

The Blessings of *'Framily'*

Parashat Chayei Sarah

October 30, 2021; 24 Heshvan 5782

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Who doesn't love a good portmanteau? A portmanteau is not a French red dessert wine, it is the technique of combining two words to make a completely new one. You know more of these than you realize...For example, my favorite meal of the day, hands down, is brunch. That delightful middle ground between breakfast and lunch that allows you to justify a bagel with cream cheese, lox, white fish, an egg dish like a frittata or a quiche, and maybe a little pastry, coffee, juice...you get the idea. Heavier than breakfast, but more 'breakfasty' than lunch! You may occasionally watch infomercials about skorts or sporks, or read articles in People Magazine about Bennifer or Branjelina. In 2013 you no doubt celebrated Thanksgivukkah, the convergence of Thanksgiving with the first day of Hanukkah ...at least I hope you did, because it won't happen again for another 79,811 years! And while we're on the topic of Thanksgiving, have you considered serving turducken at your meal? By the way, portmanteau words exist in Hebrew too. Some of my favorites are: karnaf, a combination of keren (horn) and af (meaning nose). A karnaf is a rhinoceros. A ramzor is a traffic light, combining remez (sign or indicator) with or (light). And for Har Shalom musical fans, machzemer is the word for musical: combining machazeh show, with zemer, song.

But the portmanteau I am reminded of when I read Parashat Chayei Sarah is the word "Framily." I am pretty sure that this word entered the English lexicon when the telecom company Sprint introduced the Framily Plan several years ago. It allowed you to basically create a shared phone and data plan with up to ten people who you call most often. Unlike the

traditional family plan which involved members of the same household, the Framily plan allowed you to expand your network to other especially close people in your life. Sprint's chief marketing officer Jeff Hallock at the time said, **"The American family has changed. Our families today are more than our relatives, but also our friends, our neighbors – basically all the people we love."**¹ There are people in my life, in my orbit who I see far more often than my blood relatives; who are more in tune with my day to day life than the people I spent my formative years with. It's not that I don't love my biological family, it's that my love and loyalty has expanded to include a number of people I may not share blood or DNA with, but with whom I have many deep, important connections.

What does this all have to do with Parashat Chayei Sarah? Rabbi Aviva Richman from the Hadar Institute in New York argues that there is essentially a member of the larger Jewish Framily who often goes unrecognized for the role he played in shaping our clan. That is of course Abraham's servant Eliezer. Hardly a "mere messenger who carries out Avraham's bidding," Richman writes, "a closer look reveals that this servant is a crucial part of our lineage, even as he is peripheral to the bloodline of the patriarchs."² **There is an astonishing amount of text devoted to dispatching this servant to find a wife for Isaac. Sixty seven detailed verses, multiple columns in the sefer Torah describe nearly every thought, doubt, worry, observation, consideration, prayer, and ultimately decision of Eliezer's that Rebekah and Isaac would be a good shidduch. It is totally uncommon for the Torah to devote this much attention to any single episode...the creation of the entire world is related in half the number of verses!! We are meant to pay close attention to Eliezer, and how personally and devotedly he assumes the task of finding an appropriate match for Isaac. He is so clearly more than just a messenger fulfilling a**

¹ <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20140324005693/en/The-Frobinson-Family-Stars-in-New-Sprint-Campaign>

² <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/embracing-overlooked-%E2%80%9Cpatriarch%E2%80%9D>

fee for service. Eliezer cares deeply about Abraham, and is possessed by the responsibility of finding a partner who will make Isaac happy, and help him fulfill his destiny as the second patriarch of the Jewish people. Eliezer's avodah was not about obedience and servitude, it was the avodah of sacred service, like the service of the Holy Temple. Eliezer was a servant to a higher calling of love and loyalty. In other words, Eliezer is "family."

Various midrashim pick up on Eliezer's devotion, and suggest that not only was he Abraham's head of household, he also emulated Abraham's attribute of **chesed, of extraordinary kindness**. He was a believer in the God's promises to Abraham's family and was invested in their fulfillment. According to one Midrash, when Lavan, Rebekah's churlish older brother first met Eliezer, he assumed he was a simple servant, *p'sul ha'bayit*, an insignificant member of Abraham's household. But it didn't take long for Lavan to realize that this wasn't just some employee or hired help. Rather, *she'hu ahuvo shel bayit*—Eliezer was most beloved by this family!³

There is kind of a funny, you might even say snarky Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah about the Talmudic sage Rabbi Yehoshua, traveling on foot on a long journey. Undoubtedly famished, he sees a child walking along the road carrying a covered dish of food. Rabbi Yehoshua asks the child when she's got under the lid. The child retorts, "If my mother wanted you to know what was on the plate she wouldn't have covered it!" A little later, Rabbi Yehoshua arrives at the town of his destination, and thirsty, he sees a girl filling pitchers from a well. "Give me some water to drink," he orders the child. And in Rebekah-like fashion she offers water to him and to his animals. After he drank the water, he turned to leave and said, "My child, you have acted like our matriarch Rivkah!" To which she responds, "I acted like Rivkah, but you did not act like

³ Bereishit Rabbah 70:13

Eliezer!”⁴ What did she mean? The Torah tells us that Eliezer gave Rivkah a gold nose ring and bracelets as an expression of his gratitude for her hospitality. In so many places in our tradition, Eliezer, who was not a blood relative, is depicted as having the characteristics and qualities of Abraham’s family. And without his role, his careful work at acquiring a spouse for Isaac who embodied those same characteristics and qualities, it is unlikely that Isaac would have married Rivkah at all. That’s what family does...they look out for you because they love you. They extend themselves because they truly, deeply care about you. They go way beyond the call of duty, because they are loyal to you and want only what’s best for you.

I hope that you are blessed, as Sari and I are, as Avraham Avinu was, to have people like Eliezer in your life. Perhaps not related by blood, but profoundly related in every other way. Oftentimes these are the people we call upon in the most significant moments in our lives; the people we couldn’t imagine either celebrating or mourning without; the people we consult about major decisions; the people who we would trust our kids with, and who we know we can rely on through thick and thin. I remember from my own childhood precious family friends, honorary aunts and uncles who exerted loving, trusted influence over me. I am grateful that my kids have similar people in their lives too.

Rabbi Richman writes: “These teachings about Avraham’s servant invite us into a more expansive understanding of what lineage looks like. Remarkably, each time we recite the opening blessing of the Amidah, where mentioning the names of our biblical forebears might reinforce a narrow sense of lineage, we should be aware that we are actually following in the footsteps of Eliezer, the first one who taught us to pray to the God of Avraham. Invoking words first spoken by Eliezer, we remind ourselves each day to appreciate the fullness of our lineage

⁴ Lamentations Rabbah 1:1, par. 19

and bring honor to those who have contributed to all that we each inherit. It is our duty, as individuals, as communities and as a broader society to notice and honor those who might otherwise remain on the margins when we tell and retell the stories that shape us.”⁵

To that I can only say, Amen.

⁵ <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/embracing-overlooked-%E2%80%9Cpatriarch%E2%80%9D>