

**Polina Malamud**

*D'var Torah*

## **CHAYEI SARAH**

This is probably going to come back to haunt me, but I'll be comparing the story of how Rabbi Niles came to the New Shul to the story of how a wife was found for Isaac. Abraham told his most senior servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac, from among his relatives. With only this to guide him, the servant, Eliezer, as he is called in an earlier chapter of the Torah, set off to find a wife for Isaac. Once he got to the city of Abraham's brother, Nahor, he began to pray, asking for a sign from G-d to help him find the right woman. The text reads 'Now he had not yet finished speaking, and behold, Rebecca came out, who had been born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, and her pitcher was on her shoulder.' This was the sign he was looking for, as he had specifically asked to find a woman who would not only give him a drink of water, but also would water his camels. And lo and behold, Rebecca appeared with a water jug and was more than willing to provide the water.

Just as Rebecca created the sign that Abraham's senior servant needed to choose her as Isaac's wife, Niles provided the sign that Holly and Ellen needed to hire him as their Rabbi. For those of you who don't know, Niles was actually recommended to our co-founders, Ellen Gould and Holly Gewandter, by a friend, while they were looking for a Rabbi. They never got a chance to call him though, because just as they were about to pick up the phone, he called them. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Our lives are filled with signs. We need only to look for these signs, and the path on which we should take our next steps in life will become clear. There are true signs, but also there are things that seem like signs, but probably aren't. If we even think of following the wrong signs, we're going to feel a little warning-bell go off in our mind and we'll know that what we're doing is wrong. We need to ask ourselves whether the signs come from G-d or not. When Rebecca responded readily to Eliezer's plea, and extended herself by watering his camels, he was, according to the Torah, 'astonished at her, standing silent, [waiting] to know whether the Lord had caused his way to prosper or not.' Not until he found out that she was indeed the granddaughter of Abraham's brother did he believe that the Lord "had caused his way to prosper". Signs often give us the strength, the guidance and sometimes the permission to make bold, difficult and even everyday choices in life. The choices we make in life determine what path our life will take.

Does this mean that all we can do is play our part in the show, reading our lines off a slip of paper that comes from G-d? Absolutely not. The overall destination of our life comes from G-d, but the things we do, the words we say every day, the way we complete our destiny in life, is our own choice. At the risk of extending the metaphor, our life is an improv show with a predetermined theme, but everything in between the beginning and the end is determined by none other than us. Moreover, we can also argue with the director if we think that what we want to do will fit in with his or her theme better than what was previously envisioned; an example being when Abraham beseeched G-d not to destroy Sodom in last week's chapter. However, certain skits may fit the overall theme very well, and others not at all. To find the best-fitting way to go about a certain situation, one must sometimes ask for a sign from G-d.

The overall theme in Chayei Sarah that all the characters' skits followed was that Rebecca and Isaac were meant to meet. They did so only after a long string of different choices without which the Jewish people would not have Rebecca as one of our matriarchs. Every single step of this chapter was vital in making sure that the right woman was chosen to continue the Jewish people.

Abraham chose to send Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac, trusting him to do a good job. He also chose to rely on G-d, believing that G-d would send an angel to go with Eliezer to help him choose. Then, when Eliezer got to Aram Naharaim, the city of Nahor, he trusted in G-d just like his master did and asked for a specific sign, one he would understand, to point him in the right

direction. And what luck, what coincidence, that the first woman who came out to gather water was Rebecca, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother. When the sign was provided, Eliezer chose to go in that direction, instead of being cynical and not believing that G-d's will was at work.

Every single person in this chapter trusted in the signs they were given, believing that they were being led to them by G-d. Just receiving a sign is not enough, however. A door can open before you, and a sign may lead you toward it, but you can choose to turn away from it. We need to, like Eliezer, have enough faith to look for G-d's signs, but when the sign is already given, like Rebecca, we must be brave enough to follow it when it points us in an unexpected and life-changing direction.

Rebecca's mother and brother, Laban, made the choice not to outright refuse to send Rebecca with Eliezer; quite the contrary, they saw G-d's fingerprint on the situation and insisted only on asking for Rebecca's consent. Torah says: 'And they said, "Let us call the maiden and ask her." And they summoned Rebecca, and they said to her, "Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go."' Rebecca was exceedingly brave in agreeing to go with a man she had never met before to marry a man she had never met at all and who lives among the Canaanites. Hers was the biggest leap of faith, and she serves as an example for all of us, with her confidence in the future and her strong faith in G-d. The behavior of all the people in Chayei Sarah who helped this story turn out the way it did is inspiring. Their faith and bravery motivates us to be courageous in following our own signs and making our own difficult choices.

I'd just like to thank everybody for making the choice to come here today to celebrate with us. A very, very big thank you to Ellen for honoring us with her beautiful singing. Thanks Dad, for joking about the whole process when it got too stressful. Thanks Mom, for making me be serious if I joked too much. Thanks Ella and Sophie, for giving me a LOT of good ideas for the D'var Torah and Mom and Melanie, for polishing them till they really began to shine. Lots of thanks to Melanie for being with me every step of the way. And Rabbi Niles, none of this could have happened without you. Thank you. The fourteen months of preparation were tough and long, with a lot of ups and downs, but I enjoyed 98% of the torture. Thank you all once again, and Shabbat Shalom.

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### **Words spoken to Polina by her mother, Sasha, when passing the Torah**

*Polina, it's a big day for you and for all of us. Because it is more than just about you. It continues the story that started long ago. This Torah I am holding now embodies the tradition of our ancestors. Almost a century ago, the families of your grandparents on your father's side and of your great grandparents on your mother's side, like many families in this community and in many countries and religions, made a choice to abandon their tradition. They did so because they answered the call of the twentieth century, the call for scientific understanding of the material world and for creating abundance of material commodities. Looking back, we can tell that this quest of ours was extremely successful, and it set the stage for the next era. Recently, our family, like many families in this community, like this young community itself, followed the call of the twenty first century, the call for spiritual renaissance of the humankind. We came back to retrieve our ancestral treasure, and, miraculously, it did not perish, it was waiting for us! Because, fortunately, there were other families, who, like many families in this community, kept our treasure for us while we were away. I want to thank both those of you who preserved this treasure over the years, and those who came with us to reclaim it. Now, Polina, I am passing it to you. It has many faces. It is ancient, always young, always new, awkwardly big, overwhelmingly joyful. You will not always know what to do with it. Don't worry, no one does. But it is yours, by birthright and by choice. Try to keep it.*