son is blessed, and the cursed cannot adhere to the blessed'" (Bereshith Rabba 59:9).

This means that Abraham knew that Eliezer wanted to cleave to someone who was blessed and to give his own daughter to Isaac as a wife. Hence Abraham feared that Eliezer would break his word, not because he was already trying to give his daughter to Isaac as a wife, but because he would find reasons to extricate himself from his promise. In fact by making Eliezer swear an oath by "the G-d of Heaven and G-d of earth," Abraham knew that he would not transgress it. Due to this oath, each time that Eliezer wanted to break his word, he would recall the moment that he made this oath, a lofty spiritual moment when Abraham made him swear by "the G-d of Heaven and G-d of earth," and thus he would not break it.

## The Greatness of Palti ben Laish

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin says something similar in regards to Palti ben Laish, to whom King Saul had given his daughter Michal in marriage, despite the fact that she was already married to David. By order of the king, Palti ben Laish was commanded to live with her, although he did not approach her. Of him the Sages said, "You surpass them all [Mishlei 31:29] – [this refers] to Palti son of Laish" (Sanhedrin 20a). The Sages also said, "His name was really Palti, so why was he called Paltiel? Because G-d [E-I] helped him to escape [palti] from sin. What did he do? He planted a sword between her and him, and he said: 'Whoever tries this shall be struck with this sword'" (ibid. 19b).

Day after day, Palti was with her in his home. Day after day he was next to her. What did he do so as not to sin? What did he do to conquer his desires? He planted a sword between himself and her.

Here Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin asks, "What good was it to plant a sword? How could it have prevented him from sinning? He could have simply removed the sword and broken his word by approaching her! When a person is assailed by his desires, does a sword have the power to stop him? He planted it, and he could have also removed it!"

He replies that this sword only served as a reminder to Palti, a reminder of his decision. Having planted this sword was enough to constantly remind him of the oath that he took and the feelings he had on the day he planted it, which is how he maintained his resolve.

We learn something amazing from this: "The deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children," meaning that sometimes even a small deed to strengthen ourselves – such as an oath between two people, or planting a sword between a man and a woman, even if not done publicly, but rather in secret – can prevent a person from falling into the abyss. Even under those circumstances, he can control his desires.

In reality, Eliezer was a great man with a pure heart. It was not without reason that Abraham put him in charge of all his possessions. Furthermore, on the verse "he armed his trained servants" (Bereshith 14:14), the Sages say that Eliezer was equal to 318 men, and that a miracle occurred for his sake during the war of the kings. He succeeded in his mission, and furthermore a kefitzat haderech [miraculous shortening of the path] was performed for him.

Yet Abraham knew that despite Eliezer's purity of heart, as well as his spiritual greatness and stature, he would have been unable to resist his desires arising from self-interest if he did not take an oath. In fact after strengthening his resolve in this way, Eliezer prayed to G-d for success like a faithful servant. He was not obligated to pray, especially since he would lose out in the process, given that success meant that his daughter would not marry Isaac. Nevertheless Eliezer prayed to find a wife for Isaac, and his prayer was granted.

All this happened on account of Eliezer's oath, for that small deed recalled his promise to Abraham. Sometimes a small deed, in fact, is all that is needed to reach great heights in the service of Hashem.

### Equal

It is written, “The life of Sarah was” (Bereshith 23:1).

Since Sarah was equal to Abraham in regards to his spiritual level, why did she not live as long as he did?

The book Yeriot Shlomo explains that Abraham and Sarah, in fact, lived an equal number of years.

How so?

The Midrash states that Abraham recognized his Creator at the age of 48. Now we know that a convert “is like a newborn child.” It follows, therefore, that Abraham’s life was missing 48 years. When we remove these years from Abraham’s lifespan, which totaled 175 years, we are left with 127, which is precisely the number of Sarah’s years.

### In Control

It is written, “Abraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, who controlled all that he had...” (Bereshith 24:2).

For the holy Shelah, the expression “who controlled all that he had” refers to Abraham, not Eliezer. In fact Eliezer was the servant and elder of the household of the one “who controlled all that he had.”

This means that the person to whom Hashem gives great wealth, and yet is stingy, not giving much tzeddakah, will certainly have accusers preventing him from controlling the wealth that he possesses.

However Abraham was extremely generous, and he gave so much tzeddakah that he “controlled all that he had.”

### Modest Garments

It is written, “The servant brought out articles of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebecca” (Bereshith 24:53).

The holy Torah underlines that Eliezer gave Rebecca expensive articles of silver and gold. Yet in regards to the garments that he gave her, there was nothing luxurious or beautiful about them. This is because it is not the way of the Torah for a woman to make herself noticed for her wealth.

The author of Ta’am VaDa’at states that this contains an important lesson: In our time, women waste a great deal of money purchasing superb and expensive clothing, according to the spirit of the street. This goes against our ways, according to which a Jewish woman’s garments should be simple and modest.

Wearing luxurious garments also arouses people’s jealousy, which can be very harmful. Indeed, modesty protects us from the evil eye.

### The Mitzvah of Hospitality

It is written, “Isaac went out to pray in the field.... He raised his eyes and saw: And behold, camels were coming” (Bereshith 24:63).

The book Ohel Shlomo cites the author of Tiferet Shlomo, who asks from where peasants, who never pray in a minyan or hear words of Torah, can derive sanctity. His response: Solely from the fact that they practice the mitzvah of hospitality.

Thus we read, “Isaac went out to pray in the field,” meaning that before the coming of Mashiach, Isaac will go out to see by what merit the Jewish people have endured.

“He raised his eyes and saw: And behold, camels were coming” – this is the welcoming of guests, who arrive by camel.

### The Right Order

It is written, “Isaac brought her... she became his wife, and he loved her” (Bereshith 24:67).

In his book Oznam LaTorah, Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin Zatzal notes that from here we learn that a man can love his wife without having known or seen her beforehand, having been married through an intermediary. This is contrary to those who only want to marry a woman whom they have loved beforehand.

Experience has shown that marriages which follow the customs of our forefathers result in love, whereas marriages founded on the need for pre-existing love often result in disputes, and sometimes lead to divorce.

## In the Light of the Parsfa

### They Were All Equally Good

It is written, “The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years; the years of Sarah’s life” (Bereshith 23:1).

Rashi explains: “The reason that the word ‘years’ is written at each term is to inform you that each term must be interpreted by itself. At the age of one hundred she was as a woman of twenty in regards to sin, and at the age of twenty she was as beautiful as when she was seven.”

Rashi is surprised by the fact that the term “years” is repeated in this verse, since the Torah could have written: “The life of Sarah was a hundred and twenty seven years.” Therefore why add unnecessary terms? Rashi says that the term “years” is repeated each time in order to tell us that each grouping must be interpreted separately. That is, at one hundred she was like a woman of twenty in regards to sin, for just as she had not sinned by the age of twenty, since she was not yet liable to punishment, likewise she had not sinned by the age of one hundred. Rashi also says the same about Sarah at twenty and at seven in regards to beauty. Then, concerning the words, “the years of Sarah’s life,” Rashi says: “They were all equally good.”

From here we see how, in a few brief words, the Torah tells us the story of this tzaddeket’s life, our Matriarch Sarah. This is what characterized her: That at one hundred she was like a twenty-year old in regards to sin! The Torah testifies to how virtuous she was, being clean of all sin.

If we examine Rashi’s remarks more closely, however, they seem to contain a redundancy. That is, if at one hundred she was like a twenty-year old in regards to sin, then it is clear that her years were all equally good. Therefore why conclude by explicitly saying, “They were all equally good”? What more does this tell us?

It seems that the Torah is hinting at something wonderful here, namely that a person can sometimes find himself in a situation where he does not sin, but does not grow spiritually either. To an outside observer, it seems that this person is not growing spiritually, but in the final analysis he is not descending either. In this regard, the Torah testifies that in Sarah’s greatness, her years were all equally good, her entire life being a unified block of constant spiritual growth and development. They were all equally good, and there was no day in which she did not progress or purify her heart to an even greater extent than on the previous day.

This is the allusion that we find here: Not only did she not sin – not only did she not commit any bad deeds, but only good – her years were all equally good, all together forming a vast mosaic, an impressive picture of spiritual greatness. Indeed, our Matriarch Sarah was an incredible woman!

### *My Name is Yaakov Loberbaum*

It is written, “He swore to him regarding the matter” (Bereshith 24:9).

The great men of Israel have always been very careful in regards to taking oaths, even truthful ones, and in their writings they have underlined the gravity of the issue. In the commentaries of our Sages, we find numerous accounts on how to avoid taking an oath, regardless of the circumstance, so as not to use G-d’s Name in vain. Awe-inspiring stories describe the extreme measures taken by certain individuals to avoid using G-d’s Name in an oath. We shall examine this important subject in detail.

It is said that the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Loberbaum, the Rav of Lissa and author of Chavat Da’at, once traveled among a group of people who did not know him. None of them were aware of his identity or his greatness, and his worn-out clothing – those of a poor man – hardly testified to his elevated position in the world of Torah. During this journey, one of the passengers began to cry out in desperation: “Somebody stole my wallet! I had it with me at the start of the trip!”

The passengers began to look at one another, and their suspicions quickly rested upon the one among them who looked like a beggar, the person they didn’t know. His penetrating gaze only reinforced their suspicions that he was the actual thief.

Their suspect, none other than the Rav of Lissa, completely denied it. However the other passengers couldn’t care less, and so they seized him.

Arriving at their destination, they brought him directly to the local Rav. All the people traveling in the same passenger compartment as the victim accompanied him to court, along with their suspect.

The local Rav, surprised by the crowd that unexpectedly came before him, asked: “What are you here for?”

Embarrassed, the victim of the theft said: “I entered the passenger compartment with my wallet, and a stranger joined us. I suspect him of having stolen it.”

The Rav of Lissa denied the accusation, answering all the questions of the local Rav. Finally, the latter ruled that the suspect had to take an oath of rabbinic origin in order to be acquitted.

He answered the local Rav, “I am not ready to take an oath. However I am prepared to offer a sum corresponding to half the amount that was stolen.”

The victim replied, “The Rav can clearly see that he’s the thief, since he’s prepared to give me, ‘in his great generosity,’ half of the stolen amount! But I’m not prepared to compromise on even a penny!”

“In that case,” said the Rav of Lissa, “I will give you three quarters of the amount.”

The man raised his voice with a tremendous air of self-confidence, arguing: “The Rav can see that the suspect is clearly responsible. Otherwise, why agree to give me such a large sum of money? Let the Rav order him to immediately pay me back the total amount that was stolen!”

The Rav of Lissa then said, “I will give you 90% of the amount, just as long as I do not have to take an oath.”

However the accuser stood his ground: “I’m not ready to forgo even a penny! Return all the money that was stolen, down to the last cent.”

The Rav of Lissa replied, “If you accept my suggestion, very good. Otherwise I will take an oath and you will receive nothing.” However the accuser didn’t want to hear anything more.

The Rav of Lissa then addressed the local Rav: “In that case, I prefer to take an oath. But please give me a few moments.”

He then went to a quiet corner to be alone with his thoughts. Suddenly, the sound of screaming could be heard among the people gathered in court. One of those present, who had been traveling in the same passenger compartment as the others, fainted to the ground.

After regaining consciousness, he said: “Leave the suspect alone. I’m the one who stole the money!” As he said these words, he took the victim’s wallet out of his bag.

Great commotion broke out in the courtroom. Everyone then realized that their initial suspect was not some homeless beggar, but a man who was head and shoulders above the people.

The local Rav said to him, “As the Rav of this city, I order you to tell me who you are and where you’re from.”

He replied, “My name is Yaakov Loberbaum of Lissa.”

This time, it was the local Rav who almost fainted.

The leader of the generation had been disgracefully brought before the local Rav, who “ruled” that he had to take an oath because he was accused of theft! Woe to him and woe to his soul!

The Chavat Da’at (as the Rav of Lissa was also known) saw the troubled look on the face of the local Rav, and guessed at what he was thinking. He therefore tried to console him: “The Rav did precisely as he should, having acted according to the principles of the Torah. He made the proper ruling and was obligated to order me to take an oath.”

Thus relieved, the local Rav regained his confidence and questioned the Chavat Da’at: “There’s something that I don’t understand. Why did you initially agree to pay half the stolen amount in order to avoid taking an oath, and were then prepared to pay up to 90% of the amount? Why didn’t you agree to pay the total amount?”

The Chavat Da’at replied, “In reality, I was prepared to forgo all my possessions in order not to take an oath. At first I estimated the value of the possessions I could sell, with the only exception being religious articles. That came to about half the total amount. Next, I added the value of my religious articles, and I estimated the value of all the books in my library to be about 90% of the amount. However if I wanted to pay the entire amount, selling all my possessions and books would not have been enough. I would also have needed to borrow money, and that is something which I cannot do. I am not capable of owing money.”

## Guard Your Tongue!

### *Rechilus in Writing*

Furthermore, know that there is no distinction in regards to the prohibition against Rechilus [talebearing] whether the speaker directly tells someone what another person did or said against him, or whether he conveys it in writing. Also, there is no distinction between relating an insult against a person or against a person’s merchandise, for in either case it produces hatred in the heart of the listener for the person in question.

– Chafetz Chaim

Numerous scientists and researchers have risked their lives in order to explore the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle (more than 1,000 people have perished in this deadly region over the last 50 years). A vast array of theories have been forwarded to explain this mystery, one of the marvels of Creation that demonstrate the glory of G-d for all eternity, all under the guise of nature. According to one theory, underground earthquakes create violent underwater storms in the Bermuda Triangle, which in turn generate massive rogue waves. The result is that the water, which is calm one minute, becomes a tempest in the next, followed by an eerie silence over an underwater grave. With a few brief words, we have just described the Bermuda Triangle.

Richard McIver, an oil-drilling specialist from Texas, offers an explanation based on his work in gas blowouts produced in the waters of the Bermuda Triangle. According to Mr. McIver, in places where the water is particularly deep, methane gas is dislodged from the ocean floor and forms immense gas plumes (also coming into play is the temperature difference between the colder deep waters and the warmer waters of the Gulf Stream). The result is that these gas plumes significantly reduce the density of water, meaning that a ship floating above it will quickly sink. Such gas plumes are massive enough to submerge even large ships.

We can cite numerous other theories stemming from scientific books and papers, without ever providing a precise explanation for the extraordinary disappearances that have occurred in the Bermuda Triangle. However there exists one explanation that has been known and accepted in the Batei Midrashot of the Sages of Israel. The Sages explicitly state that the cause of this phenomenon – resulting in the sinking of ships and downing of planes – is a magnetic force that exists beneath the watery depths.

### Places that Attract Iron

The author of the book *Nachalei Eshkolot* discusses Rashi's commentary on a statement found in the Gemara: "It is like a rope through the loop-holes" (Berachot 8a). Here Rashi says, "There are parts of the ocean that do not tolerate iron. They [sailors] tie the planks of a ship with ropes, and push them through because the ropes are the same size as the holes."

According to *Nachalei Eshkolot*, Rashi's commentary calls for two explanations:

1. What body of water was Rashi speaking of? In his era (Rashi died in the year 4865 [1105 CE]), Europeans did not know of North America or the Bermuda Triangle. Perhaps he was only speaking of the Mediterranean? From the following discussion, it seems that the Gemara is speaking about the great ocean that encircles the entire world:

"Rabbi Yitzchak ben Yosef said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: In Eretz Israel no guilt is incurred on account of [moving objects in] a public domain. ... Said Abaye to Rabbi Dimi: What is the reason? If we say that it is because the 'Ladder of Tyre' surrounds it on one side and the 'Declivity of Geder' on the other side, then Babylon is also surrounded by the Euphrates on one side and the Tigris on the other side! In fact the whole world is surrounded by the ocean!" (Eruvin 22ab).

There is no doubt that Rashi was familiar with this Gemara, and when he spoke of the "ocean," he meant the ocean that surrounds the entire world.

2. What did Rashi mean by the words "that do not tolerate iron"? It is precisely the opposite, for the ocean swallows iron! However this was a euphemism, for Rashi was saying that there are parts of the ocean that attract iron (although Rashi was not speaking of magnetic attraction). He advised people not to make ships traveling to these dangerous regions with metal, for they could be drawn into the depths and sink. He advised that they be made only of wood, and that its planks should be joined by ropes that are accurately and precisely pushed through holes bored in them. In this way, not a drop of water would leak inside. In passing, Rashi compares this procedure to the croup, a disease that prevents air from passing through the trachea. A person therefore slowly dies by suffocation, which is one of the most agonizing kinds of death.

### Magnets in the Underwater Depths

Rashi's remarks are not fully clear. The Rashash (Rabbi Shemuel Strashun of Vilna) comments on Rashi's words, and in so doing resolves the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle. His explanation is the following: "Rashi clearly indicates that what he was aware of, a magnetic attraction, is what causes the 'disappearance' and sinking of ships that pass over certain parts of the ocean, as Hashem so desired when He created the world. 'If they were wise, they would understand this' [Devarim 32:29]."

### A Magnetic Star

We shall not close this subject before citing, to complete it, a very interesting passage from the thorough investigation of Dr. Hadassah Melamed in her book *The Secret of the Flood, the Bermuda Triangle and the Migration of the Continents*. It is based on a statement of the Sages in the Gemara concerning Noah's generation and the flood that inundated the entire world: "Because they perverted their ways, the Holy One, blessed be He, changed the works of Creation and made the constellation of Pleiades rise at daybreak and took two stars from Pleiades and brought a flood upon the world" (Rosh Hashanah 11b).

According to the scientific view cited in Dr. Melamed's research, "These two stars impacted areas near the equator. The first star, 'Discord' [with a diameter of 150 km], superficially hit the west of the primordial super-continent [Pangaea], and caused it to fracture into huge plates, splitting it from the earth's crust to a depth of five kilometers. Within 24 hours, these plates drifted to the positions where they remained as the continents that we know today. This magnetic star, mostly made of iron and nickel, lies in the Bermuda Triangle and, it seems, is responsible for the magnetic distortions and mysterious phenomena that have occurred there."

All that remains is to look in awe and proclaim: How great are Your works, Hashem! You have made everything with wisdom. No mind can understand You. Nothing can be compared to You, and there is no limit to Your greatness!