



Parashat Chayei-Sara
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Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the story of Avraham's servant, who was assigned the task of traveling to his master's birthplace, Aram Naharayim, to find a suitable mate for Yitzchak. The Torah describes the servant – whom *Chazal* of course identify as Eliezer, the servant mentioned earlier in Bereishit (15:2) – as “*moshel be-khol asher lo*,” the one who “ruled over all he [Avraham] had” (24:2). According to the straightforward reading, this means that Eliezer had open access to all his master's assets. He had earned Avraham's trust to the point where he could spend and manage funds as he saw fit, without receiving his master's explicit authorization. (Eliezer's stature is reminiscent of Yosef's position in the house of Potifar, who granted him full control over his assets – see 39:6).

In the Talmud and Midrash, however, we find that *Chazal* saw in this description an allusion to Eliezer's spiritual greatness. The Gemara (Yoma 28b) explains this phrase to mean that the servant “ruled over his master's teachings.” Eliezer was not only Avraham's servant; he was also his most accomplished disciple, who achieved mastery over everything Avraham taught. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 59), by contrast, suggests that the Torah refers to Eliezer's control over his passions: “*she-haya shalit be-yitzro*.” When the Torah speaks of Eliezer as “ruling,” it means that he exerted control and restraint over his impulses, rather than allowing them to control his conduct.

Rav Baruch Sorotzkin of Telz noted that these two Midrashic readings need not necessarily be at odds with one another. For in order to achieve mastery over Torah, one must exert control over his physical drives. A student must curb the natural drive for physical gratification in order to develop his intellect to its fullest potential, as it is impossible to acquire scholarship amidst the unending pursuit of physical gratification. Hence, the Gemara and the Midrash both point to the same quality of Eliezer, namely, that he exercised self-control and discipline in order to obtain knowledge.

Maimonides discusses this link between discipline and scholarship in the Hilkhot Talmud Torah section of *Mishneh Torah* (3:12):

The words of Torah are not sustained within somebody who is slothful regarding them, nor in those who learn amidst delights and eating and drinking, but only within one who kills himself over them and constantly causes himself physical discomfort, and does not allow his eyes to sleep or his eyelids to slumber. The Sages said by way of allusion: "This is the Torah – a person who dies in a tent: Torah is sustained only within one who kills himself in the tents of the scholars."

Indulgence in comforts and delights does not allow a person the time or frame of mind he needs to achieve scholarship. Maimonides therefore urges students to exercise moderation in their pursuit of physical gratification, so that they can properly focus their minds and efforts on the pursuit of knowledge. Even if few are capable – and expected –

to adhere to the demanding standard that Maimonides here establishes (“...and constantly causes himself physical discomfort, and does not allow his eyes to sleep...”), we are all called upon to make certain sacrifices for the sake of Torah learning. Each individual must exercise control and restraint, denying himself a degree of comfort and luxury, so that he can achieve “mastery” over at least a significant portion of the vast corpus of Torah.