

Investing in Jewish Futures

Category: Bereishis, Chayei Sarah

How to convince your children to marry Jewish.

A Bratty Bride

In the month of Cheshvan late in the year 1939, not too long after World War II had broken out, there was a young Chasidic couple in Poland who had just gotten engaged. And they were now making every effort to leave Polish soil and immigrate to the United States.

But in those days, everyone wanted to flee Europe and especially Poland, which had been overrun and occupied by the Germans. But the United States had a limited number of people from each country whom it could admit and provide with entry visas.

At that time, the entry quota for Polish citizens had been filled—but Russian citizens could still get entry visas to the United States.

Now, with this couple, the groom had Russian citizenship while his bride was a Polish citizen. So, to allow her to immigrate to the United States too, they staged a fictitious wedding and got their marriage license and thus, in the form of a married couple, they succeeded in getting the coveted entry visas.

And so, on the first of November of 1939, the young couple boarded a packed ship filled with refugees, most of whom were Jews wanting to flee from the war as fast as possible.

But here, a new problem cropped up. The ship's crew accepted them as a married couple and as such, gave them a shared room. However, a Chasidic couple not yet married cannot stay in the same room even for one moment. According to Halachah, a bride and groom are like two complete strangers for all matters.

Here, however, they could not reveal the secret that they were only married on paper.

So, the bride approached a steward with a fallen face that broadcast distress. She told him that she was a fresh newlywed and revealed to him that her new husband snored at night—and that it was simply unbearable. It was one thing if they were in a house; then each of them could sleep in a different room. But here on a ship, in a single little room, it was simply impossible!

In those days, when everyone was trying to save their lives, such a request sounded completely unreasonable. Here you had millions of people who could only wish for a room on that same ship, and here, this young woman was worried about snoring! But she complained that it was too much and that she wasn't capable of remaining with him in the same room. She was prepared to sleep in any corner the steward would provide her—even in a closet!

She added that she was prepared to help out on the ship in any way she could—as long as he would give her a corner in which to sleep.

So the steward took pity on her and found a corner somewhere for her.

However, the news spread among the passengers about the young couple that had only gotten married a few weeks ago and now were already fighting so much that they couldn't even stay in the same room.

So a lot of good people with good intentions tried to “make peace.” They told her that life is short. They berated her for being involved with petty squabbles during wartime. “Grow up and learn to live together.” But none of these people “succeeded” in “making peace” between the “husband” and “wife.”

Obviously, then, the next step was the gossip and rumors that spread throughout the ship's passengers about the stubborn “couple” that wasn't ready to compromise. Of course, everyone added something to the story from their fertile imaginations; after all, there was nothing else to do on the ship except busy one's self in these stories.

Several months later, after they had all arrived safely in NY, many passengers were surprised to receive an invitation to the wedding of the young couple. Before the actual Chuppah, they all stood in line to beg forgiveness from the bride for slandering her and believing her to be some sort of finicky spoiled brat who wasn't at all willing to work things out with her husband (Rabbi Zalman & Chava Gurarie *a”h*).

Isaac's Match

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion of Chayei Sarah.

The parshah of Chayei Sarah is the parshah of engagements and marriages. And in our parshah, we learn about the first engagement in Jewish history—that of Yitzchak and Rivkah.

The story goes as follows.

Avraham summons his servant and binds him by an oath to go forth and find a match for his son—to not bring him a local girl even if she may be a fine young woman. Rather, Avraham specifically wants someone from his greater family. He wants his servant to go to “my land and my birthplace” of Aram Naharaim and bring him someone from the clan.

So Eliezer the servant asks a very practical question: “Perhaps the woman won't want to go after me?”

As human nature goes, it's only normal for a girl to want to live near her parents. A guy will have no problem living far away from his parents—but a woman's natural tendency is to live near her father and mother.

Eliezer's question was a very good one: Why would she suddenly want to abandon her country, her birthplace and her father's home and go to a strange land? She hasn't even met the groom, and I haven't even brought his picture!

But Avraham answers him: “G-d, the Lord of the Heavens, will send His angel before you”—G-d who always helped me will help me here too. But if not, then “you shall be purged of my oath”—you are free from having to marry him off, but under no circumstances are you to try to marry him off to a local girl.

But even Avraham knew the rule that “one does not rely on a miracle,” that a person needs to do whatever he can physically do to attain the goal for which he strives. And so Avraham also did something physical in order to convince any potential bride to want to leave it all behind and run to the land of Canaan to marry Yitzchak.

What was that? We're about to find out.

The Bribery

Eliezer gets to Aram Naharayim, and prays to G-d that the one that he'll ask for a bit of water will also offer water to the camels on her own, and then he'll know that this is the woman suitable for Yitzchak. And indeed, Rivkah immediately came out to draw water at the well and Eliezer asked for a little water from her and on her own, she said, "I'll draw for your camels too."

When Eliezer understood that this was the woman suited for Yitzchak, he didn't try to convince her that there was a young man, a scholar, waiting for her in a faraway land. Instead, the first thing the Torah (Bereishis 24:22) tells us is: "And the man took a gold nose ring... and two bracelets on her hands." In other words, he gave her gifts. The girl immediately ran to her mother and told her that some rich guy came here and gave her presents.

When her brother saw the nose ring and the bracelets, he immediately ran outside to meet the "rich uncle," and they brought him into the house and gave him much honor. And then Eliezer introduced himself by saying "I am Avraham's servant," only then starting his sales pitch on why it was worth it for them to send their daughter to a faraway land to marry someone she never even met.

Then Eliezer tells them just who Avraham is: "G-d blessed my master greatly." He then goes on to describe Avraham's wealth: "And He gave him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, and servants and maids and donkeys." And then comes the main pitch: "Sarah bore him a son, and he gave him all that he has."

And Rashi continues, adding: "He displayed a gift contract," to which Rashi adds that Avraham had done so "so that they would jump to send him their daughter." Avraham had handed Eliezer a document in which it was written that all of Avraham's assets were to be given as a gift to Yitzchak as soon as he would get married—an offer one couldn't refuse.

But the Rebbe points out that Eliezer did not bring a will from Avraham that said that at the end of his life, his son Yitzchak would inherit everything, because a will can always be changed as long as the person is alive. As we indeed see in modern life, it often happens that people fight with their kids and change their minds and write new wills.

Avraham chose to write in black and white terms that he was handing over all his wealth as a gift now to Yitzchak, and he signed up two famous people as witnesses so that everyone would know that the contract was a genuine contract—and ultimately, Rivkah really did agree to come, and the match was made.

Make It Happen!

The lesson to us from this story is that a person needs to do everything to ensure that his son or daughter will marry a spouse from “the greater family”—from the Jewish People.

A lot of people will tell you that they threatened their kids that if they don't marry a Jewish girl, then they will not put them in their wills—but that their kids didn't react much to that. They were young, and their parents were also young, and so something that will happen in 30 years doesn't move them too much. After all, who knows what will be then? Maybe the wife will “convert,” and even if not, then she will be “accepted” by the family over the years, the parents will forgive him, and so on.

But if you tell your son, “Listen: If you marry a Jewish girl, I will give you a large portion of my assets right now,” then it's a completely different story. We're not expecting anyone to sacrifice his entire life like Avraham and give their kids their entire fortune—but 30 percent can also convince a child that it's a worthwhile investment.

And so, my friends, ever since the days of Avraham and to this very day, money always convinces more than any explanation in the world. Let us use our assets to positively influence our children to do what is right!