



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Chayei Sarah: Social Seclusion

When Abraham instructs his slave to go and find a wife for his son Isaac, Abraham is pedantic and particular. He outlines specific rules to guide his slave in his search for the appropriate woman:

1. Isaac may not marry a Canaanite.
2. Isaac may marry a woman from Abraham's birth town, but he may not go and live abroad with his wife's clan.

Thus, the only possible arrangement will be for the prospective bride to leave her family and to make her way to Canaan, and to live there with Isaac. Indeed, this is what happens with Rebecca/Rivka.

These are serious limitations.

The "Kli Yakar," Rabbi Efraim Solomon b. Chaim Lunshitz (Lemberg, 1550-1619) notes the extraneous phraseology of the verse: "[Do] not take a wife for my son Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites **among whom I dwell**" (24:3-4). He asks, why add the phrase "amongst whom I dwell?" We know that Abraham lives in Canaan amongst Canaanites!

He reads this phrase as a reason rather than an explanation. Do not marry a girl from Canaan **because** I dwell among them. He details Abraham's logic in the following way:

He said to himself, if my son marries one of the daughters of Canaan, since we live among them, my son will frequent their homes and will learn from their cultural practices. Furthermore, if my son marries one of the daughters of Laban and Betuel and will go to live with them, there is also a probability that he will be influenced by their norms. By marrying a woman from abroad who will come to live here, there is no worry at all.

What Abraham is recommending is to place his daughter-in-law in a degree of social isolation. Isaac and his family must be restricted from familial and cultural ties with the surrounding peoples so the majority culture not influence Isaac and Rebecca's home. They must sustain an independent ethnology.

Please Discuss:

This raises the question of how much seclusion is necessary to sustain a distinct identity. Let us recall that this is a very early stage of the development of the Jewish people. Kli Yakar is suggesting that Isaac must isolate himself culturally to some extent.

- Why is this necessary?
- What are the positives and negatives of this approach?
- Abraham is known for welcoming guests into his tent. If Rebecca is chosen for Isaac in a manner that cuts her off from her family, then is Abraham still committed to his tradition of hospitality?

When the book of Devarim/Deuteronomy talks about a ban on intermarriage it is phrased in the following manner:

When the Lord your God brings you to the land ... Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites... You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods...

- According to this text, is intermarriage the key problem, or assimilation?
- Or put another way, does assimilation lead to intermarriage, or does intermarriage lead to assimilation?

This is a challenge that all Jews have had to grapple with in a modern, multicultural context. In Jewish circles, many different suggestions have been made, and rules established to sustain Jewish identity under adverse conditions.

- Are Abraham's rules, made for his son Isaac, relevant in 2017?
- How much do you feel that you and your family are enveloped by an exclusively Jewish environment, and how much are you exposed to wider society?
- Would you like this to be different?
- Where is societal exposure appropriate and when is it a problem?

Shabbat Shalom!