



עֵלֵי חֹדֶשׁ

# Clilei HaChodesh

Tevet 5780

## Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

### The Great Escape

Jeffrey Lautman

Some of you may recognize this as the title of a famous movie about Allied prisoners who escape from a German POW camp during World War II. Truly, a very worthwhile movie.

In Parshat Chayei Sarah, Rivka devises her own great escape.

In Chapter 24, after Eliezer<sup>1</sup> has shared his story with Rivka's family, the following dialogue occurs:

54 And they did eat and drink, he and the men that were with him, and tarried all night; and they rose up in the morning, and he said: 'Send me away unto my master.'

55 And her brother and her mother said: 'Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go.'

56 And he said unto them: 'Delay me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master.'

57 And they said: 'We will call the damsel, and inquire at her mouth.'

58 And they called Rebekah, and said unto her: 'Wilt thou go with this man?' And she said: 'I will go.'

59 And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men.

When Eliezer wishes to depart with Rivka, Lavan and his mother display ambivalence regarding the agreement by requesting that Rivka remain with them "for a year or ten months." They further downplay the idea of her departure in *pasuk* 57, suggesting that "we will call the young girl," and, in an odd phrase, "ask of her mouth."

They do not refer to her by name – and when the Torah uses a pronoun instead of an individual's name, it means to clue us in to the mindset of the other people in the story.

In the minds of Lavan and his mother, Rivka is not a family member of equal standing, but merely a "young girl," unable to make up her own mind. They do not ask what she wants to do, but rather "we will ask her mouth." They fully anticipated that she would not have a cognitive answer, but rather one rooted in their family values. They assumed she would parrot the perspectives inculcated by her upbringing in their family.

They then go on to denigrate Eliezer. In *pasuk* 58, Eliezer is no longer the messenger from a wealthy baron, possessive of great wealth; here, he is referred to as just "that man."

Rivka's mother and brother were expecting her to say "I will stay home," but instead she responds with one word: "לך – I will go." Rashi elaborates on this word: "Even if you don't want me to, I am going."

Did Rivka suddenly summon the courage to stand up to her brother and mother, or was she perhaps planning this all along?

When Rivka first encountered Eliezer, he asked for a bit of water from her jug. Eliezer had already stipulated that Yitzchak's future bride would be the one to give him water and also to offer water for his camels. Rivka fulfills this condition but takes it even one step further, stating that she will draw water for the camels "until they have completely finished drinking" (v. 19). Camels used in caravans will drink for hours to replenish their losses and build up their internal water stores. Why would she make such an extreme offer?

Further, when Eliezer asks for a place to spend the night, she adds an interesting detail: "We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in" (v. 25). Why emphasize that her family has lots of straw and food for him and his animals?

I would like to propose that the bold statement of "I will go" at the end of the story allows us insight into Rivka's mindset at the beginning of the story.

Here is a young girl growing up in a house of corruption and immorality, with little opportunity to assert her own viewpoints. Perhaps, when she sees this man coming of obvious power and wealth, Rivka recognizes a chance to escape; perhaps she sees some quality in him that she would like to escape to. She therefore spends hours demonstrating her worth to him, and when he asks for a place to lodge, her answer hints that they are a wealthy family and he should try to make a deal for her.

This capability of Rivka's, to take charge and manipulate an outcome, then becomes the major theme of Parshat Toledos.

### Chanukah and the Oral Torah

Rabbi Daniel Olgin

The Al Hanissim prayer that we insert in the Amidah for Chanukah states:

*In the days of Mattityahu, son of Yochanan High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons, when the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel, to make them forget Your Torah and cause them to abandon your Mitzvot...*

How did the Greeks attempt to subvert the Jewish people from Torah belief and practice? Unlike Purim, when annihilation was decreed against every Jew in the world, the Greeks didn't want physical genocide; their

battle against us was in the realm of the Mind and Soul. If we would just give up our belief in an invisible God, stop keeping the Mitzvot, and become like the Greeks, everything would be ok.

The Sages in the Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 2:4) relate that the Greeks darkened the eyes of the Jews with their decrees, saying, "Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the God of Israel." What is the meaning of this cryptic statement? We have to go back almost a century before the events of Chanukah to understand.

<sup>1</sup> Although the text does not identify Avraham's messenger by name, many commentators identify him as Eliezer.

After the Greek conquest of the entire known world by Alexander the Great, the Greeks and the Jews became acquainted but really didn't know what to make of each other. The Jews were the only monotheists in the world and held that everything that exists was created and is sustained by One, infinite, invisible God, who concerns Himself with the lives of imperfect mortals. The Greeks found this concept incomprehensible in light of their paganism and nascent philosophy. They also could not understand the Jewish adherence to the ancient book called the Torah that Jews claimed they received from God and that prescribed a lifestyle far removed from Greek values.

The Jews were perplexed as well. Despite their paganism, the Greeks seemed to value education and intellectual pursuits, which the Jews also valued and admired. The Greek language was beautiful, and as time went by and Greek became the international intellectual language of the Mediterranean world, the Jews became conversant in it as well.

After Alexander died and his kingdom broke up, Israel fell under the political control of Ptolemies of Egypt. Their capital city of Alexandria became the cultural and intellectual center of the world. In 246 BCE, King Ptolemy III requested that the Torah be translated into Greek and added to his great storehouse of wisdom, the fabled Great Library of Alexandria. The Talmud relates:

*It happened that King Ptolemy gathered seventy-two sages and placed them in seventy-two houses without telling them why he had brought them together. He went to each one of them and told him, "Translate for me into Greek the Torah of your master Moshe." (Megillah 9b)*

Miraculously, upon the completion of their work, the sages emerged from their houses with identical Greek translations.

On the one hand, Ptolemy's desire to become apprised of the Jewish world view and include the wisdom of the Torah in his magnificent Alexandrian library was a compliment to the Jewish People.

On the other hand, the translation of the Seventy – the Septuagint – was considered a national disaster for the Jewish people and a tragedy our Sages describe as "three days of darkness that descended upon the world." What was so bad about the Torah being translated into Greek?

Now the Torah no longer exclusively belonged to the Jewish People. Rather, the Torah had become merely another source of wisdom, another culture, another subject in the university catalogue.

In the hands of the non-Jewish world, the Tanach has often been used against us and in many cases has been deliberately mistranslated. From Greek to Latin and then to the various English translations, countless interpretations, mistakes, and deliberate mistranslations – perpetrated by Christian scholars in order to "bend" the biblical text to prove Christian theology – have occurred.

Just one thing mitigated the tragedy of the new Greek translation: only *Torah sh'bktav* (the written Torah) was shared with the world. *Torah sh'b'al'peh* (the Oral Torah) remained the exclusive property of the Jewish People, its transmission dependent on the *rebbe-talmid* relationship.

Rabbi Nota Schiller, Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, relates a fascinating story from when he was learning at Ner Yisrael and taking classes at Johns Hopkins University. At the time, the Semitic Studies Department at Johns Hopkins was headed by Professor William F. Albright. One day professor Albright came in clutching a photocopied page of Talmud. Clearly frustrated, he approached one of the yeshiva boys and said, "I've translated the text and correctly identified the etymology of every single word on this page, but I can't for the life of me understand what it's saying!"

Albright's frustration was not accidental. Our Sages anticipated and orchestrated it. They knew that if anyone could open the Gemara, read it, and properly understand it, then the Torah as a product of transmission from rabbi to student, as portrayed in Pirkei Avot 1:1, with the particular approach of the Jewish People, would end. The unique nature of the Talmud demands that in order to be part of the *mesorah* of the Jewish People, one must become a link in the unbroken chain that stretches from this very day all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu over 3300 years ago.

When, 150 years after the Torah was translated into Greek, the Greeks said, "Write upon the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the God of Israel," they were demanding access to the oral Torah as well as the written. Just as you translated the Bible, now write down *Torah sh'b'al'peh* and grant us access to it as well. The Jewish people rejected this request, as accepting it would spell the end of Torah life.

Just as the Oral Torah is the lifeblood of the Written Torah, Chanukah is the celebration of preserving Oral Law in the face of Greek culture.

Unlike with Purim, Chanukah has no megillah, no canonized book detailing the battles. Why? Because in the post-prophetic days when Chanukah occurred, the story must be transmitted orally. At the center of this battle was the Greeks' attempt to destroy the Oral Torah; instead, we created a new holiday through the mechanism of the Oral Torah.

The blessing we say on the candles is, "...Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to light the flame of Chanukah." Where are we commanded? Which verse in the Torah mandates this? The unusual origin of this mitzvah is its very strength: The Torah endowed our Sages with the authority to legislate for the Jewish People, and the mitzvah of Chanukah represents that power of the Oral Torah. That which the Greeks sought to extinguish is symbolized by the light that illuminates the darkness of exile.

Chanukah is the holiday of the Oral Torah, and its celebration reminds us of the wisdom and genius of the Jews, expressed and refined through the Oral Torah which makes us Jewish.

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