Was Rivka Really Three?

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CHAPTER 01

A Son He Had for Forty Years

Let us begin with the words that introduce Avraham's search for a wife for Yitzchak.

The opening pasuk and Rashi

Please look at source one.

Source 1 — Bereishis 24:1; Rashi, s.v. Berach es Avraham bakol

וְאַבְרָהָם זָקֵן בָּא בַּיָּמִים וַה׳ בֵּרַךְ אֶת אַבְרָהָם בַּכֹּל.

Avraham was old, advanced in days, and Hashem had blessed Avraham with everything.

״בכל״ עולה בגימטריא ״בן״, ומאחר שהיה לו בן היה צריך להשיאו אשה.

"Bakol" has the numerical value of "ben," a son. Since he had a son, he needed to find him a wife.

The Torah introduces Avraham's search for a wife for Yitzchak with this familiar verse. Let us read it carefully, because the explanation of one word will open the entire class. What does bakol, "with everything," mean?

Rashi explains that the numerical value of bakol is the numerical value of ben, a son. Both equal fifty-two. Hashem blessed Avraham with a son. Rashi then continues, as we have just read: since he had a son, he needed to find him a wife.

Question 1 · Why describe the blessing now?

That brings us to our first question: why are we hearing this now?

Yitzchak is forty years old. Avraham has had this son for forty years! Why introduce the search for a wife by telling us that Avraham has been blessed with a son? What happened now that makes this blessing the introduction to the next stage?

Question 2 · Why wait until forty?

Our second question follows closely: why did the marriage wait until this point? Yitzchak was thirty-seven at the Akeidah. He married at forty. What made this the time to establish his home? We will discover that the period between those two events contains a preparation we would never have imagined from the narrative alone.

Question 3 · A son only to Sarah?

Our third question concerns the announcement of Yitzchak's birth. The angel says, "Behold, a son to Sarah your wife."

Is he a son only to Sarah? Is he not Avraham's son as well? We will see that these words identify something about his original spiritual inheritance.

Question 4 · What connects the match to Har HaMoriah?

Our fourth question concerns the connection between the Akeidah and the marriage. Listen to the actual words of Lavan and Besuel when Eliezer asks for Rivka:

וַיַּעַן לָבָן וּבְתוּאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵה׳ יָצָא הַדָּבָר לֹא נוּכַל דַּבֵּר אֵלֶיךָ רַע אוֹ טוֹב.

“Lavan and Besuel answered: The matter has come from Hashem; we cannot speak to you either bad or good.” (Bereishis 24:50)

Bereishis Rabbah 60:10 asks, “מֵהֵיכָן יָצָא?”—“From where did it emerge?” One answer is: “מֵהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה יָצָא”—“It emerged from Har HaMoriah.”

On the surface, the match was arranged through a journey to a well and a meeting with Rivka’s family. Why trace it to the mountain of the Akeidah? What happened there that made this marriage possible? If Rivka was intended for Yitzchak, what preparation was still necessary? Hold that question alongside our first three.

Establishing the three-year calculation

Please look at source three.

Source 3 — Rashi, Bereishis 25:20; 23:2 (excerpts)

ויצחק היה בן ל״ז שנה, שהרי בו בפרק מתה שרה, ומשנולד יצחק עד העקידה שמתה שרה ל״ז שנה, ובת צ׳ היתה כשנולד יצחק ובת קכ״ז כשמתה ... ובו בפרק נולדה רבקה, המתין לה עד שתהא ראויה לביאה ג׳ שנים ונשאה.

Yitzchak was thirty-seven years old, for Sarah died at that time. From Yitzchak's birth until the Akeidah, when Sarah died, thirty-seven years had passed. She was ninety when Yitzchak was born and one hundred and twenty-seven when she died … Rivka was born at that time. He waited three years, until she was physically fit for marital relations, and married her.

ונסמכה מיתת שרה לעקידת יצחק, לפי שעל ידי בשורת העקידה שנזדמן בנה לשחיטה וכמעט שלא נשחט פרחה נשמתה ממנה ומתה.

Sarah's death is placed alongside the binding of Yitzchak because, through the news of the Akeidah - that her son had been brought to slaughter and had come so close to being slaughtered - her soul departed from her and she died.

Now let us turn to Rivka. First we must establish the familiar calculation of her age. Sarah was ninety when Yitzchak was born and one hundred and twenty-seven when she died. According to the chronology Rashi follows, her death was connected with the Akeidah. Yitzchak was therefore thirty-seven at the Akeidah. Rashi explains that Rivka was born at that time.

The Torah explicitly tells us that Yitzchak married at forty. Thirty-seven to forty is three years. On this calculation, Rivka was three when she married him. Rashi states the conclusion explicitly (25:20):

וּבוֹ בַּפֶּרֶק נוֹלְדָה רִבְקָה.

At that time Rivka was born. He then describes Yitzchak waiting three years before marrying her. And the connection between Sarah's death and the Akeidah is explicit in Rashi to 23:2:

וְנִסְמְכָה מִיתַת שָׂרָה לַעֲקֵדַת יִצְחָק.

Rashi continues that the news that her son had been brought to the point of slaughter caused her soul to depart. These are the steps of the chronology; we are not deriving her age merely from a general impression of the story.

Question 5 · How could a three-year-old marry?

Only now can we ask our fifth question: how could a three-year-old be ready for marriage? Doing the arithmetic does not make that question disappear. Think of a three-year-old child. How could she leave her parents, establish a home, and become the wife of Yitzchak Avinu and the next mother of the Jewish people?

The explanation of exceptional development

Please look at source four.

Source 4 — Gur Aryeh, Bereishis 25:20 (see also Sechel Tov, Bereishis 24:14)

והא דכתיב בקרא ... ״נערה״ דמשמע נערה היתה, ולא תקרא בת ג׳ ״נערה״, ויש לומר דהיו אבריה וגידול שלה כנערה.

> *As for the verse calling her a "na'arah," which implies that she was a maiden, a three-year-old would not be called a "na'arah." We can explain that her limbs and bodily development were like those of a maiden.*

The Gur Aryeh directly addresses the word na'arah: her limbs and bodily development were like those of a maiden. Midrash Sechel Tov likewise explains the water-drawing episode through the different development of those generations: a girl of three then could be like a girl of ten later. These explanations give us reason to distinguish her physical development from that of an ordinary three-year-old today.

That helps us understand her strength. But have we understood the whole account? Marriage involves understanding, judgment, commitment, and readiness to establish a shared life. Even the comparison to a ten-year-old leaves us wanting a fuller explanation. The Gur Aryeh also addresses the exceptional marriage through the explicit Divine direction of this match. Those are substantial approaches. Yet there is another explanation we will explore, one that asks what the three years are measuring.

Question 6 · Why call her a na'arah?

That brings us to our sixth question: why does the Torah call her a na'arah?

וְהַנַּעֲרָ טֹבַת מַרְאֶה מְאֹד.

Please look at source five.

Source 5 — Tosafos, Yevamos 61b, s.v. Vekhen hu omer (excerpts)

תימה דהכא משמע דרבקה נערה היתה ובסדר עולם ... תניא בהדיא שהיתה בת שלש כשנשאה יצחק.

This is puzzling: here it appears that Rivka was a maiden, whereas Seder Olam … explicitly teaches that she was three years old when Yitzchak married her.

וה״ר שמואל חסיד משפיר״א הוכיח שהיתה בת י״ד, מדתניא בספרי ו׳ זוגות שנותיהן שוות, וקחשיב קהת ורבקה, וקהת חיה קל״ג כדכתיב בקרא.

Rabbeinu Shmuel HaChassid of Speyer demonstrated that she was fourteen, from the teaching in Sifrei that six pairs had equal lifespans. Kehos and Rivka are included, and Kehos lived one hundred and thirty-three years, as Scripture states.

דכשנולד יעקב היתה בת ל״ד, ויעקב היה בן צ״ט כשמתה רבקה הרי קל״ג ... וצריך לומר דמדרשות חלוקים זה על זה.

When Yaakov was born she was thirty-four, and Yaakov was ninety-nine when Rivka died, making one hundred and thirty-three … We must therefore say that the Midrashic traditions disagree with one another.

The maiden was very beautiful. Tosafos itself raises the difficulty: this description suggests a na'arah, a maiden who has reached the threshold of maturity, at least twelve years old, rather than a little child. In its technical halachic sense, na'arus begins at twelve years and a day with the appropriate signs of maturity. The contrast with a child of three makes Tosafos's question much sharper: how does this fit Seder Olam? Our point here is the distinction between a maiden and a tiny child; we are not using the word alone to assign Rivka an exact age. Tosafos also brings a tradition that she was fourteen when she married. We therefore have a question within the sources themselves. Could there be a way to understand both accounts as expressing something true?

Six questions: why the blessing now; why marriage at forty; why a son to Sarah; why the Akeidah matters to the zivug; how Rivka could marry at three; and why she is called a na'arah.

One question holds the six together: what changed that made this marriage possible now? Keep that question in mind as we move through the sources. Our starting point is Avraham's blessing. To understand why he receives his son anew, we must return to the Akeidah.

What changed that made this marriage possible now?

CHAPTER 02

What Changed at the Akeidah?

We generally picture the Akeidah as a test that Yitzchak survived. He went up the mountain alive, and he remained alive. Hashem stopped Avraham, a ram was offered, and life continued. But the sources describe a profound change within that life.

When the soul departed—and when it returned

Please look at source six.

Source 6 — Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 31

ר׳ יהודה אומר: כיון שהגיע החרב על צווארו, פרחה ויצאה נשמתו של יצחק. וכיון שהשמיע קולו מבין הכרובים ואמר לו: ״אל תשלח ידך״, חזרה הרוח לגופו, וקם ועמד יצחק על רגליו, וידע יצחק שכך המתים עתידים להחיות, ופתח ואמר: ברוך אתה ה׳ מחיה המתים.

Rabbi Yehudah says: When the blade reached his neck, Yitzchak's soul flew out and departed. When He made His voice heard from between the keruvim and said to him, "Do not stretch out your hand," his soul returned to his body. Yitzchak rose and stood upon his feet. Yitzchak understood that this is how the dead would one day be revived, and he began: "Blessed are You, Hashem, Who revives the dead."

Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 31, tells us exactly when the departure occurred: when the blade reached Yitzchak's neck, his soul departed.

When the Divine voice commanded Avraham not to put his hand to the boy, his soul returned to his body. Yitzchak stood on his feet, recognized through his own experience that Hashem would revive the dead, and blessed Hashem as Mechayeh HaMeisim. This account describes a departure before slaughter; it does not say that Avraham killed him.

Understanding the two soul-roots

Please look at source seven.

Source 7 — Bereishis 18:10; Ohr HaChaim, Bereishis 21:1 (excerpt)

וְהִנֵּה בֵּן לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתֶּךָ.

Behold, a son to Sarah your wife.

״בן לשרה אשתך״ שבא מצד הנקבה ולסיבה זו הוצרך לעקידה.

“A son to Sarah your wife”: he came from the feminine side, and for this reason he required the Akeidah.

The teaching of the Arizal gives the change at the Akeidah an additional meaning. Originally Yitzchak possessed a neshama mi-sitra de-nukva; at the Akeidah he received a neshama mi-sitra de-duchra, through which he could father children. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer gives us the account of departure and return. The teaching of the Arizal supplies the explanation of the changed spiritual capacity. We should keep those two contributions distinct as we bring them together.

Let us translate the expressions. Mi-sitra means "from the side of" or "rooted in." Nukva means the feminine side; duchra means the masculine side. Here the terms identify the spiritual root of the neshama and the capacity it gives him. Yitzchak was physically male throughout. The change concerns the soul through which he would father the promised generations. We will shortly see how this explanation relates these roots to din and chesed.

Capacity for fatherhood—and the twenty-year wait

Here the consequence is specific: with his original neshama, Yitzchak could not father the children through whom the Jewish people would continue. His holiness was already immense; the capacity needed to establish the promised generations had not yet been given in its required form. A wife could not by herself supply that missing capacity. Within this explanation, the Akeidah had to precede the marriage through which that future would unfold.

We should make one distinction now. The Torah still describes twenty years of waiting and tefillah after the marriage before Yaakov and Esav are born. The change at the Akeidah establishes the possibility of fatherhood. It does not promise that children will arrive immediately. (Bereishis 25:20–26)

The Akeidah therefore gave him more than rescue from danger. With the new neshama came the capacity for fatherhood and for the continuation of Klal Yisrael through him. Later we will see how this particular explanation connects the feminine root with din and the masculine root with chesed.

Consider the reversal this creates in our understanding. Avraham went to the mountain prepared to surrender the son through whom his future was promised. Through that very act, Yitzchak received the soul that enabled the future to unfold. The event that seemed to threaten the continuation of the family became the event through which its continuation was made possible.

Avraham was prepared to surrender his future. At the Akeidah, Yitzchak received the capacity to bring that future into the world.

The event that seemed to threaten the future made its continuation possible.

“A son to Sarah your wife”

The Torah's announcement of his birth had used a particular expression:

וְהִנֵּה בֵן לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתֶּךָ.

Behold, a son to Sarah your wife. But is he a son only to Sarah? Is he not Avraham's son as well? Why emphasize "a son to Sarah"?

“As He said” and “as He spoke”

The expression “a son to Sarah” identifies his original spiritual root. Yitzchak is physically the son of both Avraham and Sarah throughout. The explanation concerns the soul and its capacity to bring forth the next generation.

Keeping source seven’s explanation in mind, now listen to another pasuk:

וַה׳ פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמָר וַיַּעַשׂ ה׳ לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֵּר.

“Hashem remembered Sarah as He had said, and Hashem did for Sarah as He had spoken.” (Bereishis 21:1)

Why begin with “amar” and finish with “dibber”? First, “ka’asher amar”—as He had said—expresses the kindness of the promise. Amirah is gentle speech: Hashem would give Sarah the child for whom she had longed.

Then comes “ka’asher dibber”—as He had spoken. Dibbur is harsh speech. The promise was fulfilled, but the gift came with a harsh condition: Yitzchak’s original neshama was from the feminine side, without the capacity to father children.

The Ohr HaChaim explains that this limitation was a punishment connected to Sarah's laughter. The kindness was the gift of a son; the judgment lay in the condition in which she received him. That distinction is already contained in the change from "amar" to "dibber."

The Ohr HaChaim himself connects that condition to the Akeidah and to Sarah's death. Let us follow the steps rather than merely name them. Because of Yitzchak's original soul-root, he needed the change brought about at the Akeidah. There, the original soul departed and he received the new soul through which he could become a father.

Now hear Rashi's explanation of Sarah's death:

וְנִסְמְכָה מִיתַת שָׂרָה לַעֲקֵדַת יִצְחָק, לְפִי שֶׁעַל יְדֵי בְשׂוֹרַת הָעֲקֵדָה, שֶׁנִּזְדַּמֵּן בְּנָהּ לִשְׁחִיטָה וְכִמְעַט שֶׁלֹּא נִשְׁחַט, פָּרְחָה נִשְׁמָתָהּ מִמֶּנָּה וּמֵתָה.

"Sarah's death is placed alongside the binding of Yitzchak because, through the news of the Akeidah—that her son had been brought to slaughter and had come so close to being slaughtered—her soul departed and she died." (Rashi, Bereishis 23:2)

The whole connection is now visible. Sarah's laughter was followed by the judgment expressed in Yitzchak's original soul-root. That condition required rectification at the Akeidah. Hearing about that very event caused Sarah's soul to depart. Within this explanation, had he originally received the soul appropriate to fatherhood, this particular need for the Akeidah would not have arisen, and Sarah would not have died through hearing its report.

This is the harsh dimension contained in "ka'asher dibber." The gift of the son, his original limitation, the rectification, and Sarah's death form one connected exposition. It explains a particular purpose of the Akeidah; it does not exhaust all its purposes. And it does not erase the grief: Avraham still comes to eulogize Sarah and weep for her.

Why repeat "Avraham fathered Yitzchak"?

The Ohr HaChaim uses this explanation to answer another beautiful question, at the beginning of Toldos:

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם הוֹלִיד אֶת יִצְחָק.

"These are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham; Avraham fathered Yitzchak." (Bereishis 25:19)

If we have already said “Yitzchak, son of Avraham,” why repeat “Avraham fathered Yitzchak”? Notice that the verse is introducing Yitzchak’s own descendants. But if his original soul-root did not enable him to father children, how could he have descendants?

“Avraham holid es Yitzchak” supplies the answer. Through the Akeidah, Avraham brought about **the capacity for generation within Yitzchak**. **The son could now become a father himself**. The wording explains how Yitzchak could have the “toldos” with which the pasuk begins.

Receiving the son anew

Now return to the words we read in source one. Hashem blessed Avraham “bakol,” whose numerical value is “ben,” a son. Physically, Avraham had been his father for decades. Through the Akeidah, his son received a new spiritual capacity. That is the new dimension of the blessing being described.

And Rashi’s continuation follows: since he had a son, he needed to find him a wife. The capacity to establish the next generation had now been given; building that home belonged to the next stage.

Avraham enabled his son to become a father.

Returning to Har HaMoriah

Now we can return to Lavan and Besuel’s words and the Midrash:

מֵה׳ יָצָא הַדָּבָר.

“The matter has come from Hashem.”

מֵהֵיכָן יָצָא? מֵהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה יָצָא.

“From where did it emerge? It emerged from Har HaMoriah.”

The Midrash has taken us to the point where the marriage became spiritually possible. At the Akeidah, Yitzchak received the capacity through which he could establish the promised generations. The marriage is therefore traced to the mountain even though Eliezer’s journey and Rivka’s agreement came later.

We have begun answering why Avraham receives his son anew and why the Akeidah matters to the match. But if there was a new beginning within Yitzchak, could there also have been a corresponding beginning within Rivka?

CHAPTER 03

Three Years from Which Beginning?

The older-age tradition

Let us first hear the disagreement accurately. Rashi follows the calculation that places Rivka's birth at the time of the Akeidah and her marriage three years later. Tosafos in Yevamos asks how this fits the description of a na'arah and brings Rav Shmuel HaChassid of Speyer's calculation that she was fourteen.

The older-age calculation has a basis in the sources. Tosafos cites the tradition that Rivka’s lifespan equalled Kehos’s: one hundred and thirty-three years. Working back through Yaakov’s life places her at fourteen when she married. Tosafos concludes that the Midrashic traditions disagree.

For the calculation: Yaakov was sixty-three when he left, spent fourteen years in the beis midrash, twenty with Lavan, and two years on the return journey. That makes him ninety-nine at Rivka’s death. Subtract ninety-nine from her lifespan of one hundred and thirty-three: she was thirty-four when he was born. Subtract the twenty childless years of her marriage: she married at fourteen.

This is a real discussion within our sources. Now let us see a proposed way of reading “three” without making it her physical age.

Rav Nosson Lubert’s proposed reconciliation

Now let us see whether we can make peace between the accounts. Rav Nosson Lubert, whose teachings are collected in She'eris Nasan, introduces his proposal by suggesting that both views can be true. His explanation is quoted in Otzar Pela'os HaTorah.

Please look at source eight.

Source 8 — She’eris Nasan, Toldos, p. 15; quoted in Otzar Pela’os HaTorah, pp. 381–382 (excerpts)

ובאותה שעה קיבלה רבקה נשמה מסטרא דנוקבא כי הנשמות הן זוגות.

At that same time, Rivka received a soul from the feminine side, because souls come in pairs.

היתה בת ג׳ מהנשמה החדשה.

She was three years old in relation to the new soul.

Yitzchak received his new soul at the Akeidah. Rav Nosson then writes that at that same time Rivka received a female neshama, because souls come in pairs. The three years can therefore be counted from the new soul she received.

הָיְתָה בַּת ג׳ מֵהַנְּשָׁמָה הַחֲדָשָׁה.

She was three years old in relation to the new neshama. Her body could have been older. The spiritual renewal associated with her marriage had occurred three years earlier.

Keeping thirteen and fourteen distinct

According to this proposal, the tradition of three years and the tradition of an older physical age are describing different beginnings. This is Rav Nosson's proposed reconciliation; Tosafos itself leaves the accounts as differing traditions. We can appreciate the proposal without attributing its answer to every earlier commentator.

One account measures years since physical birth. The proposed reconciliation measures three years since spiritual renewal.

There is one numerical detail to keep distinct. The printed reconciliation discusses thirteen, whereas Tosafos’s calculation gives fourteen. Its conceptual proposal is that “three” measures the age of a new neshama. It does not by itself settle that separate one-year discrepancy.

But if Yitzchak and Rivka were destined for one another, why did either need a new spiritual beginning? Should a destined match not already be ready?

An intended match can still require preparation

Please look at source nine.

Source 9 — Shem MiShmuel, Chayei Sarah 5671, on MeHashem yatza hadavar (excerpt)

דמשעת לידה הי׳ לו נשמה דנוקבא ולא הי׳ שייך לו אז בן זוג.

From birth he had possessed a soul of the feminine side, and at that time a corresponding mate was not yet applicable to him.

The Shem MiShmuel addresses the timing of this match through the Midrash we have just read. In explaining the view that the match emerged from Har HaMoriah, he says that Yitzchak’s

original feminine soul-root did not yet allow the corresponding relationship of a husband who could father the promised generations. The **Akeidah changed that condition**.

This is why it is insufficient simply to say, “They were destined for one another, so why was preparation necessary?” Hashem’s intended future can include the preparation through which it becomes possible. The Shem MiShmuel is explaining when the relationship became applicable in this spiritual sense. We should keep that precise point, rather than turn it into a general claim that every intended match is already ready from birth.

We can understand the intended match in this way: Hashem could intend Rivka for Yitzchak while also intending the Akeidah as the preparation through which they would become ready. The distinction we can apply is that an intended future can include the preparation needed to reach it. A promised future need not be available immediately. Avraham was promised descendants through Yitzchak before Yitzchak possessed the capacity through which that promise would be fulfilled.

Rav Nosson's proposal adds the corresponding renewal in Rivka: when Yitzchak received the neshama through which he could become a father, she received the female neshama appropriate to their shared future. Their being a zivug is therefore consistent with their needing preparation. The intended match becomes ready through the events included in Hashem's plan.

What the source explicitly says about Rivka

Rav Nosson explicitly describes Rivka receiving a new female neshama. He does not explicitly identify her previous neshama as male. We therefore do not have to add an exchange of souls between the two of them to make his explanation work. The explicit teaching is sufficient: their readiness for their shared future was bound up with a spiritual renewal at the Akeidah.

Now return to the basic human question. How could a three-year-old establish this home? Within Rav Nosson's proposed reconciliation, we are no longer being asked to picture an ordinary three-year-old's body and understanding. We are being asked to distinguish physical age from the age of a new neshama. That is an answer of a different kind from saying that development was faster in those generations.

We have an answer about the beginning from which those three years are counted. One question remains: what does it take to learn how to live with a new beginning?

Physical age and the age of a new neshama can count from different beginnings.

CHAPTER 04

Learning to Live with a New Neshama

Three years of preparation

Please look at source ten.

Source 10 — Shvilei Pinchas, Chayei Sarah, ma’amar 9, p. 23 (explanatory heading)

יצחק ישב בגן עדן ג׳ שנים כדי לחנכו עם נשמה החדשה.

Yitzchak remained in Gan Eden for three years in order to be educated with the new soul.

After the Akeidah, Yitzchak was thirty-seven; at marriage, he was forty. One account places these three years in the beis midrash of Shem and Ever; another places them in Gan Eden. In the latter explanation, he was being educated in serving Hashem with his new neshama.

There is a striking indication brought in this discussion. Years later, when Yaakov enters for the brachos, Yitzchak smells the fragrance of his garments:

וַיָּרַח אֶת רֵיחַ בְּגָדָיו.

“He smelled the fragrance of his garments.” (Bereishis 27:27)

Rashi explains:

מְלַמֵּד שֶׁנִּכְנְסָה עִמּוֹ רֵיחַ גַּן עֵדֶן.

“This teaches that the fragrance of Gan Eden entered with him.”

How did Yitzchak recognize that fragrance? The explanation brought here is that he knew it from his own stay in Gan Eden. Rashi supplies the fragrance; the discussion connecting it with Yitzchak’s earlier stay explains his recognition. We are bringing an indication within this interpretation, not claiming that Rashi himself states the whole three-year account.

Receiving a new capacity and learning how to live with it are distinct stages. Those three years now become an education for the home he is about to establish.

Who is missing from Sarah’s funeral?

Look at the funeral scene. The Torah names Avraham: he comes to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her. But where is Yitzchak? That is the question we want to notice.

The verse itself names Avraham. Within the account we are following, Yitzchak’s three years in Gan Eden belong to this interval after the Akeidah. We will return on Shabbos morning to the deeper meaning of that period and what it can teach us.

A question reserved for Shabbos morning

Before we leave Gan Eden, there is an extraordinary detail we are saving for Shabbos morning.

The Riva, commenting on Rivka's first sight of Yitzchak, describes him returning from Gan Eden in the manner of the departed, with their feet above. What could that mean? Was he coming upside down? Why would seeing him make Rivka fall from her camel? And what could this teach us about the way our lives here affect souls in the World to Come?

We will take up those questions on Shabbos morning. Tonight we need the point that brings us back to his marriage: receiving a new neshama was followed by learning how to serve Hashem with it.

Receiving a capacity—and learning to live with it

This is Yitzchak Avinu, who had already surrendered himself to Hashem at the Akeidah. His earlier greatness did not make the education unnecessary. He was preparing for a new form of avodah and for the home he would establish.

A new beginning can be given in a moment. Learning to live with it requires avodah.

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Becoming a parent

Someone becomes a parent. The baby has arrived; the responsibility is already real. But becoming wise, patient, and attentive as a parent takes time. One can love a child deeply and still need to learn how to listen, set limits, and place that child's needs before one's own convenience. The new relationship begins an education.

Learning to live with changes in age and ability

There is another example many of us recognize from getting older. A person who has always managed independently discovers that strength, mobility, hearing, or sight has changed. Perhaps he must stop driving or accept help with something he used to do for everyone else. The change may become clear in a day. Learning how to live with it can take much longer.

He has to learn how to ask for help without feeling that his dignity has disappeared. He may need a different way to contribute, a different pace of learning, or a different way to be present

for his family. Sometimes the avodah is patience; sometimes it is allowing another person the mitzvah of helping. His worth has not diminished. The form of his service now requires an education.

Our circumstances differ from Yitzchak's. The point we can apply is that a changed condition does not automatically bring the ability to serve Hashem within it. We need time, practice, and encouragement to discover how to live the next chapter.

Those three years therefore explain the timing of the marriage. A new spiritual capacity had been given, and preparation followed. In the familiar chronology, Rivka was also becoming ready during that interval. In Rav Nosson's proposal, these were the three years since her new neshama. Their preparation meets in the building of one home.

Why the marriage begins now

Remember the thread: the capacity is given, preparation follows, and then a home can be built. Now we can distinguish two complementary answers to "Why now?" At the Akeidah, Avraham receives his son anew through the change of neshama. When Yitzchak returns from the three years of preparation, Avraham welcomes that renewed son back into life here and begins seeking his wife. The first point explains the new capacity; the second explains the timing at forty. The future promised through Yitzchak can now become a family.

But what kind of inner change prepares Yitzchak for that family? The language of the new soul leads us to chesed and din.

CHAPTER 05

Chesed and Din: Learning the Other Middah

Two holy middos

Please look at source eleven.

Source 11 — Yismach Lev, Vayeira, quoted in Shvilei Pinchas, ma’amar 9 (excerpts)

דכורא בחינת חסד ונוקבא בחינת דין.

> *The masculine aspect corresponds to chesed, kindness; the feminine aspect corresponds to din, judgment.*

ובהתחלה נולד יצחק במדתו מדת יצחק בחינת גבורה, אחר כך בעקידה נכלל ונכנס בו מדתו של אברהם חסד.

Initially, Yitzchak was born with his own quality - the quality of Yitzchak, the aspect of gevurah. Later, at the Akeidah, Avraham's quality of chesed became included within him and entered him.

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו.

The two of them walked together.

The Yismach Lev explains the following. The language of male and female spiritual roots is related here to chesed and din. Avraham represents chesed. Yitzchak represents din or gevurah. Sarah is associated in this explanation with din as well.

Din is an essential quality. It gives life definition, seriousness, discipline, and limits.

Chesed gives, reaches outward, and seeks the good of another. Each has a holy purpose. The question is how they are joined.

How chesed and din become included in one another

Originally, Yitzchak's soul was rooted in din without the necessary inclusion of Avraham's chesed. Sarah, from whose side he initially received, is also associated here with din. The Akeidah joins father and son in an avodah through which their qualities become included in one another.

Avraham, whose defining quality is chesed, binds the son he loves in obedience to Hashem. His chesed now includes the restraint and severity of din. Yitzchak, whose defining quality is din, allows himself to be bound by his father. Through Avraham's participation, chesed is included within Yitzchak's din. The Zohar describes this mutual inclusion; the Yismach Lev uses it to explain the change of soul.

So does Yitzchak cease to be gevurah after the Akeidah? No. He remains Yitzchak, whose avodah is din, but now it is **din sweetened by chesed**. The new neshama does not simply replace his defining quality with its opposite. It brings the chesed of Avraham into his din, allowing that din a new expression. In this framework, that is the spiritual change through which he becomes capable of fathering the next generation.

"My father"

Now listen carefully to the father–son dialogue. The Torah does not only say that they walked together:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֶּנִּי בְנִי.

“Yitzchak said to Avraham his father, ‘My father.’ He answered, ‘Here I am, my son.’” (Bereishis 22:7)

Why say “Avraham his father” and then repeat “my father”? In the explanation developed here, Yitzchak is seeking inclusion in the middah of his father. He is din; Avraham is chesed. “Avi”—my father—expresses his reaching toward Avraham’s chesed, so that his own din will include it and be sweetened.

“Here I am, my son”

Avraham answers, “Hineni, beni”—here I am, my son. Avraham, whose defining middah is chesed, is also including himself in the middah of his son, din. **The movement goes both ways**. Avraham binds the son he loves in obedience to Hashem; his chesed includes the firmness of din. Yitzchak offers himself through his father; his din becomes included with chesed.

“The two of them walked together”

Then the Torah says:

וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו.

“The two of them walked together.” (Bereishis 22:8)

They remain father and son, chesed and gevurah, but now their qualities are included within one another. This is what gives the words “together” their depth. Yitzchak does not stop being Yitzchak. **His din becomes sweetened through chesed**. In this framework, that spiritual inclusion explains the new capacity through which the next generation can be born.

They remained distinct, but their middos became included within one another.

When life asks us to develop the other middah

Now bring this into our own lives. A person may naturally live through chesed. Saying yes comes easily; giving is a joy. Then a situation arises in which the kindness Hashem asks of him requires a firm boundary. An adult child may need responsibility rather than another rescue. A commitment to one person may require saying no to someone else. He must learn the holy use of din without losing his love.

Another person naturally lives through din: careful, disciplined, reliable, exacting. Then Hashem places him alongside someone who needs patience rather than correction, listening rather than another instruction. Perhaps a spouse is struggling, or an older parent can no longer move at his pace. He must develop the chesed within his strength.

We cannot claim to know why a particular difficulty was sent. But we can ask what avodah the situation calls for. Am I being asked to give my kindness a boundary? Am I being asked to give my firmness warmth?

Our familiar middah remains valuable. Growth asks us to develop the complementary middah so that we can serve Hashem beyond what comes naturally. Avraham and Yitzchak show us that even a holy, established strength can require this further inclusion.

Does my kindness need a boundary? Does my firmness need warmth?

Bringing this into marriage

This has a direct application to marriage. A home needs responsibility, commitments, and limits. It also needs the warmth that lets another person live within those limits with dignity. "I am right" does not finish a conversation between husband and wife. How have I spoken? Have I understood what the other person needs? Can my strength become a source of security?

Imagine a couple discussing an expense they cannot comfortably afford. One spouse is concerned about the budget; the other is concerned about feeling confined or overlooked. A home needs the financial limit, but it also needs someone to ask what the request means to the other person. Can they keep the limit while finding a considerate way to meet that need? That is a small, everyday place to practise strength sweetened by kindness.

Think back to Eliezer at the well. Rivka's kindness becomes visible in what she undertakes for a stranger and his camels. The person who will establish this home is someone whose chesed takes practical form. The soul discussion therefore brings us back to the qualities through which a home is lived.[1]

Footnote 1 — A suggested explanation of Eliezer's test. Perhaps Rivka's exceptional chesed needed the inclusion of gevurah, corresponding to Yitzchak's gevurah receiving the inclusion of chesed. Eliezer's test would then reveal precisely the quality needed for their match: **chesed sustained by gevurah**. She did more than give a thirsty stranger a drink. She volunteered to draw for his camels as well, "until they have finished drinking" (Bereishis 24:19), and then hurried, ran back to the well, and drew for all his camels (24:20). Her willingness expressed chesed; the perseverance to complete so demanding a task expressed gevurah within that chesed. Here gevurah means the strength to master fatigue and carry a generous commitment through to completion. On this proposed reading, her new feminine neshama supplied a complementary dimension of gevurah without displacing her extraordinary chesed. She could thus meet Yitzchak as **chesed including gevurah**, corresponding to his **gevurah including chesed**. The interpretation of her original soul-root and of what the new neshama supplied is Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz's suggested reconciliation, rather than an explicit statement in the cited sources.

Shidduchim, growth and responsibility

For parents and grandparents helping with shidduchim, there is a useful question alongside the familiar questions about background and prospects: can these two people grow in responsibility and kindness together? We cannot see hidden souls. We can notice how people speak, keep commitments, respond to inconvenience, and treat those who cannot advance their interests. The teaching calls us to work on ourselves; it gives us no way to assess another person's spiritual readiness from the length of a wait.

And those already married have not finished this work. A couple can enter a new stage after decades together. Retirement, a change in health, or a change in family responsibilities can require a fresh education in giving and receiving. The years together are precious; the next chapter still asks something of each spouse.

A promised future can require preparation. Building the home asks for responsibility joined with kindness.

CHAPTER 06

The Woman at the Fair

Let us bring the discussion of shidduchim to a story about a meeting at a fair, an old hurt, and the responsibility to put it right.

A blessing that required a sacrifice

A Chassidic account tells of Reb Yosef, a follower of the Maggid of Kozhnitz, who repeatedly sought a blessing for children. Years passed without the blessing he and his wife longed for. Eventually his wife urged him to insist on an answer.

The Maggid told him that he must be prepared to surrender his wealth. Yosef would not make such a decision without his wife. He returned home to consult her. She preferred poverty with the hoped-for blessing of a child to holding on to their wealth, and agreed to the condition. The Maggid then sent him to the Chozeh of Lublin, whose instructions he was to follow.

An old engagement and an unrepaired hurt

In Lublin, another wait followed. Finally the Chozeh received him and spoke about something Yosef had left behind: an engagement arranged in his youth. He had abandoned that match, married another woman, and never made amends to the girl he had hurt.

Her name was Esther Shifra. According to the account, the Chozeh identified that unrepaired hurt as the obstacle to their having children. Yosef had to obtain her forgiveness. He would find her at the fair in Balta.

Searching at the fair

Yosef went there and searched. He asked about her, but no one could help him.

There were only three days left before the fair ended. Merchants were preparing to leave, and he still had not found the person he had travelled so far to meet.

Recognition in the rain

Then heavy rain sent him into a shop for shelter. Other people crowded inside. As a young woman approached, Yosef moved aside out of modesty. She recognized him and protested that he had abandoned her once and was avoiding her again.

It was Esther Shifra.

The condition for forgiveness

He explained his journey, apologized for the hurt he had caused, and pleaded for forgiveness. He wept as he spoke. Gradually her expression softened. She agreed on a condition: he must go to her poor brother in Sovalk and provide two hundred gold coins for the brother's daughter's wedding.

Yosef calculated that the sum would take what he could raise by selling his possessions together with his savings. He accepted the condition, went home to gather the money, and then travelled to Sovalk.

The brother’s revelation

There he found the brother struggling with the approaching wedding expenses. Yosef gave him the money and explained that his sister had requested it when they met in Balta.

Pause before the brother's answer.

The brother could scarcely believe what he was hearing. His sister had been dead for fifteen years. He himself had buried her.

Yosef described the woman he had met. The brother recognized the description. According to the account, she had returned from the other world to grant forgiveness through an act that would help her niece marry. Within the following year, Yosef and his wife had a child.

Pause. Let the revelation settle before explaining it.

Why this was the form of the repair

The striking thing is the form of the repair. He had caused pain around one marriage. The forgiveness required him to help another marriage take place. An apology began the repair; an act of responsibility gave it substance.

We have spent tonight considering the hidden preparation of souls. Here the story brings us to something we can recognize in our own lives. A person can move forward while someone else still carries the hurt he left behind. Have we mistaken the passage of time for having put something right?

An apparition, and the lesson we may apply

We should hear the account on its own terms. It describes a departed soul appearing again; it does not describe reincarnation into a new body. And the Chozeh's particular insight into this couple gives us no basis for diagnosing why another couple waits for children. The responsibility we can apply is to take another person's hurt seriously.

The apology that may still be owed

A broken engagement may sometimes be necessary. Even then, the other person's dignity matters. The same responsibility applies to disappointments within a marriage, a family, or a friendship. We can be certain about a decision and still owe someone an apology for how we treated them.

In the story, the repair of an old hurt makes room for another family's wedding and a new generation.

The story leaves us with a practical question: is there someone whose pain I have stopped thinking about because my own life moved on? We cannot summon a meeting at a fair. We can make the apology or the act of repair that is already within our reach.

The passage of time is not the same as repairing a hurt.

CHAPTER 07

What Does the Next Chapter Ask of Us?

Returning to the opening questions

Let us return to Avraham's blessing and to the questions with which we began.

Why describe him as blessed with a son now? Through the change at the Akeidah, Yitzchak received the capacity for the promised generations. Why marriage at forty? That capacity was followed by preparation for the home he would establish.

Why "a son to Sarah"? The words identify his original spiritual inheritance. Why connect his zivug to Har HaMoriah? The possibility of that marriage emerged through the Akeidah.

And how could Rivka marry at three, yet be described as a na'arah? We heard the literal chronology and explanations of exceptional development. We also heard Tosafos's older-age tradition and Rav Nosson's proposed reconciliation: physical age and the age of a new neshama can count from different beginnings.

A concrete avodah for the next chapter

An intended match can still need preparation. The capacity is given; then comes the education in living with it. A home gives that capacity expression through responsibility and kindness.

For us, the application may be patience with someone entering a new role, learning to accept help, or bringing more chesed into a conversation with a spouse. The woman at the fair adds another possibility: repairing a hurt we have left behind.

What does the next chapter of my life ask me to learn?

Choose something concrete for this week: a responsibility to fulfil, a gentler way to make a necessary point, or an apology that has waited too long.

We began with a son Avraham had already had for forty years. The blessing was real all along. Through the Akeidah and the preparation that followed, its next possibility opened: Yitzchak could build the home through which the promise would continue.

We may have lived with a blessing for many years and still have more to learn about how to live with it. A marriage, a family, the ability to help, even the dignity of accepting help: each stage asks something of us.

Hashem had blessed Avraham bakol. A son had been given; now a home could be built. What has Hashem placed in our lives that we are still learning how to build?

Based principally on Shvilei Pinchas, Chayei Sarah, ma'amar 9, by Rabbi Pinchas Friedman, with the additional sources cited in the class.