

Parashah *Chayei Sarah* – literally, “Sarah’s life” – begins with her death. Rashi, citing Midrash Genesis Rabbah, teaches that her death was the direct result of Isaac’s near-death at the hands of his father. “... because as a result of the news of the ‘binding,’ that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died.” This is of course understandable, but there is another aspect to her death, and it is related to the rabbis’ ambivalent portrayal of Abraham’s servant Eliezer. Tractate Rosh HaShanah (16b), which we are currently studying in the *Daf Yomi* program, the sequential reading of the Babylonian Talmud, which began anew in January 2020, offers a revealing teaching: “Three matters evoke a person’s sins, and they are: Endangering oneself by sitting next to an inclined wall that is about to collapse; expecting prayer to be accepted ... ; and passing a case against another to Heaven, ... . Praying for God to pass judgment on another, causes one’s own deeds to be examined and compared with the deeds of the other, as is stated, ‘And Sarai said to Abram: My anger be upon you; I have given my maid into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; let the Lord judge between me and you.’ [16:5], and it is written afterward, ‘And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.’ [23:2]. Sarah called upon Heaven to pass judgment between her and her husband, and therefore she was punished and died first.” All three matters imply a mixture of entitlement and laziness. Because a covenantal relationship requires participation from both parties, expecting action from HaShem without personal initiative is a violation of its terms. Leaning against an unstable wall is akin to swimming in shark-infested waters, or refusing to take precautions against disease. HaShem is not obligated to protect inveterate risk-takers. Expecting prayer to be answered can be anything from praying for a good grade on a test when one has not bothered to study, to relying on an omen for success, i.e., praying for an unwarranted miracle. Invoking the judgment of HaShem precludes a court trial, because the offending party is thus denied a chance to repair the damage (s)he has caused. In all three, HaShem is expected to intervene even if the human side is remiss. This goes beyond chutzpah; it is grievous disregard for our human responsibility. Sarah’s mistake is obvious, but what about Eliezer, who in his pivotal role in our parashah is only called “Abraham’s servant” or “the man?” For insight, we return to the cantillation sign *shalsholet*, which so poignantly expresses Lot’s reluctance to leave Sodom. Here, it appears over the word *va-yomer* (and he said), “O Lord, the God of my master Abraham, please cause to happen to me today, ... And it will be, that the maiden to whom I will say ‘Lower your pitcher and I will drink,’ and she will say, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels,’ her have You designated for Your servant, for Isaac ...” It is precisely this statement that provokes so much commentary, pro and con. What does he mean, and why the hesitation? Rashi, again citing Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, sees Eliezer as aspiring to marry his own daughter into his master’s family. It is the word *ulai* (“Perhaps the woman will not want to come with me ...”) in his conversation with Abraham (24:5) that provides the clue. Rashi notes that because of its “deficient” spelling (omitting the letter *vav*), the word could be read as *elai* (to me), and has Abraham responding, “My son is blessed, whereas you are cursed and one who is cursed cannot cleave to one who is blessed.” Eliezer is portrayed as a descendent of Canaan, who was cursed by Noah and thus ineligible for intermarriage. The Vilna Gaon concurs, with a clever juxtaposition of the two Hebrew words for perhaps: *pen* implies an undesired outcome, while *ulai* alludes to fulfillment of a wish. But others see Eliezer in a positive light, despite his sin of divination, or putting HaShem to the test by relying on an omen, because he successfully overcomes the three archetypal weaknesses that plague us all: “Envy, lust, and seeking honor put a man out of the world.” (Pirke Avot 4:21) He could have aborted his mission at any time, telling Abraham that he could find no suitable bride, but after initial hesitation, he proceeds honorably. His detractors say that it was only because angels helped him, while his champions see his hesitation as humble awareness of his tremendous responsibility, as well as his ultimately successful struggle against temptation. The Rambam (Maimonides) teaches that one who hesitates and then chooses the path of righteousness is on a higher plane than someone who acts without hesitation. It is also telling that in his dealings with Rebecca’s family, Eliezer remains anonymous, eschewing personal gain in favor of loyally serving his master. When Lavan sees him, he exclaims, “Come, you who are blessed of the Lord.” (24:31) Indeed, he is truly blessed, for HaShem answers his “unreasonable request” with a favorable response. (Tractate Taanit 4a) Rebecca’s appearance has completed his transformation, and he is the first person since Noah to bless HaShem, with words we Jews repeat so often: *baruch HaShem*. Finally, his very name bespeaks his ultimate victory. *Eli-ezer* means My God is help. We all have *shalsholet* moments great and small. We may hesitate and ponder, but if we heed the voice of our conscience, we will choose the path of righteousness. *Baruch haShem*, we can learn from Eliezer.

Shabbat shalom!