

## REBECCA AND THE ORIGIN OF CHESED

A commentary on *Parashat Chayei Sarah*  
By Dan Jacobs

In the *Parasha* of *Chayei Sarah* (the life of Sarah) we learn a fundamental and basic character trait that we should emulate from our biblical fore-parent.

Abraham sends his servant (hopefully receiving a living wage) Eliezer out to find his son Isaac a wife. In ancient times, the water well served as a social hub, much in the same way as a pub or coffee shop has done in modern Britain. Abraham gave Eliezer little in the way of criteria to decide on this match, other than they should be part of the family. Abraham trusted that Eliezer would use his wisdom and judgement to find the right wife for his son.

Says Eliezer: *“So let it come to pass, that the maiden to whom I shall say: Let down your pitcher that I may drink; and she shall say: Drink, and I will give your camels drink also ... and then I shall know that you have shown Chesed (kindness) unto my master”* (Genesis 24, 14). It is clear from the context of the text that Eliezer saw Chesed as the key attribute Isaac should want in a wife.



\*painting of the Kabbalist Moshe Cordovero

The Mishna records Shimon HaTzadick who lived second century BCE as saying that the world stands on three things; Torah (law), *Avodah* (Service to G-d) and *Chesed*. This poses the question of what *Chesed* or kindness means that it should be so key to the workings of the world. In his work, Tomer Devorah, the Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (16th Century) talks about how human beings can emulate G-d's *Chesed* (which is a key part of the Kabbalistic tree) by doing any of the

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following: loving G-d; providing for children; circumcision; visiting and healing the sick; giving charity to the poor; attending to the dead; delivering a bride to her wedding and making peace between people.

A strong thread going through R. Cordovero's list is that each and every person starting with childhood has a right to be provided with basic necessities such as food, healthcare, love, a peaceful life through to their death. This is what Eliezer was looking for, a woman who can embody these attributes as one of the foremothers of civilisation so that she can imbue future generations with her *Chesed*.

Interestingly, Article 25 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.” I see a large overlap in Article 25 with R. Cardevero's formulation, in this way you can say that Rebecca (who according to tradition was a prophetess) was seen as embodying a fundamental principle of modern human rights.