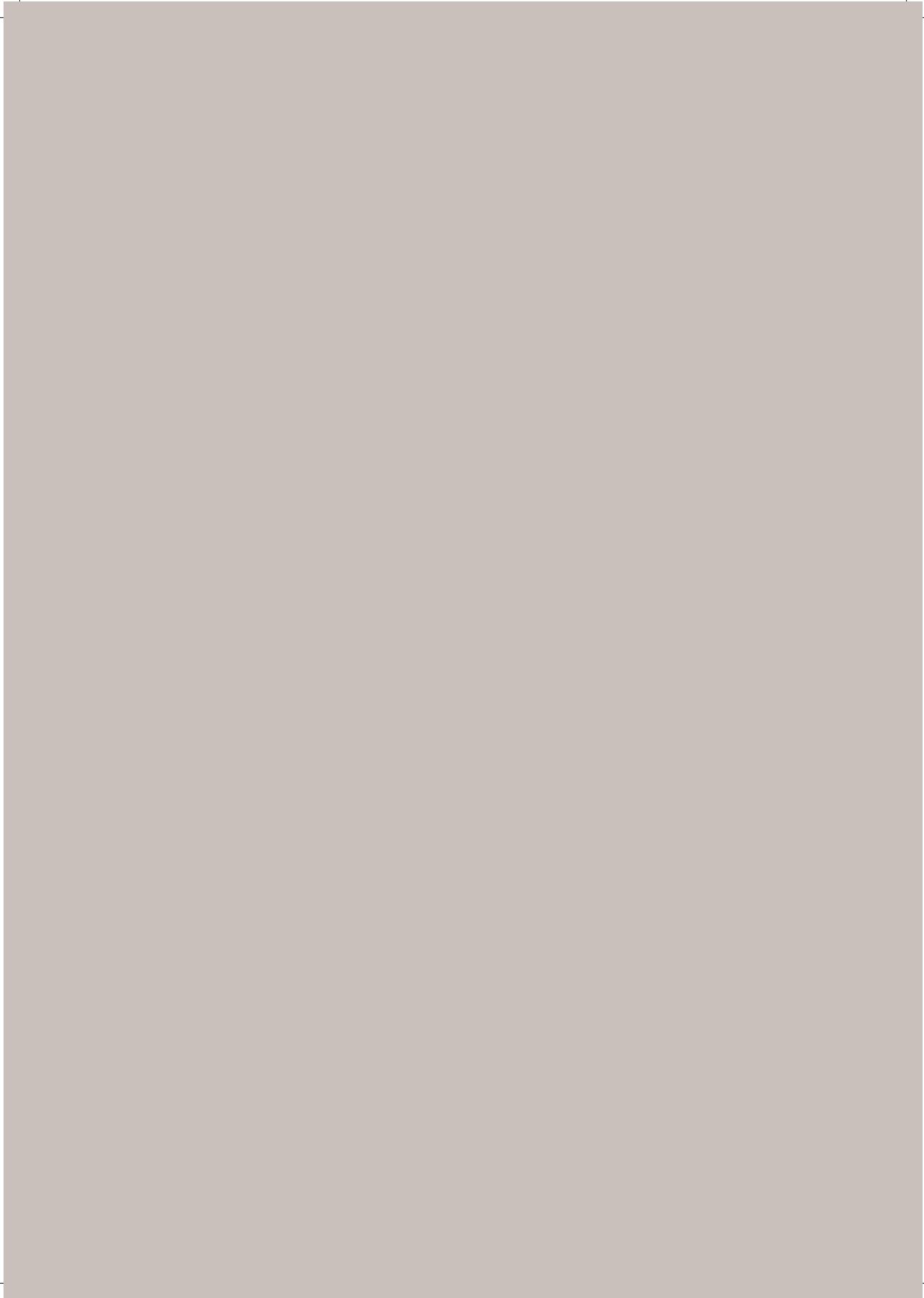


Parashat Chayei Sarah

Sharon Rimon





”לא תקח אשה לבני מבנות הכנעני...“

”רק אל תשב את בני שמה“

“You shall not take a wife
for my son from the
daughters of Canaan...”

Do not allow my
son to return there”

Genesis Ch. 24, v. 1-8

- Why does Abraham not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman?
- What do we know about Canaan?
- Why does Isaac not find a wife for himself?
- When mutually exclusive, which is preferable - having a wife who is not Canaanite, or living in the Land of Israel?

A. Abraham's Last Deeds

Chayei Sarah describes Abraham's last three deeds, which characterize his way of life.

Buying
the Cave of
Machpela -
Keeping the
Promise to
Inherit
the Land

His first deed is the purchase of the Cave of Machpela (Gen. 23). Why does the Torah devote so much space to this story? Why isn't it enough to say, "And he bought the Cave of Machpela, and he buried Sarah there"? This detailed description of Abraham's actions gives the impression that there is something more to this narrative. The text provides details of the purchase and repeatedly emphasizes Abraham's refusal to accept the cave as a gift – he insists on paying a generous amount for it. Even though God has promised the Land of Canaan to Abraham, Abraham knows that the promise will not be fulfilled automatically - **he must actively fulfill it**. Therefore he acts as a foreigner; never as though the land already belongs to him. He knows that he must take steps to acquire the land.¹

1 The *mishna* in tractate *Avot* notes that Abraham endured ten trials and passed all of them (*Avot* 5:3). According to most commentators, the Binding of Isaac was the last trial. This is stated in *Sanhedrin* 89b and quoted in Rashi's commentary on the verse "And God tested Abraham" (Gen. 22:1): "'Pass this test for Me, so that others will not say that there was no substance to the first [tests],' meaning that with this test [Abraham] completed the series of trials proving his devotion to God." See also the commentary of Rambam and Bartenura ad loc.

However, in Rabbenu Yona's opinion, the Binding of Isaac was the ninth trial, with the tenth possibly being **Sarah's burial**. Abraham was told: "'Get up and walk in the land, travel the length and breadth of it, for I will give it to you,' and when his wife died he could not find a place to bury her until he bought one, and did not hesitate – this shows the depth of Abraham's

When God tells Abraham, “Get up and walk in the land, travel the length and breadth of it, for I will give it to you” (Gen. 13:17), Abraham understands that in order to receive the land he must travel it – which he does throughout his life. In addition, Abraham begins to purchase the land with his own money. The Cave of Machpela is the first site bought by Abraham in the Land of Canaan.²

**Finding Isaac
a Wife –
Fulfilling the
Promise for
Descendants**

Abraham’s second act is finding a wife for his son Isaac (Gen. 24). God promised Abraham that “through Isaac you shall have descendants” (Gen. 21:12). The fulfillment of God’s promise for descendants is meant to be through Isaac – he will be the progenitor of the “great nation” (Gen. 12:2) that was promised to Abraham. At the end of his life, Abraham searches for a worthy wife for Isaac to ensure that this promise will also be fulfilled. This has two purposes: to ensure (a) that he will have children and (b) that these children will be worthy of continuing the covenant with God,³

affection.”

Thus, according to Rabbenu Yona, this section describes Abraham’s test of purchasing the land.

- 2 Every purchase of land is significant, but buying a burial plot is even more so since it literally connects a person to the ground.
- 3 See Radak’s commentary on Gen. 24:3: “For the descendants of Canaan are cursed, and my offspring are blessed – and the blessed shall not mix with the cursed.” See also Ralbag ad loc.: “And the Canaanite customs were very corrupt, until Canaan was finally cursed...and for this reason Abraham distanced his son Isaac from marrying a Canaanite.”

In contrast, Chizkuni (ad loc.) actually draws a connection between the search for a worthy wife and the inheritance of the land: “Lest they say of me, ‘Through inheritance and gift

that latter of which requires a suitable wife.

**Isaac –
Abraham’s
Sole Heir**

Abraham’s third act is choosing his heir (Gen. 25:1-6). Before his death Abraham clarifies that Isaac is his only heir to prevent arguments over his inheritance. To this end, he sends the sons of his concubines away and bequeaths all of his property to Isaac.⁴

**The Promises –
Goals to be
Achieved**

While God may have promised Abraham land and descendants, Abraham does not take this for granted, but rather as a goal that he must work to reach – he takes action in order to merit settling the land and establishing a line of descendants.

he came by the land,’ and so I want to receive it only from God by His strength.” Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor offers a similar explanation as well.

- 4 Rambam explains: “Since it was said to him, ‘For through Isaac you shall have descendants’ – not through any other offspring (for his other wives were concubines, who are not considered wives, since their offspring do not inherit)” (Rambam on Gen. 25:6). Radak offers a similar interpretation: “And he sent them away from Isaac, his son’ – so that they would not be a nuisance to him or fight with him about the matter of inheritance.”

B. A Suitable Wife for Isaac

The Worthy
Wife – Haran,
not Canaan

The search for Isaac's wife begins with an oath sworn to Abraham by his servant Eliezer:⁵

(1) And Abraham was very old, and God had blessed Abraham with everything. (2) And Abraham said to his servant, the eldest of his house, who was in charge of his household, "Put your hand under my thigh, (3) and swear by God, Lord of the heavens and the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of Canaanites among whom I live. (4) Rather, go to my land, my homeland, and take a wife for my son, for Isaac." (Gen. 24:1-4)	(א) וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בְיָמִים וַה' בֵּרַךְ אֶת אַבְרָהָם בְּכֹל: וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל עֶבְדוֹ זָקֵן בֵּיתוֹ הַמְּשֻׁל בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ שֵׁים נָא יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי: (ג) וְאִשְׁבִּיעַךְ בַּה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֱלֹהֵי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא תִקַּח אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִבְּנוֹת הַכְּנַעֲנִי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּקִרְבָּו: (ד) כִּי אֶל אֶרֶצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי תֵלֵךְ וְלִקַּחְתָּ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי לְיִצְחָק:
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Abraham's words reveal the type of woman that would be suitable for Isaac = one who is not Canaanite, who comes from Abraham's homeland.

Two aspects of Abraham's request require explanation:

A. Why does Abraham oppose marriage to

5 According to *Yoma* 28b, Abraham's servant is Eliezer: "And Abraham said to his servant, the eldest of his house, who was in charge of [also: master of] his household' – Rabbi Elazar said, 'He had mastered his master's Torah (Gen. 15), which is Eliezer of Damascus.'"

Caananites? Isn't it possible that there are suitable women among them (perhaps the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre,⁶ Abraham's allies and students;⁷ or even one of the daughters of Eliezer himself, who served Abraham and learned from his ways)?⁸ Couldn't he "convert" a Canaanite woman (after all, Abraham was already involved in bringing people closer to God)?⁹

B. Why is Abraham only interested in a woman from his birthplace considering that God commanded him to "Go from your country, your homeland, and your

6 According to Rashi (see his commentary on Gen. 24:8, s.v. "you will be released"), this is the default option – (see below).

7 See Gen. 14:13. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 27* states that they were Abraham's students: "Abraham rose early in the morning and took his three students with him, Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, and his servant Eliezer with them, and chased after them until the Dan region." See also *Pesikta Zutra, Bereshit 18*.

8 This possibility is mentioned by the *midrash*:

"כְּנָעַן בְּיָדוֹ מֵאֻנֵּי מִרְמֶה לְעֵשֶׂק אֱהָב, הוֹשַׁע י"ב, ח. "כְּנָעַן" - זֶה אֱלִיעֶזֶר. "בִּידוֹ מֵאֻנֵּי מִרְמֶה" - שְׂהִידָה יוֹשֵׁב וּמְשַׁקֵּל אֶת בִּתּוֹ, רְאוּיָה הִיא, אוֹ אִינָה רְאוּיָה. "לְעֵשֶׂק אֱהָב" - לְעֵשׂוֹק אֱהוּבוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, זֶה יִצְחָק. אָמַר, אוֹלֵי לֹא תֵאבְדָה וְאֵתָן לוֹ אֶת בִּתִּי? אָמַר לוֹ (=אֲבָרְהָם): אֵתָה אֲרוּר וּבְנֵי בְרוּךְ, וְאֵין אֲרוּר מִתְדַבֵּק בְּבְרוּךְ.

"In Canaan's hand are scales of deceit, to defraud the beloved" (Hosea 12:8): "Canaan" – this is Eliezer. "In his hand are scales of deceit" – that he would sit at home and weigh [evaluate] his daughter, to see whether or not she was worthy. "To defraud the beloved" – to defraud the beloved of the world, who is Isaac. He said, "Perhaps she [the woman from Haran] will not be willing, and I shall give him my daughter?" He (Abraham) answered him: "You are cursed, and my son is blessed, and the cursed cannot cleave to the blessed." (*Bereshit Rabba 59:9*)

This *midrash* is quoted by Rashi in his commentary on Gen. 24:39.

9 See Rashi on Gen. 12:5.

father's house, to a land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1)? The meaning of this command is not merely geographical; Abraham is meant to disconnect himself from the culture of the population as well.¹⁰ How could Abraham want to take a wife for his son specifically from the culture that God commanded him to distance himself from? Why not from the Canaanite women, about whom God issued no such command?

10 This is explicitly stated in Joshua 24:2 as well:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם כֹּה-אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַנְּהָר יָשְׁבוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵעוֹלָם תֵּרַח אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאָבִי נְחוֹר וַיַּעֲבָדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים..

And Joshua said to the entire nation, "Thus says the Lord, God of Israel: 'Long ago, your forefathers – including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor – lived across the Jordan and worshiped other gods.'" (Jos. 24:2)

It is written in the *midrash*:

שמעתי בת וראוי והטי אונק זה אברהם, ושכחי עמך ובית אביך זו עבודת כו"ם... כך היה אברהם דר בתוך עובדי כו"ם א"ל הקב"ה לך לך מארצך ואני אודיע טבעך בעולם.

Hear, daughter, and see, listen to Abraham, and forget your father's house of idolatry... So Abraham lived among idolaters, and God said to him, "Go from your land, and I will make your nature known in the world." (*Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha* 3)

This is also mentioned in *To'alot LeRalbag* (*Parashat Lekh Lekha* Part I):

שראוי לאדם שיקל לו הפרדו מארצו וממשפחתו ומבית אביו, ללכת במקום שיאות לו יותר ההגעה אל שלמותו לפי שלוה התכלית נברא.

It is proper that a man should easily part from his land, his family and his father's house, in order to go to a place that will better serve his efforts toward wholeness, for this is the purpose for which he was created.

He seems to understand that Abraham's place of residence would have impeded his spiritual development, which indicates that there was a cultural problem with Abraham's birthplace.

**What is the
Servant's
Question?**

We will discuss these questions later on. Let us first consider Eliezer's reaction:

(5) And the servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman will not be willing to follow me to this land; shall I surely return your son to the land which you left?" (Gen. 24:5)

(ה) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הָעֶבֶד
אוּלַי לֹא תֵאָבֶה הָאִשָּׁה
לְלֶכֶת אַחֲרַי אֶל הָאָרֶץ
הַזֹּאת הֲהֵשֵׁב אָשִׁיב
אֶת בְּנִי אֶל הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר יָצֵאתָ מִשָּׁם:

Abraham's servant suggests a reasonable possibility: what should he do if the woman from Haran refuses to return to Canaan? This seems to be a strictly technical question, but both the question and Abraham's response reveal the nature of Abraham's request. If Abraham does not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite and is interested only in a woman from Haran, the most logical course of action would be to send Isaac to Haran to find a wife for himself. Apparently Abraham does not want Isaac to go to Haran – but why? If it is so crucial that Isaac marry someone from Haran, he should travel there to find a suitable wife himself. It seems as though the servant realizes that the issue is more complex, which prompts him to ask his question.¹¹

**Isaac Shall Not
Go to Haran**

Through Abraham's response, we see that Eliezer's question was warranted:

11 Eliezer deduces this from the fact that *he* was sent to bring Isaac a wife. If it were possible for Isaac to go to himself to Haran to choose a wife, Eliezer would not need to go.

(6) And Abraham said to him, וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו (ו)
“Only do not allow my son to אַבְרָהָם הַשְּׂמֹר לְךָ פֶּן
return there.” (Gen. 24:6) תָּשִׁיב אֶת בְּנִי שָׂמָּה:

Abraham’s response is actually quite harsh – “Only do not...” warns Eliezer against even considering allowing such a thing to happen.

Through the servant’s question it is apparent that another crucial point has been added to his mission: Isaac is not allowed to leave the Land of Israel and settle in Haran. Abraham’s harsh language emphasizes the importance of this point.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO ABRAHAM THAT ISAAC NOT TRAVEL TO HARAN?

If it is because God commanded Abraham to leave his country and its culture, why should he find a wife for Isaac there while forbidding Isaac from actually going there? Perhaps Abraham recognizes that Isaac must remain in the land and never leave it?¹²

Land and
Lineage – Two
Essential Values

Through Abraham and Eliezer’s dialogue it seems that the search for Isaac’s wife is a complex task with two opposing values: (a) finding an appropriate wife for Isaac and (b) Isaac’s remaining in the Land of Israel.

The promise of land and the promise of descendants are both central aspects of Abraham’s life, which he is not willing to abandon. But when

12 Radak writes a similar idea: “For Abram did not want him to leave his authority, from the land that God gave to him and his descendants” (Radak on Gen. 24:6).

the two values collide – which will he favor?? Which value will Abraham sacrifice in order to ensure that the other is upheld?

**Isaac Must
Remain in the
Land**

Abraham will not tolerate Isaac's leaving the Land of Israel under any circumstance. He repeats this at the end of his speech:

(8) And if the woman is not willing to follow you, you will be released from this oath of mine, only do not allow my son to return there. (Gen. 24:8)

(ח) וְאִם לֹא תֵאָבֶה
הָאִשָּׁה לָלֶכֶת אַחֲרַי
וְנִקִּיתָ מִשְׁבָּעֵתִי זֹאת
רַק אֶת בְּנִי לֹא תָשֻׁב
שָׁמָּה:

Abraham's answer seems to emphasize that **Isaac's remaining in the Land of Israel is crucial** and should not be sacrificed for any reason.

**A Worthy
Canaanite
Woman**

If the servant is not able to find a woman from Haran that is willing to come to Canaan, it seems as though Isaac would have to marry a Canaanite woman. This is indicated by Rashi's comment on verse 8:

“And you will be released from this oath of mine” – and take a wife for him from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. (Rashi on Gen. 24:8)

“וְנִקִּיתָ מִשְׁבָּעֵתִי”:
וְקַח לוֹ אִשָּׁה
מִבְּנוֹת עֵנֶר אֶשְׁכּוֹל
וּמַמְרֵא.

Who are Aner, Eshkol and Mamre? They are mentioned in Gen. 14:13 as young men who joined Abraham in the war against the four kings. The *midrash* describes them as Abraham's students and allies. They were apparently righteous and had daughters that were

worthy for Isaac.¹³

“Do not take
from the
daughters
of the
Canaanites”?

However, according to the midrash, the condition that Isaac’s wife not be from the women of Canaan refers specifically to the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre.¹⁴ These are the women whom Eliezer might have considered as potential marriage partners for Isaac, despite their being from Canaan – but Abraham specifically forbids Eliezer from choosing one of them.

According to Rashi, were no woman found in Haran willing to come to Canaan, Abraham **would agree to give up his position that Isaac’s wife not be from Canaan.** Instead, he could find a wife from among the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, who, though from Canaan, are righteous.

In light of the above, it seems that Abraham values living in the Land of Israel over marrying a woman

13 See *Bereshit Rabba* 57:3: “Abraham was thinking – he said [to himself]: ‘[Even] had he died on Mount Moriah, he could not have died without children. Now, what shall I do? I shall choose a wife for him **from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, who are righteous**, and why should I care about their lineage?’ God said to him: ‘You no longer need to; his match has already been born, for Milcah has also borne children to your brother Nahor.’”

14 See *Bereshit Rabba* 59:8: “‘That you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of Canaanites among whom I live’ – he warned him not to go to the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre.” The *midrash* deduces this from the phrase “among whom I live,” and from Gen. 14:13: “And he lived in Elonei Mamre [of Mamre] the Amorite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner, who were Abraham’s allies.” See also the *midrash Sekhel Tov, Bereshit* 24.

who is not Canaanite. However, this assumption is puzzling since the very first thing that Abraham commands his servant regarding Isaac's marriage is, "[do] not take a wife for my son from the daughters of Canaanites." This is the first condition in the servant's oath to Abraham - it must be a crucial point. Now we will address the following questions: why does Abraham object so strongly to marriage to Canaanites? Would he be willing to forgo this condition?

**Marriage to
Canaanites to
Inherit the
Land?**

As mentioned above, even though God promised Abraham the land, Abraham does not passively wait for God to give it to him. He understands that he must act in order to transfer the land to his ownership and initiates this through the purchase of the Cave of Machpela. Another possible way to acquire land would be to have his son marry the daughters of the local inhabitants and become a resident of the land himself. This way he would receive his own portion of land and his descendants would naturally multiply and settle the rest of it.

But Abraham makes it clear that this is not his desire. He is not willing to choose a Canaanite woman for Isaac, even if the marriage would help promote settling the land. Why?

c. The Canaanites

Ham, Father
of Canaan
- Revealing
His Father's
Nakedness

Who are the Canaanites and what do we know about them? They are first introduced in the story of Noah's intoxication following the Flood:

(20) And Noah, a man of the earth, proceeded to plant a vineyard. (21) And he drank from the wine and became drunk, and exposed himself in his tent. (22) And Ham, **father of Canaan**, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. (23) And Shem and Japheth took the garment and put it on both of their shoulders, and they walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness while facing away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. (24) And Noah sobered from his drink, and he knew what his young son had done to him. (Gen. 9:20-24)

(כ) וַיַּחַל נֹחַ אִישׁ
הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּטַּע כְּרָם:
(כא) וַיִּשְׁתֶּה מִן הַיַּיִן
וַיִּשְׁכָּר וַיִּתְגַּל בְּתוֹךְ
אָהֳלָה: (כב) וַיֵּרָא
חָם אָבִי כְנַעַן
אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיו וַיַּגִּד
לְשְׁנֵי אָחָיו בְּחוּץ:
(כג) וַיִּקַּח שֵׁם וַיִּפֹּת
אֶת הַשְּׂמֹלֶה וַיִּשְׂמֻוּ
עַל שִׁכְמָם שֹׁנִיָּהם
וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרֵינִית וַיִּכְסֻוּ
אֶת עֶרְוַת אָבִיהֶם
וּפְנֵיהֶם אַחֲרֵינִית
וְעֶרְוַת אָבִיהֶם לֹא
רָאוּ: (כד) וַיִּיקֶן נֹחַ
מִיַּיִנו וַיֵּדַע אֶת אֲשֶׁר
עָשָׂה לוֹ בְּנוֹ הַקָּטָן:

This story describes the reactions of Noah's sons to his becoming intoxicated. What was Ham's sin? A simple reading of the text finds two sins: (a) he saw his father naked without covering him or acting respectfully and (b) he belittled his father by going outside to tell his brothers what he saw. However,

it seems that there was more to the story: “What his son had **done** to him” (v. 24) implies that Ham’s transgression was not only seeing, but that there was a deed that took place. Rashi, quoting the *midrash*, adds:

“And he saw his father’s nakedness” – some of our Sages say he castrated him, and some say he had relations with him.¹⁵ (Rashi on Gen. 9:22)

”וירא את ערוות אביו” - יש מרבותינו אומרים סרסו, ויש אומרים רבעו.

Shem and Japheth counteract Ham’s actions. Ham should have covered his father but instead he publicized his father’s offense. Shem and Japheth, on the other hand, protect their father’s honor – they cover him in a sensitive way, without seeing him naked: “And they walked backwards...while facing away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness.”

15 The phrase “seeing nakedness” in the Bible usually refers to the act of intercourse itself. This is implied by Leviticus 20:17: “And a man who takes his sister, daughter of his father or his mother, **and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness**, this is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off before the eyes of the nation; he revealed his sister’s nakedness, he shall bear his sin.” See also Ramban ad loc.

**Noah's
Harsh
Response**

Noah's response to his sons' deeds is serious with extensive ramifications:

(25) And he said, "Cursed is Canaan, he shall be the lowest of slaves to his brothers." (26) And he said, "Blessed is the Lord, God of Shem, and Canaan shall be a slave to him. And God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be a slave to him." (Gen. 9:25-26)

(כה) וַיֹּאמֶר אָרֹר
כְּנָעַן עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים
יִהְיֶה לְאֶחָיו: (כו)
וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ הוּא
אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם וַיְהִי
כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ: (כו)
יִפֹּת אֱלֹהִים לְיִפֹּת
וַיִּשְׁכֵּן בְּאֶהֱלֵי שֵׁם
וַיְהִי כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ:

**The Curse of
Canaan**

The curse placed upon Canaan is puzzling: why does Noah curse Canaan, Ham's son, and not Ham himself?

This difficulty leads some commentators¹⁶ to interpret "his young son" (v. 24) as referring to Canaan, who participated in what was done.¹⁷ However most commentators disagree with this opinion since the text describes Ham's actions, not Canaan's. The simple understanding of the text is that Ham acts, and Canaan is cursed. Why?

Radak, in his commentary on verse 24, explains:

He saw in a prophecy that he [Canaan] and his descendants would be evil forever. (Radak on Gen. 9:24)

ראה בנבואה
כי רע יהיה הוא
וזרעו עד עולם.

16 See Ibn Ezra on verse 24 and the *midrash* in *Pirket DeRabbi Eliezer* 23.

17 According to Rabbi Nehemiah in *Bereshit Rabba* 36:7, Canaan saw Noah first and told the others.

**Ham and
Canaan's
Fundamental
Flaw**

According to this interpretation, Canaan's curse is not a punishment for one deed of his father's but rather something much more fundamental: Noah understood that Ham's actions reflected **an inherent negativity in Ham and all of his descendants** – a quality which was strongly present in Canaan.¹⁸ This is why the curse is directed specifically at Canaan, who is afflicted with this particular flaw.

The Talmud¹⁹ (quoted by Rashi) expands Ham's deeds from merely seeing and telling his brothers to something far more severe, demonstrating that this narrative comes to teach us something fundamental about Ham's nature – that it is sexually corrupt. Noah's curse is not a personal penalty to Canaan, but rather a fundamental statement about all of his descendants, who are just as far removed from Canaan as they are from Ham.²⁰

**Shem and
Japheth –
Characteristic
Deeds and
Blessing**

In the same way that Ham's actions reflect the inherent flaw that he passes down to his descendants, Shem and Japheth's deeds reflect their nature. Noah accordingly blesses Shem and Japheth and their future

18 Later on we will see evidence of this flaw of Canaan's (see note 23). While the Torah mentions that Cham's other sons possess this quality as well (for example, Egypt), Canaan seems to be the most extreme case.

19 *Sanhedrin* 70a.

20 Noah's curse affects all of Cham's descendants in any case, so the sons are not punished for their father's sin – it makes no difference whether it is Cham or Canaan who is cursed. This is not a personal statement of Noah to his son or grandson, but something more fundamental with extensive ramifications.

descendants.²¹ In order to understand this blessing, let us focus on what is promised to Shem:²²

“And he said, ‘Blessed is the Lord, God of Shem’” (v. 26) – **Shem’s nature is to be a servant of God with a special connection to Him.** The story of Noah’s inebriation is not a personal narrative. Rather, it highlights the nature of each of the three branches of humanity. Similarly, Noah’s words to each of his three sons are not to them as individuals – they hold significance for all future generations.

**The
Corruption
of Ham and
Canaan**

Our first introduction to Canaan confirms his negative nature, sexual depravity and curse. Later in the Bible, the sons of Ham in general and Canaan in particular are known as sexually corrupt;²³ the

21 The story of Noah’s intoxication is one of the Genesis narratives and, consistent with their themes, it is not a personal account of Noah and his sons. Rather, it is a universal story which teaches us fundamental enduring lessons about humanity. For more on the Genesis narratives, see our lesson on *Parashat Noah*.

22 Japheth is a secondary character in the story. While he does join Shem, he does not initiate anything. This too is reflected in Noah’s blessing to Japheth: while Japheth clearly has a connection with God, it is not a direct one, but rather achieved through closeness with Shem (see v. 27).

23 Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all struggle with the sexual corruption of the Egyptians, Philistines and people of Shechem (all of whom are descended from Cham – see Gen. 10:6-15): Sarah’s captivity in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20) and in Gerar (Gen. 20:1-18), and the rape of Dina in Shechem (Gen. 34:1-31).

In addition, the people of Sodom demand of Lot:

אֵינָהּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ אֵלַיךָ הַלַּיְלָה, הוֹצִיאֵם אֵלֵינוּ, וְנִדְעָה אֹתָם.

Where are the people who came to you tonight; bring them out to us, and let us know them. (Gen. 19:5)

Torah therefore cautions the nation of Israel against forbidden relationships by warning against imitation of “the deeds of the Land of Canaan.”²⁴ In contrast, the descendants of Shem produce Abraham, who becomes close to God and is the beginning of God’s chosen people.²⁵

Rashi explains their demand:

ונדעה אתם - במשכב זכר כמו אשר לא ידעו איש.

“Let us know them” – **by having homosexual relations with them**, similar to “who have never known a man.” (Rashi on Gen. 19:5)

They, too, are descended from Canaan, as described in Gen. 10:19:

ויהי גבול הכנעני, מצידן-באכה גררה, עד-עזה: באכה סדמה ועמרה, ואדמה וצבים-עד-לשע. אלה בני-חם, למשפחותם ללשונתם, בארצותם, בגויהם.

The borders of the Canaanite were from Tzidon toward Gerar until Gaza, and toward Sodom and Gomorrah, Adman and Tzevo'im until Lasha. These are the descendants of Cham, by their families and languages, their lands and their nations. (Gen. 10:19-20)

24 See quote from Leviticus 18 cited below.

25 The opposite is true of Cham’s descendants. Seforno points out a biblical incident in which Noah’s curse is realized:

“ויהי כנען עבד למו” – לאלקי שם ולזרע שם, כאמרו “ויהיו חטבי עצים ושאבי מים לעדה ולמובח ה.”

“And Canaan shall be a slave to him” – to the God of Shem and the descendants of Shem, as it says, “And they were woodchoppers and water-carriers for the nation and the altar of God.” (Seforno on Gen. 9:26)

Seforno is referring to the declaration of Joshua and the princes of the nation regarding the Gibeonites (who were from Canaan’s descendants, the Hivites). Following the Gibeonites’ deceit, Joshua declared that they would be woodchoppers and water-carriers for the altar of God.

D. Canaan and the Land of Canaan

Why is
Canaan
Chosen as
the Promised
Land?

Surprisingly, it is specifically Canaan that becomes God's chosen land:

(19) The borders of the Canaanite were from Tzidon toward Gerar until Gaza, and toward Sodom and Gomorrah, Adman and Tzevo'im until Lasha. (Gen. 10:19)

(יט) וַיְהִי גְבוּל הַכְּנַעֲנִי מִצִּדוֹן בְּאַכָּה גְרָרָה עַד עָזָה בְּאַכָּה סְדוֹמָה וְעִמּוֹרָה וְאַדְמָה וְצִבּוֹיִם עַד לָשָׁע:

Similarly, when Abraham is commanded to go to the land "that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1), he leaves his homeland and comes to Canaan:

...And they left to go towards the Land of Canaan and they arrived at Canaan... and the Canaanites were in the land at that time. (Gen. 12:5-6)

...וַיֵּצְאוּ לְלֶכֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן... וְהַכְּנַעֲנִי אָז בְּאֶרֶץ:

Abraham leaves the descendants of Shem and reaches the land of the descendants of Ham, the most corrupt and cursed of the nations – and God agrees with Abraham's choice,²⁶ telling him, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7). This land, inhabited by the corrupt and cursed descendants of Canaan, is where Abraham arrives at God's command and it is chosen by God as the place to begin calling out in His name!

 26 See our lesson on *Lekh Lekha*.

This is unexpected: why is Canaan chosen to be the Land of Israel, the Land of God? Why were the Canaanites given this extraordinary land – the land worthy of a special closeness with God? Why was it not originally given to the descendants of Shem?

**Fighting for the
Land – Fighting
the Canaanite
Culture**

This conveys an important message: Abraham does not receive his promised land easily. He understands that he was brought to the land, not in order to assimilate with the Canaanites and become one of them, but rather the opposite – **Abraham was brought to the land in order to exist as an alternative to the Canaanite culture.** Abraham is there to expel the Canaanites from the land and inherit it in their stead; **the battle for the land is fought through a clash of cultures.** Abraham must deal with the local culture and overcome it – in doing so he will acquire the land. The land is not given to Abraham, but rather acquired by him, through both money and spiritual progression²⁷ – a long but vital process.

27 Circumcision is part of the spiritual development required by Abraham:

וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין וְרַעְךָ לְדֹרֹתֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ לְאֱלֹקִים וְלִוְרַעְךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ: וְנִתַּעַתִּי לְךָ וְלִוְרַעְךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ אֶת אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֶת כָּל אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאַחֲזוֹת עוֹלָם וְהִיִּיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹקִים: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם וְאַתָּה אֶת בְּרִיתִי תִשְׁמֹר אִתָּהּ וְרַעְךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ לְדֹרֹתֶם: זֹאת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְרוּ: בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם וּבֵין וְרַעְךָ אַחֲרָיִךְ הַמּוֹל לְכֶם כָּל זְכוֹר:

“And I will uphold My covenant with you and your descendants after you forever – an eternal covenant to be your God, and the God of your descendants after you. And I will give you and your descendants the land in which you live, all of the Land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I shall be their God.” And God said to Abraham, ‘And you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you forever. This is My covenant that you must keep

**Establishing
Abraham's
Descendants
- Not
Through
Canaan**

As mentioned above, the Canaanites were known to be corrupt in their sexual conduct. Abraham is searching for a wife for Isaac, one who will be a partner in producing the blessed descendants promised to Abraham. Obviously he would be opposed to choosing a woman from Canaan, a nation whose inherent flaw is related to sexual relations and reproduction. Abraham is looking for a woman from the descendants of Shem, who are especially inclined to form a close bond with God.

between Me and you and your descendants after you – you must circumcise every male.” (Gen. 17:7-11)

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Rambam brings one possible explanation for the *mitzva* of circumcision:

המילה – אחד מטעמיה, מיעוט התשמיש והחלשת האבר הזה כדי שימעט בפעולה זו ויתאפק ככל האפשר... ואין המצווה הזו להשלמת חסרון הבריאה, אלא להשלמת חסרון המידות... שלא יבטל כח ההולדה, אבל תפחת הלהיטות והתאוותנות המופרזים מכדי הצורך.

Circumcision – one explanation for it is to decrease sexual acts and weaken the organ, so that it will be less active and as restrained as possible... and this *mitzva* is not the completion of an imperfect creation, but rather *the correction of an imperfect character*... not in order to diminish the ability to father children, but rather *to lessen one's excessive eagerness and lust*.

Similarly, in *OlatRe'iyah*, Rav Kook suggests the following explanation for the *mitzva* of circumcision:

המילה באה לא רק למעט את התאוה המינית, היא באה לעדן את תאות המין שתהיה ממולאה בעדינות עליוניות הרוח שבאהבה המתגלה באהבת המין בתכונתה היותר עליונה. (חלק א אות ברית קודש).

Circumcision comes not only to diminish one's lust, but *to refine his sexual desire* so that it will be filled with tenderness and elevation of the soul, so that the love that is expressed through the physical act shall be in its highest form.

The meaning behind their words is clearly reflected in our interpretation of the connection between sexual restraint and inheriting the land.

Forbidden Relationships Lead to Exile from the Land

In addition, the Torah emphasizes that sexual immorality led to the Canaanites' banishment from the land. The nation of Israel will likewise inherit the land only if they keep the laws of forbidden relationships and distance themselves from this shortcoming that plagued the Canaanites. The nation is told later on:

(3) The acts of the [inhabitants of] the land of Egypt ²⁸ where you dwelt do not do, and the acts of the [inhabitants of] the Land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, do not do, and do not follow their customs... (6) Each man should not come close to his fellow to reveal his nakedness, I am God... (24) Do not defile yourselves with any of these, for the nations that I am driving out before you defiled themselves with all of these. (25) And the land was defiled, and I punished it for its sin, and it vomited out its inhabitants... (27) For all of these abominations were	(ג) כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבַחֲקֵיהֶם לֹא תִלְכוּ... (ו) אִישׁ אִישׁ אֶל כָּל שֹׂאֵר בְּשָׂרוֹ לֹא תִקְרְבוּ לְגִלוֹת עֶרְוָה אֲנִי ה'... (כד) אֶל תִּטְמְאוּ בְּכָל אֱלֹהֵי כִּי בְּכָל אֱלֹהֵי נְטֻמָּאוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְשַׁלַּח מִפְּנֵיכֶם: (כה) וּתִטְמְאוּ הָאָרֶץ וְאֶפְקֹד עוֹנָה עָלֶיהָ וְתִקֵּא הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׁבֵיהָ... (כו) כִּי אֶת כָּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵל עָשׂוּ אֲנָשֵׁי הָאָרֶץ
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28 The descendants of Cham settled in Egypt as well (see Gen. 10:6-15).

done by the people of the	אֲשֶׁר לְפָנֶיכֶם וַתִּטְמָא
land before you, and the land	הָאָרֶץ: (כח) וְלֹא
was defiled. (28) Lest the land	תִּקַּיֵּא הָאָרֶץ אֶתְכֶם
vomit you out if you defile it,	בְּטִמְאַתְכֶם אֶתְהָ
as it vomited out the nations	בְּאֲשֶׁר קָאָה אֶת
before you. (Lev. 18:3-28)	הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לְפָנֶיכֶם:

Abraham realizes that his mission is to inherit the land from the Canaanites by creating an **alternative to the Canaanite culture.**

E. Two Sides of the Same Coin

INHERITING THE LAND DEPENDS ON STAYING IN IT AND SEPARATING FROM ITS INHABITANTS

Now we understand Abraham’s instructions. When his servant asks whether to favor staying in Israel or marrying a woman from Shem, Abraham emphasizes that these are not two conflicting goals, but rather two sides of the same coin. Separation from Canaan and creation of an alternative culture (especially as it relates to marriage) allow Abraham and his descendants to inherit the land. Abraham is concerned about inheriting the land and so he commands Isaac not to leave – not even for a short trip to find a wife.

**A Woman
from Shem is
Worthy**

Abraham ensures that Isaac marry a woman from the descendants of Shem, who is a suitable partner in establishing Abraham’s household and descendants.

If Isaac wants to inherit the land, he must not marry a Canaanite woman – for it is precisely the distance from the Canaanites and their actions that will allow him to inherit the land.

**Two
Complementary
Values**

Abraham understands that these are not two opposing values, with the possibility that one be sacrificed in favor of the other. In fact, they are two parts of one whole and complement one another. He cannot abandon either of them or the entire process will collapse.²⁹ Therefore, Abraham swears his servant to

29 The preference for Shem's daughters, despite the fact that they came from a background of idolatry (as we mentioned above), is explained in an interesting analysis of the *Kli Yakar*:

כי מסתמא ציוה שלא יתחתן בבנות הכנעני פן ילמד ממעשיהם... ואם כן, מה ירויח אם ישא אשה מבנות לבן ובתואל, כי גם המה עובדי ע"ז כמו הכנעני? על כן אמר "אשר אנכי יושב בקרב", ואמר "פן תשב את בני שמה". כי אמר פשיטא אם ישא בני אשה מבנות הכנעני מאחר שאני יושב בקרבו מסתמא גם בני יגור אצלם ואו יש חשש שילמוד ממעשיהם, ואם ישא מבנות בתואל וידור אצלם, או יש גם כן לחוש שמא ילמוד ממעשיהם, אבל כשישא אשה משם וידור כאן, או אין כאן בית מיחוש, כי מן לבן ובתואל לא ילמוד שהרי לא ידור אצלם, ומן הכנעני לא ילמוד כי לא יהיה לו התערבות עמהם... היה מרחיק מהכנענים שהיו שטופי זימה וכמה מיני עבירות הנתלים בחומר האדם וזאת עבודה זרה, ולא הרחיק לבן ובתואל שלא היה בהם כי אם פחיתת העבודה זרה בלבד (...העבודה זרה דבר התלוי בשכלו של האדם אינו מתפשט מאבות לבנים...).

For we would assume that he [Abraham] commanded him to not marry the daughters of the Canaanites lest he learn from their deeds... and if so, what would he gain by marrying one of the daughters of Laban and Betuel, who were also idolaters? For this reason he said, 'among whom I live,' and said, 'only do not allow my son to return there.' He said to himself, 'It is clear that if my son marries a woman from Canaan, since I live among them, my son will also live among them – and then there is a chance that he might learn from their deeds. And if he marries one of the daughters of Betuel and lives with them, then too there is a chance that he will learn from them. But if he marries a daughter of Betuel and lives here, then there is nothing

two things: (a) that he will not choose a Canaanite wife for Isaac; (b) that he will not allow Isaac to leave the land.

EXPLAINING ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE: "YOU WILL BE RELEASED FROM THIS OATH OF MINE"

**Of Course He
Cannot Marry a
Canaanite!**

Let us reconsider the conversation between Abraham and Eliezer. The possibility of choosing a Canaanite woman for Isaac is not even considered. The servant is not asking whether, if no woman from Haran would come with him, he may choose a Canaanite woman. It is clear that the answer to this question would be "no," for this is the main element of Eliezer's oath to Abraham. Of course the daughters of Canaan are not worthy of building the nation of God with Isaac. Rather, he must marry one of the daughters of Shem, who are prepared to form a special bond with God.³⁰

to fear – for he will not learn from Laban and Betuel if he does not live with them, and he will not learn from the Canaanites, for he will not associate with them.'...He distanced him from the Canaanites, who were steeped in corruption and all manner of sins that affect a man's being, in addition to idolatry, and he did not distance him from Laban and Betuel, for they were guilty only of idolatry... (idolatry being a sin that preys upon a person's mind, and does not spread from father to son).

30 This is Ralbag's interpretation, partially quoted above:

שלא יקח אשה לבנו יצחק מבנות הכנעני, ואף על פי שהוא יושב בקרבו, כי לא בחר בארץ ההיא מפני יושביה, אבל מפני היותה מוכנת אל שידבק בה השפע האלוקי למי שהוא מוכן לזה. והנה מנהג הכנענים היה פחות מאד... ועוד שכבר נתקלל כנען... ולזה היה אברהם מרחיק בנו יצחק מהתחתן בכנענים, כי בו בחר ה' יתעלה להיות ממנו הזרע הנבחר, כמו שקדם. ומפני זה בחר לו אברהם מבנות ארצו, ומהם בחר יותר בבנות משפחתו. וציווה לעבדו שיקח ליצחק משם אשה, ואם לא ימצא ממשפחתו יקח מארצו.

He should not take a wife for his son Isaac from the

**Eliezer's
Practical
Question**

Eliezer, charged with executing the plan to find a wife for Isaac and bring her back to Canaan, realizes that these are two important values and that **the reality of the situation may not allow him to realize both of them**. How does Abraham answer Eliezer's practical question?

**Abraham's
Response
(1) - Do Not
Give Up;
God will
Help**

First, Abraham warns Eliezer against sacrificing either one of these values: he cannot choose a Canaanite woman and he must not allow Isaac to come to Haran. In fact, Abraham tells Eliezer that he is sure that God will be with him and that there will be no need to take a Canaanite woman or for Isaac to leave Israel:

(7) God, Lord of the heavens, Who took me from my father's house and my homeland, Who spoke to me and Who swore to me, saying, "To your descendants I will give this land," He will send His messenger before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. (Gen. 24:7)	(ו) ה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְנִי מִבֵּית אָבִי וּמֵאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתִּי וְאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לִי וְאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לִי לֵאמֹר לְזֶרְעֲךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת הוּא יִשְׁלַח מַלְאָכּוֹ לְפָנֶיךָ וְלָקַחְתָּ אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִשָּׁם:
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daughters of Canaan, even though he lived among them – for he did not choose the land on the basis of its inhabitants, but rather because it was prepared for the divine bounty to be showered upon whoever was prepared for it. And the Canaanite customs were very base... until Canaan was finally cursed...and for this reason Abraham distanced his son Isaac from marrying a Canaanite, for the Almighty God had chosen him and his descendants, as mentioned earlier. And for this reason Abraham chose women from his [home]land, and furthermore from his own family. And he commanded his servant to choose a wife for Isaac from

God would never allow a situation that would prevent Abraham and Isaac from continuing to serve Him (including serving Him through settlement of the land).

Abraham's
Response (2) –
“You will be
released from
this oath of
mine”

Abraham also adds a practical response to his servant's question:

(8) “And if the woman is not willing to follow you, you will be released from this oath of mine, just do not allow my son to return there.” (Gen. 24:8)

(ח) וְאִם לֹא תֵאָבֶה הָאִשָּׁה לְלֶכֶת אַחֲרַיךָ וְנִקִּיתַּ מִשְׁבֻּעָתִי זֹאת רַק אֶת בְּנִי לֹא תָשֻׁב שָׁמָּה:

If Eliezer does not succeed in his mission, he will be released from it. Contrary to our first assumption, we now understand that if Eliezer cannot bring a woman from Haran, he must neither choose a Canaanite woman *nor* allow Isaac to travel to Haran – rather, he will be completely exempt from finding a wife for Isaac.³¹ This is Ramban's interpretation:

“You will be released from this oath of mine” – he would not

וְנִקִּיתַּ מִשְׁבֻּעָתִי זֹאת - לֹא תֵרָשֶׁה

there, and if he cannot find one from his family, he should at least take one from his [home] land.

³¹ Abraham's reluctance to choose a Canaanite wife for Isaac – even from among the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre – may be explained by the following *midrash*: “Rabbi Yitzhak said: ‘Sow the seeds of your city, even if they are *zonin*’” [*Zonin*: black, bitter seeds that grow among wheat; see the mishna in tractate *Kil'ayim* 1:1], meaning: one should not sow the seeds of another city even if they are exceptional.” (*Bereshit Rabba* 59:8)

This is very similar to another parable by Rabbi Yitzhak: “Toss a stick into the air, and it shall land on its roots.” While

allow him to choose [Isaac] a wife from the daughters of Canaan, **but rather, he would release him from the oath, and God would do as He saw fit...**and Abraham knew Isaac's righteousnes, and knew he would listen to his father and distance himself from them, and he would go to Ishmael or Lot and the other nations. (Ramban on Gen. 24:8)

אותו לקחת לו
אשה מבנות כנען,
**אבל שיהיה הוא
פטור וה' הטוב
בעיניו יעשה...**
ואברהם הוא היודע
ביצחק הצדיק
שישמע לאביו
ושיזהר בהם וילך
לו אל ישמעאל או
ללוט ויתר העמים.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch adds:

“Only do not act against the divine will. We have nothing but the hope that no mishap will result from our actions... for ‘if she is not willing,’ then you are exempt, for there is nothing further you can do. Do not even think that you still should have acted, even though it would have been contrary [to the conditions of your oath]...” (Hirsch on Gen. 24:7)

...רק אל תפעל
אתה בניגוד
לכוונה האלוקית.
אנו אין לנו אלא שלא
תצא תקלה מתחת
ידנו... הרי "אם לא
תאבה", ונקית, שוב
אין בידך לעשות דבר.
רק אל יעלה בדעתך
שעדיין יהיה מוטל
עליך לפעול, ולו גם
בכיוון המנוגד...

Abraham was aware of the righteousness of the daughters of Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, he was concerned about their Canaanite roots, and therefore preferred the “tail of the lions” [i.e. the least of a more desirable group] than the “head of the foxes” [the greatest of a less desirable group].

F. Faith in God

What might happen if Eliezer cannot find a wife for Isaac? Why doesn't Abraham instruct him how to deal with this possibility? He merely states that Eliezer would be released from his oath.

Making an Effort

Abraham knows that God has promised him descendants as well as the Land of Canaan, and therefore he is sure that Isaac can stay in Israel and find an appropriate non-Canaanite wife. However, Abraham does not sit and wait for the promise of the land to come true: he takes action to inherit the land and even buys a plot of land as a grave for Sarah. Similarly, Abraham does not wait passively for the blessing concerning descendants to be realized: he sends Eliezer and gives him clear instructions. At the same time, Abraham knows that man's abilities are limited. He must make an effort, but this alone cannot ensure his success.

Trust in God's Help

Where Abraham's effort ends his faith in God begins. Once he has done his part, Abraham trusts that God will act in order to keep His promises to "surely bless you and multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky and the sand at the edge of the sea" (Gen. 22:17), and to "give you and your descendants the land in which you live, all of the Land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I shall be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

Blessing, Promise and Effort

This chapter in Abraham's life teaches us an important lesson on faith. Even an explicit promise

from God, which man can fully expect to be fulfilled, still requires human effort. While effort alone is not enough to bring about the realization of a blessing, God's promises cannot be fulfilled without the efforts of man.