

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Chayei Sarah

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Binyomin *ben Ya'akov a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Dinnertime Deferment

This week's *parshah* relates the pleasant narrative of Rivkah's display of altruistic kindness. Seeking a suitable wife for his master's son, Eliezer the servant of Avraham arranges a test of sorts: He will ask for a drink from the water-drawing maidens, and whoever agrees and offers water to his camels as well will have proven herself to be the prospective bride. And so it plays out when Rivkah approaches. Eliezer asks for water, and Rivkah generously responds, giving him to drink and filling the trough for his camels, as well.

Nothing untoward here, right?

Camels First?

Actually, it might not be so simple – especially in light of a *halachah* emerging from a *passuk* found in *Keriyas Shema*. The verse states: “And I will supply grass in your field for your animals, and you will eat and be satiated” (*Devarim 11:15*). The Gemara (*Berachos 40a*) notes that the order in the *passuk* is quite deliberate: First – “And I will supply grass... for your animals,” and only then “you shall eat.” From this inference, the Gemara concludes: “It is forbidden for a person to dine before he feeds his animal.”

Thus, Rivkah's actions may need to be reexamined. “And she said: ‘Drink, my master’... And she finished giving him to drink, and she said, ‘I will also draw (water) for your camels’... And she drew (water) for all his camels” (*Bereishis 24:18-20*). Thus we see that she *first* gave water to Eliezer and only supplied his camels when he was finished drinking! Was this a laudable good deed or a contravention of *halachah*?

The Machtzis Hashekel (*Orach Chaim 167:18*) states unequivocally that the fact that the Torah recorded the deed of our righteous matriarch means that not only was it permissible, but that we should learn from and duplicate it. Regarding the apparent contradiction (to the prohibition against eating before the animals), he concurs with the resolution provided by the Sefer Chassidim, who draws the following distinction. The above *halachah* was stated specifically with regard to *eating*; in that case, one must ensure that his animals are served first. Drinking, however, is another matter, as we see from the episode with Rivkah. When it comes to drinking, we need not give precedence to the beasts.

A number of commentators, however, take issue with this attempt to differentiate between eating and drinking in this matter. Why, exactly, should there be such a difference in the first place? Furthermore, they point out that the assertion of the Sefer Chassidim seems to be at odds with the Gemara elsewhere. The same statement (prohibiting eating before feeding the animals) appears in the Gemara in Gittin (*62a*), but with a “twist.” The wording there states: “It is forbidden *litom* (to taste) before feeding one's animal.” Things may have squared with the terminology in *Berachos*, which spoke of a prohibition *l'echol* (to eat); there's room to infer that the rule is limited just to solids and not liquids. But this distinction seems not to pass muster with the “*litom*” version of Gittin, as “tasting” applies equally to eating or drinking.

The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh (*Bereishis 24:19*) formulates a different distinction. The issue is not eating vs. drinking; rather, the matter revolves around urgency. Under normal circumstances, one must give

precedence to serving the animals first, regardless of the substance of the offerings. To this was the Gemara in Berachos referring. But Eliezer was a special case; having traveled from afar, his thirst was quite strong, and he suffered substantial discomfort. In cases of extreme need or danger, we tend first to the person – as evidenced by Rivkah’s deed.

But there seems to be room to raise questions on this explanation as well. The assumption here is that Eliezer was in “great need” of a drink. But is that necessarily the case? Seemingly, Eliezer was a capable individual who could readily have helped himself; the whole arrangement with the water-drawers was but a contrived exercise for matrimonial purposes. It might be that Eliezer wasn’t so desperate for a drink after all.

Polly Want a Cracker – Now

An alternate explanation – one unaffected by the points raised above – is offered by the Chasam Sofer (cited in *Shailos U’teshuvos K’sav Sofer, Orach Chaim § 22*). He provides yet another distinction, one that appears sporadically in Shas, such as in the laws of feeding animals on Shabbos. The Mishnah (*Shabbos 24:3*) states:

אין נוֹתְמֵין מֵיִם לְפָנֵי דְבוֹרִים וְלְפָנֵי יוֹנִים שְׁבִשׁוּבָה, אֲבָל נוֹתְמֵין לְפָנֵי אֲזוּזִים וְתַרְנְגוּלִים וְלְפָנֵי יוֹנֵי הַרְדְּסִיּוֹת.

“One may not place water (on Shabbos) before bees or doves of the cote. But one may place it before geese, chickens and Herodian doves.”

Why is it forbidden to lay out water for one class of creatures and permissible for the others? The Gemara (*Shabbos 155b*) attributes the difference to their ability to procure their own food. For those creatures that can forage for themselves, it is unnecessary to give them food; hence one is prohibited from providing them their needs on Shabbos. Regarding the others, they are considered to be in a state of “*mezonosan alecha*” – they depend on their human owners for their sustenance. As such, one may put out their rations on Shabbos.

This same distinction, explains the Chasam Sofer, is the determining factor in our discussion as well. The Gemara forbids one to eat before feeding the animals – but which ones? Those characterized as “*mezonosan alecha*,” that is, *his own* animals, who rely upon him for their nourishment. Thus, the *halachah* was totally non-applicable in the case of Rivkah – because they were not her camels but Eliezer’s. Additionally, the matter follows the giver; thus, once Rivkah was authorized to offer Eliezer first, there was no issue with him partaking before his camels.

An interesting practical ramification emerges from this approach. Someone who owns a pet bird, for example, must first see to it that his bird is given food before he himself has his morning meal. But if the same individual has guests staying with him – on whom the bird is not dependent – the host can serve them their scrambled eggs before taking care of Polly the parakeet. Then, after guests and bird are provided for, he can join them for breakfast (*Piskei Teshuvos 167:15*).