

Haftarot Unrolled: Chayei Sarah

Repetitions

The Haftarah tells the story of the succession to King David's throne. He is old and ill, and his son Adoniah acts as if he will succeed to the throne, despite King David's preference for Shlomo. Adoniah takes on some of the overt signs of monarchy and makes a feast, inviting the entire court - with the exception of Shlomo and his supporters.

The Haftarah repeats this story several times. First, we hear it from the point of view of the narrator, then Natan tells it to Batsheva, then Batsheva to David, and finally Natan to David. The repetitions do not add any detail, nor do the different perspectives add any new insight. What, then, is the purpose of that repetition?

Our Parsha exhibits similar characteristics. Chayei Sarah is famous for the repetition of the story of Eliezer and Rivka at the well. First, we are told of his plan: the girl he is looking for will be the one that offers to give water both to him and to the camels. Then, we hear it as it actually happens: Rivka comes, gives water to Eliezer and to the camels, and turns out to be Avraham's niece. He then goes to Rivka's house, and we hear all about it yet again, in detail, as he retells it to Rivka's family.

Finally, as if to tease us, when Eliezer brings Rivka to Yitzchak, this is how the entire event is described:

(טו) וַיְסַפֵּר הָעֶבֶד לְיִצְחָק אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה:

The servant told Yitzhak all the things that he had done. (Breishit 24:66)

Could this not have sufficed earlier, too?

Some suggest that the purpose of the first two repetitions is to learn about Eliezer's faith, that he relied on G-d and He came through for him. This explains the first two parts, the story of Eliezer's request for a sign, and the sign working out even better than he had hoped. But what could be the purpose of knowing exactly what he told Rivka's family? Could it not have said, "The servant told them all the things that he had done"?

This prompts Chazal to make the following statement:

א"ר אחא יפה שיחתן של עבדי בתי אבות מתורתן של בנים פרשתו של אליעזר שנים וג' דפים הוא אומרה ושונה ושרץ מגופי תורה ואין דמו מטמא כבשרו אלא מריבוי המקרא

R' Acha said: The conversations of the servants from the Forefathers' houses are more valuable than the Torah of their children. Eliezer's story takes up 2-3 pages, and repeats itself, but we learn the Torah law that an insect's blood does not cause impurity from a hint. (Breishit Rabba 60)

Important Halachot, practical laws, are not spelled out in the Torah; they need to be painstakingly derived from hints in the text. Our sources for important practical laws such as which text needs to be inside Tefillin, or whether or not we need to eat Matza for seven days or only one day, are derived from unusual phrasings or apparent contradictions. It is as if writing the laws out explicitly were a waste of ink.

Yet for the story of Eliezer, there's plenty of room. Pages and pages of it, most of the Parsha, when the entire thing could have been summed up in about three verses.

The Midrash draws the obvious conclusion: the Torah cares more about the conversations of the servants of our forefathers, than it does about making sure that important laws that you and I must keep are written clearly.

Why? What is the value of recording what Eliezer said to Betuel and Lavan? What is the lesson that could not have been conveyed in any other manner?

Nechama Leibowitz (Studies in Breishit, Chayei Sarah), in her analysis of the differences between the version of the narrator and the version of Eliezer, points out that Eliezer's story has a particular slant that makes it obvious that he had an agenda. In his speech, he keeps repeating that everything came from G-d: his master's fabulous wealth, the mission itself, the choice of the woman for his master. He points out that as a servant, he has no will of his own, and likewise, his master Avraham, as a servant of G-d, has no will of his own. Eliezer keeps drilling in the point that G-d is the cause of everything that has happened.

It is nice to hear of the faith that Eliezer had in G-d. Yet to suggest that Eliezer was simply sharing his view of the world is inadequate. He is now at a critical juncture of his mission. Once he found the girl, the very worst thing that could happen is that she will not come - or that she will not be allowed to come. The Torah implies that Rivka does not require much convincing. She recognizes very quickly that unlike her home, her life with Avraham's son will be full of truth and purpose. But Eliezer also needs to convince her family. While Betuel is Rivka's father, in the ancient world, the brothers had a say in their sisters' welfare. It appears that the real decision of whether or not Rivka marries Yitzchak is in Lavan's hands. We get to know Lavan later on, as the father of Rachel and Leah, and we see that he has absolutely no scruples when it comes to getting his own way. We also see that he is very possessive about his family¹, and prefers to have them firmly under his thumb. Eliezer's task is not easy: how to get Lavan to let Rivka go?

Betuel and Lavan were pagan; as we say in the Haggada, "originally, our ancestors were idol worshippers". The pagan relationship with their gods is a manipulative tug-of-war: if you come up with the proper offerings, your god will give you what you want, but if he's made up his mind, it's fate, and you can't do anything to change it². Eliezer thus phrases his entire narrative in a context that they could relate to: Hashem has given Avraham great wealth (point: this god is powerful). Avraham serves Hashem (point: the wealth is conditional on the service). Hashem has miraculously singled out Rivka to be the bride (point: Hashem has made up His mind, and it is impossible to try to get out of it). Indeed, he presents his case so well that he elicits the perfect response:

¹ As he tells Yaakov, "your children are mine". Yaakov snuck out because he feared that Lavan would never have given him permission to leave.

² In contrast, Avraham argues with G-d and prays to him, and his offerings come with no strings attached.

(ג) וַיֵּעַן לָבֵן וּבְתוּאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִהּ יָצָא הַדָּבָר; לֹא נוֹכַל דַּבֵּר אֵלָיךָ רַע אוֹ טוֹב:
Lavan and Betuel answered: **This came from Hashem**; it doesn't matter
what we say.

They might not be particularly happy about it, but they bow to what they perceive to be fated, and let Rivka go. Eliezer achieves his goal and his mission is a success.

In contrast, when he reports on his mission, he does not need to put on a show for his master, and the Torah can comfortably sum it up as: "The servant told Yitzhak all the things that he had done."

Now we are suitably impressed with Eliezer's skill as a negotiator, with his understanding of the mindset of his target audience, and the difficulty of his mission.

Still the question remains: why is this in the Torah? Why is Eliezer's skill as a negotiator so important that it rates pages and pages of text?

Perhaps what we need to look at is the alternative, the other way it might have gone, if the servant were not a member of Avraham's household.

Several chapters earlier, in Parshat Breishit, when the Torah talks about why the world needs to be destroyed, one of the reasons it gives is that great men would "take themselves wives, whoever they chose" (Breishit 6:2). If it sounds romantic, that they married for love, that is not the intention. The Midrash says: "took wives: women who were already married to someone else" (Breishit Rabba 26:5). If a wealthy and powerful man would see someone he liked, he would take her. He would not ask permission - not from her family, not from her husband if she had one, certainly not from her. He would just take.

Avraham is wealthy. He is respected, even powerful. He needs a girl from a specific family for his son. If he sends his servant, and the servant finds a suitable girl, but she doesn't want to go, what should happen? Would his servant make her family "an offer they can't refuse"?

Avraham? Never.

Is that because after the Flood, taking women by force was no longer acceptable by the newly rebuilt society, and wasn't an option for anyone? Hardly. When the strikingly beautiful Sarah appears in the court of Pharaoh, there are two alternatives: if she's married, her husband can be killed so she can be taken. Or, if she is under the protection of a brother, the brother can be paid, and she can be taken. The brother doesn't need to agree; it's not up to him at all.

But for Avraham, about whom Hashem himself said, "For I know him; that he will command his children, and his household after him; they will keep the way of Hashem, to do righteousness and justice"³, this is not how things are done. Eliezer, a member of Avraham's household and his representative, who keeps the way of Hashem, would not dream of using force, or guile, or bribery, to take Rivka from Lavan.

How, then, does one get what one desperately needs, if one can't take it?

³ Breishit 18:19, in VaYeira, quoted above

That is where diplomacy comes in. It is possible to get people to cooperate. It is possible to convince them of your need, of the rightness of your way, to create a narrative that they can identify with, to cause them to do the right thing.

To show us how this is done - *that* this is done - the Torah is prepared to invest a little bit of ink and a few pages of parchment. It is not something that one can derive through logic, from a hint in the text. It needs to be explicit.

Using his wits and his faith, Eliezer convinced Lavan, the most selfish man in all of Tanach, to let his sister out of his clutches. If this is possible, then other things are possible, too. Justice and righteousness, "the way of Hashem", can succeed in this world.

In the Haftarah, the story has the same structure as the Parsha. Like Eliezer, we hear Natan and Batsheva making a plan to ensure that Shlomo is crowned, and we see them carrying it out. Unlike Eliezer, they did not ask for Divine Intervention. Nor did they need to manipulate David into doing the right thing. Why then, is their plan recorded in the Tanach? What were the alternatives there, what did not happen that might have?

In the ancient world, a contested royal succession meant inevitable bloodshed. Whichever of the princes wound up taking the throne would immediately murder the remaining contenders and their supporters. In a lesser kingdom than David's, one that was not founded on "justice and righteousness", Natan and Batsheva would have arranged for the warriors that sided with Shlomo to attack Adoniah's supporters.

But that is not what happened. Natan and Batsheva needed something very desperately - it was a matter of life and death - and yet they did not take it by force. They achieved their goals through polite, well-considered discourse, maintaining respect and dignity - their own, and that of the aging King David.

The lesson of Eliezer's diplomatic success is the lesson of Natan and Batsheva's diplomatic success. In a society based on justice and righteousness, there is power in words.

And that is a lesson worth repeating.

Twice.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל