

## Nature in the Parasha

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### *Parashat Chayei Sarah* – Discovering the Camel Connection

The camel stands out in this week's *parasha*, where it is mentioned no less than 18 times, all in chapter 24. Why do we need to know that Rivkah's father "had made a place for Avraham's servant's camels," and that "his camels were unloaded and given straw and feed"? (*Bereishit* 24: 31-32). Why are these camels so important that the Torah bothers to mention them over and over again? I remember once when I was at a *Beit Din* for Conversion with a student, the Rabbi asked her which women in the Torah rode on a camel. Since then my 'Women in *Tanach*' class has become mandatory for conversion students. Actually, I didn't find any other woman than Rivkah about whom the Torah explicitly states that she rode on a camel. Rivkah, our mother, is connected to camels in several ways. The first thing we hear about Rivkah is how she goes completely out of herself in the most astonishing way to give the ten camels belonging to Avraham's servant drink until they are full (*Bereishit* 24:19). (Read on to learn how much water this is!) Later at the end of the same chapter, when she first encounters Yitzchak, Rivkah falls off the camel that she had been riding on (*ibid.* 24:64). Until two weeks ago, I had never ever in my life ridden a camel. When at the Dead Sea with my husband I thought it would be a good opportunity to try how it would feel to be up so high and moving in the soft wavy way of the camel. It was a bit scary when the camel first rose to its feet, and I felt uneasy in my stomach. I really cannot imagine Rivkah riding all the way from Mesopotamia to Hebron on a camel without getting seasick. After less than five minutes, I sighed in relief when my camel ride was luckily over. I'm even more relieved not to have shared Rivkah's experience of falling off the camel!

### Camels & Kindness

Avraham's servant selected Rivkah as a suitable wife for his master's son based on her outstanding character-trait of kindness, expressed in her willingness to not only draw water for his ten camels, but to water them until they had finished drinking (*Bereishit* 24:19). How much water would that take? There are different opinions of how long a camel can go without drinking, but at the very least for 6-8 days under desert conditions. Thereafter, a camel must drink to replenish its body water, and when water is available, it may drink more than a third of its body weight. (Knut Schmidt Nielsen, *Animal Physiology: Adaptation and Environment*). When a camel has become dehydrated and then suddenly has access to water, it is capable of drinking up to 135 liters of water in thirteen minutes (Jonathan Kingdom, *East African Mammals: An atlas of Evolution in Africa*). Keep in mind, we have to multiply this number with ten for each of the camels that Rivkah watered in her incredible *chesed* (kindness)! Rivkah's association with the camel is based precisely on her being steeped in *chesed*. The camel is called *גמל*/*gamal* in Hebrew. This word also means to bestow like in *גמילות דין*/*gemilut chasadim* – bestowal of kindness (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2). Rivkah loved kindness to such an extent that she naturally connected to anything called in the name of this character-trait (*Kli Yakar*). It is not accidental that a camel is called *גמל*/*gamal*. Camels seem to be very kind and docile animals. Perhaps the camel is associated with *chesed* because it has the ability to keep going and providing for

man without needing to be replenished for long periods. The word *לֹאֵל*/*gamal* also means 'to go without' like in the weaning of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 21:8). According to some opinions, camels can go without water for as long as a month in the harshest desert conditions.

(<http://www.animalfactsencyclopedia.com/Camel-facts.html#sthash.aMSUTEov.dpuf>). Camels are masters at survival and hold the teaching of resourcefulness. They can show us how to make the most out of whatever resources we have. They are very intelligent and emotional animals, and form close bonds with their human masters with whom they work with a noble dignity when treated with respect (<http://www.animalfactsencyclopedia.com/Camel-facts.html>). To the people who rely on camels for their very existence, the camel holds a sacred space. It is not the rude, vulgar and unruly creature of myth, but a stately, noble and amiable servant. The association between camels and kindness is supported by *Maor v'Shemesh*. He explains that when Rivkah fell off the camel, she fell off from her primary level of kindness and good deeds in the world, and arrived in the world of *teshuvah* (repentance). Realizing that this was the world of Yitzchak, Rivkah desired to join him in rectifying former deeds.

### Drinking Before our Animals

Whereas, according to Torah law, we are required to feed our domesticated animals before eating our own meals, this does not apply to drinking. We are permitted to drink in order to quench our thirst prior to feeding our animals or giving them to drink (*Sefer Chassidim* 531; *Magen Avraham* 167:18). *Sefer Chassidim* cites as a source for this halacha the story of our righteous mother, Rivkah, who offered Avraham's servant, Eliezer to drink before watering his camels (*Bereishit* 24:11-21). One of the reasons for the distinction between eating and drinking in regards to the precedence of animals over people, is that thirst is of great distress to man (*Sha'alot u'Teshuvot Chatam Sofer, Choshen Mishpat* 119; *Sha'alot u'Teshuvot Har Tzvi, Orach Chaim* 1:90). Another reason is that only with eating is it likely that a person will forget to feed his animals if he tends to his own needs first (*Sha'alot u'Teshuvot Har Tzvi*).

### Falling or Sliding off the Camel?

"Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field at the turn of evening: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, camels were coming. Rivkah lifted up her eyes, and she saw Yitzchak, and she fell off the camel" (*Bereishit* 24:63-64).

Why did Rivkah fall off the Camel? As they approached Avraham's land, Rivkah looked up and saw a man standing in the field praying. She did not know it was Yitzchak. Seeing him praying with such intensity, Rivkah realized that this was a great man. When she saw an angel standing beside him, Rivkah bowed deeply toward him and fell off the camel in her great awe and respect. Hirsch describes the emotion that prevented Rivka from riding towards Yitzchak, which is very characteristic of Rivkah. A fancy lady surely would have preferred to ride in honor and glory and with her head held high. She would have afterwards allowed her future husband to help her descend from the camel. However, especially since Yitzchak was not riding, it didn't seem suitable for Rivkah to ride towards Yitzchak who was walking. In addition, riding is a sign of ruler-ship, and Rivkah didn't want to be seen by Yitzchak as the first lady. All this was not done through calculation

(if not so, it would be only a small difference between humility and haughtiness). Rather “She fell” as if accidentally by herself, though arousal of the spontaneous correct emotion. Furthermore, Rivkah saw the tetragrammaton expressed in the personality of Yitzchak. She fell on her face, just as people would fall on their faces when they heard the tetragrammaton being pronounced on Yom Kippur by the *Kohen Gadol*. HaRav Moshe Meir Weiss, Rav of the Agudah of Staten Island relates that after the *Akeidah*, Yitzchak spent three years in the Garden of Eden and came down just as Rivkah was arriving. In *Gan Eden* it is said that people walk upside down. Following this thought, Rivkah saw Yitzchak walking upside down and she fell off the camel as a result.

### Mixed Pure and Impure

A camel is a non-kosher animal who chews its cud but does not have a split hoof – one kosher and one non-kosher sign. The root of the camel is in holiness, but when it descends into the lower world, it becomes un-kosher (*Shem M'Shemuel, Parashat Shemini*). Rivkah was riding a camel rather than in an enclosed cab on a horse befitting of a proper noblewoman, as an allusion to the twin sons she would bear. Just as the camel includes both kosher and non-kosher elements, among her sons, one would be righteous and the other wicked. (*Yalkut Shimoni Bereishit 24:109*). When Rivkah saw Yitzchak, Hashem sent her a spark of prophecy. In that moment, she saw that her marriage to Yitzchak would produce an Esau. When this was revealed to her, she became so weak that she fell from the camel. This prophecy would remain with Rivkah for years to come. She always saw Esau for what he was while Yitzchak remained blind to his actions. The camel is associated with *kelipat noga* (the husk with light that can be released). Its message for us is to choose holiness over impurity, disassociate with the lower impurity and come close to holiness (*Imrei Noam*).

### Dreaming of a Camel

“If one sees a camel in a dream, death has been decreed for him from heaven and he has been delivered from it” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 56b*). The reason for this is that the letters of *גַמְלָה/gamal* – camel have the same numerical value as the word *חכמה/chochmah* – wisdom (73). However, the particular combination of the letters in the word *גַמְלָה/gamal* indicates death. This is what it means when it states, “He saw that camels were coming...” (*Bereishit 24:63*). When Yitzchak “went out to the field” of the holy apples to destroy the mixture of holy and unholy, then he saw the combination of camels with the *shechinah*. He, therefore, went out to eradicate the husk and judgments from which death emanates. “Rivkah lifted her eyes and saw Yitzchak” (*ibid.* 64). When she saw Yitzchak who came to eradicate the judgments “she fell from upon the camel,” meaning she fell from the combination of *גַמְלָה/gamal* and it then turned into *חכמה/chochmah* – wisdom (*Sefer Ohev Yisrael*). It is known that “Wisdom preserves the life of him that has it” (*Kohelet 7:12*), this explains why he is saved from death. In the impure chariot there is a camel, yet *גַמְלָה/gamal* – camel is also the language of bestowing kindness. Thus by means of bestowing kindness we have the power to break the camel of the impure chariot from the other side and be saved from death (*Noam Elimelech, Parashat Vayeshev*). The camel corresponds to diminution and judgment from the language of “weaning Yitzchak” (*Bereishit 21:8*). Simultaneously it is also associated with bestowal of kindness, so it consist of the two opposites, judgment and kindness. When the judgments are rectified then the person is saved from death, this is the character-trait of Rivkah’s son Ya’aoav.

## The Camel -- Forging the Jewish Nation by Choosing Pure over Impure

*Parashat Chayei Sarah* encompasses the main transition point in Jewish history. Its opening description of Sarah's passing and burial is a shock not only for Avraham, but it also poses a peril for the continuation of the entire Jewish people. The aftermath of the loss of such righteous giant may naturally lead to despair. The continuation of the seed of Israel is hanging in a thin thread between death and life. Only if Rivkah comes alive to take Sarah's place can the chain of Jewish motherhood pass on. Even so, there are many deterrents trying to prevent the yet unborn people from living to become the chosen nation. This explains why camels are so central to this week's *parasha*. The camel, which connects pure and impure elements, represents the ability to forge the Jewish nation by choosing the path that will lead to the life embodied by Ya'acov over the path that will lead to the death represented by Esav. Rivkah is the carrier of this opposing mixture. She derived from a clan of tricksters, yet she unhesitatingly jumped on the camel and left her family behind in order to marry the son of Avraham whom she had never met. The camel theme serves as the backdrop for this most pivotal transition point in Jewish history. The exact amount of 18 camels – the numerical value of ח/chai – life alludes to the life-giving choice of both Rivkah and Yitzchak, which saves us all from death and eventually forges the Jewish nation.