

Shabbat Parashat Chayei Sarah  
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There are certain expressions which conjure up an immediate feeling of goodwill, and others which bring up quite the opposite. Different people, of course, have different reactions even to similar phrases. The one on my mind this week could be expressed in the question: “What is your immediate reaction to or association with the following phrase: ‘Do me a favor?’”?

On the surface, most people probably don’t like this expression too much, especially when we are on the receiving end of it. But others may see the advantage to doing someone a favor and might be more predisposed to listen favorably. This dual reaction exists even in the definition of the word, which has a dual-meaning. On the one hand it is something done or granted out of goodwill, usually voluntarily and without expectation of repayment. On the other it is an act with an ulterior motive, to ‘win favor’, to put oneself into the good graces or into the ‘now he owes me one’ column. And as always, context is everything.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have twice seen Abraham ask a pretty significant favor of Sarah. Do you remember what it was? Tell Pharaoh, or Avimelekh, that you are my sister instead of my wife, because if you tell him you are my wife he’ll kill me and take you. Sarah, as far as the Torah reports, does not object to this request – though much discussion has occurred about whether Abraham was right to have asked this of her. Whatever your judgment of that, we see no objection on Sarah’s part and we also don’t see her holding it over his head later. We can imagine that she got him to wash the dishes a few times – but the power of the Torah’s silence on Sarah’s willingness to play along with Abraham’s idea – perhaps saving both of them – is itself instructive.

In the context of our Torah portion, we see both kinds of favor, at least as far as I can tell. Can you think of one of the two favors asked in this week’s parashah? The first one is the great scene of banter and negotiation between Abraham and Ephron as Abraham seeks to acquire a burial plot for Sarah. It’s a diplomatic dance – Ephron wants to give Abraham the land and is almost saying – do me a favor and take it. But Abraham won’t hear of it – he insists on buying it for full value, and eventually succeeds. Abraham saw Ephron’s favor for what it indeed might have been – a ‘put me in the you-owe-me-one’ category, which the Torah clearly did not want Abraham to be in.

The second favor is one that Jewish history literally turns on. Abraham sends out his servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for Isaac – Lindsay will talk more about this later from a different angle. Abraham tells Eliezer how he will know it is the right person – paraphrasing, the one who does you the favor of watering your camels without you having to ask her to do that is the one I want you to bring back for Isaac to marry. And the Rebecca-at-the-well narrative unfolds exactly as Abraham wanted it to – the one who saw thirsty camels and offered to give them water – to do a favor without having to be asked – was the appropriate spouse for Isaac and role model for us.

This year the weekly e-mail from JTS includes a mishnat hashavua, and this week's mishna goes like this: If someone seeks to repay a debt during the sabbatical year [even though his debt has been canceled], the lender should say, "I forgive the loan." If the borrower says, "even so" [I am paying you], then the lender can take it, as the Torah says, "this is the word of the annulment" (Deut. 15:2). Similarly, if a killer has been exiled to a city of refuge, and the local people wish to honor him, he should say to them, "I am a killer." If they say to him, "even so," then he can accept [the honor] from them, as the Torah says, "this is the word of the killer" (Deut. 19:4).

Which narrative is this closer to? Abraham or Rebecca? I think Abraham – it is about accepting or rejecting a favor, something that Abraham was faced with in his dialogue with Ephron. Abraham declines the favor of the gift of land even though it was offered to him multiple times. In the mishna, taking the first example, if I'm offered money to repay a debt that has already been forgiven I am also encouraged to not accept it. But if the one 'doing the favor' insists, then in a way I am doing him a favor by allowing him to do me that favor.

There are some people who like to do favors and others who like to receive them. Some do favors without hope or expectation of repayment and others – in a very human response that is as old as social relationships – keep an accounting of who and what is owed to them. It's probably better to be in the first category here. On the flip-side, some people consciously never ask for favors while others do so continuously. Jewish tradition has something to say on both sides of the favor divide and it is instructive:

- 1) From the Torah's account of Abraham and Ephron, sometimes it is wise to refuse the offer of a favor because of the ulterior motives of the offerer.
- 2) From the Torah's account of Rebecca's kindness, sometimes we can do someone else a favor beyond what they asked us for – seeing a need and meeting it without having to be asked is a high form of volunteerism, and Rebecca is the early model of that kindness.
- 3) Especially for those – and I'll admit that often includes me – who dislike (or are uncomfortable with) asking for or accepting a favor, we can learn from the mishna that sometimes the best way to do someone else a favor is to allow them to do one for you. While it's true that we should be careful with what we ask of others and quick to give generously of ourselves when asked to do so, Jewish tradition takes these somewhat simple axioms of social behavior one step further: sometimes to be a better giver we have to learn to be better receivers.