

## THE SERVANTS OF THE PATRIARCHS

*Rabbi David Pinto Chlita*

**R**abbi Acha said, "The mere conversation of the servants in the household of the Patriarchs is more important than the Torah of their children" (Bereshith Rabba 60:8). In fact the story of Eliezer is not only recorded, but also repeated, while some important mitzvot are only hinted at in the Torah.

The conversations of the Patriarchs' servants have an advantage over some important Torah points and mitzvot. This is because the Torah recounts the story of Eliezer twice, from which we learn proper conduct and ethics. It is not without reason that the Torah chose to go into great detail concerning these conversations, since refined conduct precedes the Torah. Furthermore, because they are more significant than matters of prime importance in the Torah, as well as being crucial to promoting the positive image of a Jew, they take precedence. In fact they describe the duties of the heart and the virtues that make a person suitable for receiving the Torah and fulfilling its important mitzvot. We shall attempt to examine the beauty in the words of Abraham's servant Eliezer, as well as to learn from his conduct. We will then understand why his story is so important, and why the Torah repeats it.

We are familiar with the Sages' statement that Eliezer had a daughter, and that he wanted Abraham to ask him to give her in marriage to Isaac. Instead, Abraham said to him: "You are accursed and my son is blessed, and the accursed cannot unite with the blessed" (see Bereshith Rabba 59:9). In reality, Eliezer's great hope to connect himself with Abraham was not so far from reality. We cannot say that Eliezer demonstrated a wild imagination by wanting Isaac to marry his daughter. In fact Eliezer was not an ordinary servant, for the Sages say that he transmitted his master's Torah to others (Yoma 28b). Abraham himself had chosen Eliezer because he saw that he was skilled, someone who was fit – either because of his knowledge and understanding, or because of his character and conduct – to be among those who transmit tradition in order to spread the Torah of their master. The Sages also said, "Abraham said to his servant, the elder [zekan] of his house [Bereshith 24:2] – this teaches that his features resembled his own [ziv ikunin]" (Bereshith Rabba 59:8). As surprising as this appears, the Sages compared Eliezer's level, from a certain point of view, to that of Abraham. That being the case, was there anybody better suited than Eliezer to connect himself with Abraham through marriage? This was especially true of that generation, in which Abraham was on one side and the rest of the world was on the other, being idolaters. This included Abraham's own family in Aram Naharaim, since Bethuel and his son Lavan were evildoers and idolaters.

Eliezer knew his place and his level, which is why he had the brazenness to suggest that his daughter should marry Isaac. However Abraham categorically refused, since the accursed cannot unite with the blessed. Eliezer was no doubt stunned by this refusal, unable to understand how the idea of being cursed corresponded to the description given of him, and how a girl from Abraham's family was preferable to his own daughter, since they were evildoers and idolaters. Nevertheless, Eliezer did not let himself get carried away by these thoughts, and he yielded before his master Abraham

and faithfully proceeded to carry out his mission. As soon as Eliezer arrived at his destination, he stood by a well and poured out his supplications before Hashem, hoping that He would demonstrate His kindness to his master and allow him to find a woman who possessed every virtue and was especially kind. Eliezer rose above his own interests to such a degree that he could wholeheartedly pray for the good of his master, even if it was detrimental to his own interests.

When Eliezer's prayer was answered and he saw in Rebecca the signs he had requested as proof that the young girl was worthy of Isaac, he was not saddened to realize that his hopes had no chance of being fulfilled, meaning that Isaac would not marry his daughter. On the contrary, he prostrated himself to thank Hashem for having demonstrated His kindness to Abraham by allowing him to find a wife worthy of Isaac. This is the greatest proof of Eliezer's genuine gratitude and joy over the good and success of his master Abraham, for it marked the end of his chances to give his daughter to Isaac. This is an instructive example of a person rising above self-interest and annulling his will and desires before the opinion and wishes of his master. This is what the Torah teaches us from the conversation of the Patriarchs' servants.

That is the reason why the Torah describes Eliezer's encounter with Rebecca twice: The first time when it actually happened, and the second time when Eliezer recounts events to Lavan and Bethuel. It is in order to make us understand Eliezer's joy and fervor in having succeeded in his mission due to an incredible miracle, such that he was unable to contain his enthusiasm and the need to express his joy by sharing it with Rebecca's family.

We may also say that this is why the Torah twice recounts this story of providence in finding a wife for Isaac. It teaches us that Eliezer felt the need to repeat this miracle of providence to Lavan and Bethuel, thus engraving in his heart the realization that the matter came from Hashem. This meant that G-d's will was the same as Abraham's, even if Eliezer had different plans. Thus all doubts would be removed from Eliezer's heart, meaning that he would be free to rejoice over his master's success. In fact the words of Eliezer, which emerged from a sincere heart and accepting soul, made their way into the hearts of Lavan and Bethuel, and they too recognized that this came from Hashem. Hence they agreed to send Rebecca with him.

We can now see the beauty in the conversation of the Patriarchs' servants. We can see how Eliezer, who was a great Torah figure as well as a man of great character – one who controlled his desires like Abraham – completely yielded and annulled himself before his master Abraham, hoping for his good and his happiness. We have already cited the Midrash, which states that because Eliezer faithfully served a tzaddik, he earned a blessing and went from cursed to blessed, as we read: "Come, blessed of Hashem" (Bereshith 24:31). We also read that because Eliezer did good for Isaac, he attained eternal freedom (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 16). This is the Torah that we learn from the conversation of the Patriarchs' servants, and this is the reward for yielding and annulling oneself before the will of one's master – and how much more before the will of the Creator!



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### Sarah Died First

It is written, “Sarah died” (Bereshith 23:2).

Why did Sarah, who was younger than Abraham, die before him? It was because of the Satan. When Abraham came from Mount Moriah, Sameal [Satan] was furious that he had failed to realize his desire to abort Abraham’s sacrifice. What did he do? He went off and told Sarah, “Ah Sarah, have you not heard what’s happening in the world?” She replied, “No.” He said, “Your old husband has taken the boy Isaac and sacrificed him as a burnt-offering, and the boy cried and wailed in his helplessness.” She immediately began to cry and wail. She cried three sobs, corresponding to the three tekiah notes of the Shofar, and she wailed [yelatot] three times, corresponding to the yevava, staccato notes of the Shofar. Her soul then departed and she died. – Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer

Another explanation is that Sarah had the merit of dying before Abraham so as not to be discredited afterwards. All the righteous women left this world before their husbands, for in this way they would not be shamed after their deaths. – Midrash Sechel Tov

### Gratitude

It is written, “Abraham rose up and bowed himself to the people of the land” (Bereshith 23:7).

Why did Abraham bow before them?

From here we learn that a man must always demonstrate his gratitude to a place which he benefitted from. – Ner Heskelim

### Ready and Willing

It is written, “That he give me the cave of Machpelah, which is his” (Bereshith 23:9).

Our father Abraham, may he rest in peace, came to the cave of Machpelah. He smelled the fragrance of Gan Eden and heard the ministering angels say, “The first man entered it. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will also.” He saw a flame burning and emerging from it. He immediately had an ardent desire for this place. Before him, many people had tried to bury their dead there, but the ministering angels protected it. People saw a fire burning there and avoided entering until Abraham came and purchased it.

– Midrash Aggadah Ruth

### A Good Reward

It is written, “And afterwards Abraham buried Sarah his wife” (Bereshith 23:19).

Rabbi Eliezer said, “How much ink has been spilled, how many quills have been used, to write ‘the sons of Heth’”? In fact this detail is repeated ten times in the passage! Why ten? Because it parallels the Ten Commandments. This teaches us that whoever participates in a transaction carried out by a tzaddik (the Hittites served as intermediaries, spoke favorably of Abraham, and were witnesses to the exchange) is considered to have fulfilled the Ten Commandments. – Midrash Sechel Tov

### Relatives Have Priority

It is written, “But to my land and to my kindred shall you go” (Bereshith 24:4).

Why did Abraham seek a wife for his son precisely from a place where everyone worshipped idols, as it is written: “Your forefathers – Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor – always dwelled beyond the River, and they served the gods of others” (Joshua 24:2)? Abraham thought: “Since I convert people, I will give priority to those of my household and my family, who come before others. Furthermore, they

are already close to repentance.” From here we learn that we must always deal with our relatives first and worry about their welfare (if we have the means), as it is written: “Do not hide yourself from your own flesh” (Isaiah 58:7). – Midrash Hagadol

### The Name of the Wicked

It is written, “Rebecca had a brother, and his name was Lavan” (Bereshith 24:29).

What does the term ach (“brother”) signify here?

Rabbi Eliezer says that whenever someone mentioned his name, he would exclaim: “Ach!” (an expression of scorn). – Midrash Hagadol

### He Died in His Wickedness

It is written, “And [Rebecca’s] brother and mother said...” (Bereshith 24:55).

What happened to Bethuel? Why did he not respond?

Upon seeing the bracelets which Eliezer had brought, the members of Rebecca’s family thought that Eliezer was very rich, and they sought to kill him.

Yet when they saw him crossing the river with two camels at the same time, they realized that they could not kill him by sheer force. Hence they presented him with food that was laced with poison. By the merit of Abraham, the dishes became mixed up and Bethuel died after eating the poisoned dish. – Midrash Avkir

## In the Light of the Parsha

### What is a “Good Shidduch”?

It is written, “You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. But to my land and to my kindred shall you go” (Bereshith 24:3-4).

Concerning the expression, “You shall not take,” our Sages explain: “He warned him against the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre” (Bereshith Rabba 59:8).

Why did Abraham feel the need to explicitly tell Eliezer, his steward, that he should not choose such women? Our teacher the Ran relates an important and extraordinary teaching in this regard:

“Although Lavan, the father of Rachel and Leah, was an idolater, Isaac preferred to enter into a pact with him rather than with the daughters of the Canaanites [i.e., the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre]. Despite the fact that man is endowed with freewill and has been given the permission to choose whatever path he desires – as the verse states, ‘See, I have placed before you life and good... You shall choose life’ [Devarim 30:15-19] – a person is inclined to develop certain character traits, either good or bad, and these virtues or faults are transmitted from one generation to the other. Since these faults were deeply rooted in the daughters of the Canaanites, the Patriarchs preferred to distance themselves from them and to cleave to someone in whom such traits were not so rooted, even if he was an idolater, for such traits would not be transmitted to their descendants.”

A historical event supporting these sacred words occurred when Eliyahu HaNavi performed a miracle on Mount Carmel before all the Children of Israel. Despite being idolaters, when they witnessed this miracle they all exclaimed: “Hashem, He is G-d” (I Kings 18:39).

The same applied to Lavan. When he witnessed a miracle, he immediately recognized it and said: “This comes from Hashem,” and afterwards he said, “As Hashem has spoken” (Bereshith 24:50-51). That is why Abraham chose an alliance with his family through marriage.

### The Teacher Who Studied for the Elevation of His Soul

It is written, “Abraham expired and died at a good old age, an old man and full [of years], and he was gathered to his people” (Bereshith 25:8).

The Sages teach, “It is written, ‘Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the final day’ [Mishlei 31:25]. The entire reward of the tzaddikim is kept ready for them for the World to Come. While still in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, shows them the reward that He will give them in the future. Their souls are then satisfied and they fall asleep” (Bereshith Rabba 62:2).

The Maggid Rabbi Shalom Schwadron Zatzal recounted the following story:

When we speak of the death of the tzaddikim in this week’s parsha, there is an interesting account mentioned in the book Lehagid. I studied in the Mea Shearim Talmud Torah, and my teacher at the time was Rabbi Yaakov, an exceptional man. Teaching at the cheder did not provide him with enough income, and so his wife helped him. She was a specialist in making Havdalah candles, but even that didn’t bring in enough money, since a single Havdalah candle lasts an entire year.

Rabbi Yaakov and his wife were therefore satisfied with little. “Little” in that time meant bread, and sometimes an onion and some black olives steeped in their bitter oil. However they were happy with their lot.

He was not my only teacher at Mea Shearim, but he did have one special characteristic: Rabbi Yaakov was more taciturn than anyone else.

There are few such people in our generation. Yet in my youth, we saw people in Jerusalem who spoke as little as possible, saying nothing mundane. There were some who did not speak at all from Rosh Chodesh Elul until the day after Yom Kippur, while others observed a “fast of words” for a week or two every month. Now we know that a “fast of words,” especially for a person who is naturally talkative, is more important than a regular fast, for it is much more difficult for him to be silent than to go hungry.

Besides his “fast of words” on Mondays and Thursdays, my teacher Rabbi Yaakov spoke very little even on days when he wasn’t engaged in such fasts.

It is said that he had a vocabulary of 20 or 30 mundane words, not more, which he spoke each day. We should realize that he was careful in this regard, having noticed that 30 words a day was more than enough, since people can also communicate somewhat with hand and eye gestures, a smile being equal to a thank you, looking down being interpreted as shyness, and so on. In short, he fulfilled the words of the Sages: “Which craft should a man pursue in this world? Let him become like a mute.”

Besides making certain that his tongue did not utter unnecessary words, he was very careful in regards to his mouth in another area, something that was Rabbi Yaakov’s main concern: Learning mishnayot by heart.

Our teacher knew the six orders of the Mishnah by heart, from the first mishnah in tractate Berachot to the last mishnah in tractate Uktzin.

He was always repeating mishnayot by heart, completing them and then restarting. Whenever we saw him sitting down and swaying a little on a bench in the Beit HaMidrash, or on a chair in the cheder schoolyard, we knew that Rabbi Yaakov was learning mishnayot. His friends thought that he repeated them by heart so as not to remain seated doing

nothing during the long winter nights, when there was no longer any fuel in Jerusalem. In those days, fuel as well as money was lacking, and Arab merchants did not want to sell fuel on credit. People were therefore forced to sit in the dark with their arms folded. Hence he learned them by heart so he could always fulfill the mitzvah: “When you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise.”

One day, as I was walking past the teachers’ lounge, I heard some teachers talking. I was a young boy at the time, and I tried to hear what they were saying. I understood a bit of their conversation, but didn’t understand everything. All of a sudden, I heard one of the most senior teachers saying to Rabbi Yaakov, “Rabbi Yaakov, tell me why you study mishnayot.”

As a smile started to appear on his face, Rabbi Yaakov looked at the teacher who asked him this question and said, all while smiling: “One day I told myself: I have taught Torah to children all my life, and I put an effort into learning at every spare moment. Yet what will I do when my soul is summoned on high and my body remains below? What will happen then? I told myself: As always, until I’m led to the grave, people will be seated near me reading tehillim, learning mishnayot or the Zohar, and in this way they will lead me to my final resting place. All this is fine on an ordinary day, when there are but a few hours between death and the grave. Yet nobody knows their hour, and perhaps mine will come on the eve of Shabbat, at the end of the day, and I will have to wait until late Saturday night before being buried as a Jew. Will anyone sit next to me through the night and all during the day on Shabbat to learn for the elevation of my soul?”

“That’s why I learn mishnayot by heart, and it’s why I repeat them every day: So that if there’s a long interval between my death and my burial, I will be able to study mishnayot for the elevation of my soul while my body rests on earth.”

The teachers smiled a little at this answer. They thought that it was an odd response coming from a man such as Rabbi Yaakov, and people didn’t fully understand it. However they didn’t speak about it much, and the matter was soon forgotten.

As a young boy, I personally witnessed this conversation, and it remained engraved in my heart.

Rabbi Yaakov himself finally reminded me of this incident, me and others, when he died one Friday in the late afternoon near sundown, meaning that his burial could only take place on Saturday night.

True, we didn’t see his lips moving, but we were certain that he continued learning mishnayot by heart for the elevation of his soul.

## Guard Your Tongue

### A Mitzvah to Judge Others Favorably

Even if what a person has been told proves to be true – that an individual has indeed spoken against him or done something against his will – and yet there is a way to judge that individual favorably, meaning that he did not have the intention of hurting him and so on, then we know that it is a mitzvah of judge him favorably. If a person does not want to judge that individual favorably, then the entire incident – what was said about him or done against him – becomes a sin and the person will resent that individual. Hence by not judging favorably, the listener violates the prohibition against accepting Rechilut.

– Chafetz Chaim

A pious man declared that he saw Eliyahu HaNavi in a cave, and he asked him why he was late in arriving. The prophet replied, “Because the Children of Israel are not careful in reading the letters and vowels of their prayers.”

This exchange, described in the book *Yesod VeShoresh HaAvodah* (just like the story recounted in the book *Nehora HaShalem*), highlights the importance of prayer when it is recited with the correct language, meaning with properly enunciated letters and vowels.

In the book *Lechem HaBikkurim*, Rabbi Shaul Hacoen underlines: “Do not think that it is useless to be meticulous because the Sages have said: ‘He takes me under His wing with love, and even if I mispronounce [a word], He accepts it with love.’ This expression applies only to children and complete ignoramus!”

Now to the instructive story recounted in the book *Nehora HaShalem*: A very pious man by the name of Rabbi Ezra the son of Rabbi Yedidia lived in a small town located near Viznitz. Since the age of seven, he had never slept for more than half the night. He studied the details of the Torah for three-quarters of his waking hours, and its secrets for the final quarter, until sunrise.

Since the age of 12, from the day he felt capable of handling responsibility, he never uttered a prayer, a *Birkat Hamazon*, a blessing, or read from the Torah, Prophets, or Writings without focusing on the meaning of what he was reading and with the necessary concentration. Only once, when he was busy mourning the loss of one of his sons, who died at the age of 8, did he not concentrate on what he was reading. More specifically, he failed to concentrate from the words *Baruch Hu Elokeinu Shebaranu Lichvodo* to the end of the prayers. He regretted this for the rest of his life, and he fasted until the day he died, to the point that his teeth became black due to his fasting.

Let us recount another story that bears witness to his piety: From the age of 10, he never prayed without a minyan, except for one time only. It happened during the war, when the governor of the city ordered all Jews, from the youngest to the oldest, to leave with their weapons. At that point, every minyan in the city disappeared.

He never sat down for a meal without inviting a poor person to join him. Likewise, he never recited *Birkat Hamazon* without a zimun, or without making a blessing over a cup of wine. He never had any money, not even a zuz [penny]. Until his wedding day, he lived with his mother. Afterwards, it was his wife who saw to all their financial needs through her business, which supplied the entire family with what they needed.

All these acts of piety, which we cannot doubt, were revealed to us by the tzaddik himself before he died. Thus at the age of 70, he raised his 10 fingers towards the heavens and guaranteed that all his deeds were done without any self-interest involved. He wanted people to be inspired by his conduct.

To sanctify the moon, he would wear special clothes. Furthermore, he often asserted: “How I yearn to act like Rav, who didn’t look beyond four cubits! But I’m not able to!”

After Rabbi Ezra’s passing, he appeared in a dream to his friend Rabbi Gedalia, the son of Rabbi Avraham (a very pious man, although he didn’t reach the level of Rabbi Ezra). In this dream, he said to him: “My friend, my friend, woe is me, for I wasted my life pursuing

futilities!” Upon hearing this, Rabbi Gedalia fell on the ground and wept bitterly, loud enough to wake his family. They themselves melted into tears and cried out, “Father, father, why are you crying?” Rabbi Gedalia then recounted his dream to them and said, “If a man as pious as Rabbi Ezra – whom everyone believed had a place reserved near Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – says that he wasted his life pursuing futilities, then what can we say? We’re like moss that grows on the walls, not having reached a hundredth of his importance!”

Without delay, they gathered all the residents in town, about 50 men, women, and children, and decided that for 30 consecutive days, each day for about two hours after the morning prayers, they would pray by his grave and ask him to reveal to one of them – either in a dream or while awake – just how he was negligent or what his sin was.

Thirty days later, he again appeared in a dream to Rabbi Gedalia. In weeping, he described how a year after his passing, the Celestial Court showed how his life had progressed from the day that he became accountable for his deeds. Nothing was missing. He was also shown how he once failed to concentrate in prayer, starting from the words *Baruch Hu Elokeinu Shebaranu Lichvodo*. He was then told, “Since you mortified yourself through fasting, G-d has forgiven you.” As a result, he smiled and was overjoyed, exclaiming: “Blessed be Hashem, Who has guided me in the path of the truth and did not allow me to fall into the hands of the one that would not have given me any chance to arise – the evil inclination,” he said in the dream.

He then described how he was told to raise his eyes, which he did, at which point he saw small flowers, as numerous as the stars. This greatly frightened him, and all his limbs began to tremble, his knees knocking together. He asked, “What does this mean?” He was told, “These are the vowels that you neglected, reading *tzereh* instead of *shevah* in your prayers, or by exchanging one vowel for another, as well as the letters that you omitted by not leaving any space between them when necessary. The vision you are seeing corresponds to the letters and vowels that you damaged. None are absent, and they are all accusing you, asking for you to be judged by saying, ‘This is the one who scorned us, who shamed us, and who prevented us from standing out in the celestial crown.’ Now G-d loves justice, and your sentence is to be reincarnated! Perhaps you will rectify what you damaged! Without your good deeds, your judgment would have been very severe.” When the sentence was handed down, Rav Ezra left the court, content and with a relieved heart. This is what he revealed in Rabbi Gedalia’s dream.

As soon as the townspeople heard this incredible story, they summoned the grammarian Rabbi Moshe Chaim from a great distance to teach them the rules of grammar. From then on, they were very careful with the letters, vowels, and spaces between letters that seem like the end of a word. All the members of the community, as well as their children and grandchildren, became accustomed to reading the mapik in the hei at every instance, as well as observing all the other details of pronunciation. From the time that Rabbi Moshe Chaim arrived in town, their prayers were accepted and they never experienced any suffering or hardship.

From this story we must learn to be attentive, to pay close attention to the words we recite in prayer and in our supplications to Hashem. We must not say anything to G-d without being extremely precise.