Jewish Tribune – Chayei Soroh

**Spiritual matters**

Rav Yisroel Salanter was once travelling and had to stop off on the way in a small town to spend the night in one of the inns. These were the days before pictures of gedolim graced newspapers and their faces were well known to all and so the innkeeper did not recognise his illustrious guest.

However, he sensed that his guest was a man of stature and asked if he happened to be a shochet.

The innkeeper explained: “I have a cow in the barn that needs to be slaughtered. I usually go to our neighbouring town for shechita. If you are a shochet, you can save me the trip.”

Rav Salanter responded, “I am not a shochet.”

A short while later, Rav Salanter approached the innkeeper and asked, “Perhaps you would be kind enough to lend me some money?”

“What!” shouted the man, “Give you a loan!? But I hardly know you! How can I trust you to pay me back?”

Rav Yisroel Salanter calmly said to the man, ”Listen to what you have just said, when it comes to lending me the money, even a small amount, you would not trust me as I am a stranger to you. Yet, when you wanted to shecht your cow you were prepared to rely on me even though you have no absolutely no idea who I am!”

“Shechita involves many intricate halachos. Why were you so sure that I possess enough fear of heaven to be a proper shochet?” he added.

After the akeida, Avrohom realised that he needed to find a wife for Yitzchok. He sent Eliezer on his mission but told him that he did not want to take a wife from the Canaanites, nor from the seven nations. Avraham did not trust Eliezer and therefore made him make a shevua, a binding oath. He made him swear that he would follow these instructions.

Yet, in the previous possuk (Bereishis 24,2), the Torah tells us that Eliezer was in charge of all of Avrohom’s assets:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהם אֶל עַבְדּוֹ זְקַן בֵּיתוֹ הַמֹּשֵׁל בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ

And Avrohom said to his servant, the elder of his house, who ruled over all that was his.

Avrohom Ovinu had complete trust in Eliezer, giving him total control of his financial affairs. So why did Avrohom not trust him when it came to finding a wife for Yitzchok?

The answer is simple but not always seen. When it comes it to spiritual matters, people are often more comfortable to trust one another. For example, if we see a frum looking man eating in a restaurant, we assume things are ok and may be satisfied to eat there without further enquiry.

Or when it comes to a shaylo in halocha, we may recall that this is how it’s done. Or we vaguely recall that the Mishna Berura says that there are those who allow it. Or that the item you want to buy was on the list the last time you looked.

Maybe that is how it’s done. Or maybe the Mishna Berura does indeed say this. And maybe it is still on the list.

But maybe it isn’t.

And yet, when it comes to matters far more mundane, we are sometimes more discerning. Just think of shopping for clothes, or buying a new car or a new house. Think of the time spent browsing, enquiring and deliberating. And how freely would you lend your car to a friend, relative or work colleague?

Avrohom Ovinu gives us proper perspective. When it comes to money and earthly matters, he puts Eliezer in charge and trusts him בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר לו,ֹ with everything that he owns. But when it comes to spiritual matters, he does not trust Eliezer. The woman who Yitzchok would marry would not just be a wife to his son, but a matriarch to the entire Jewish people. This is of eternal impact.

And that is what Rav Yisroel Salanter understood and chided his host about. It is all about priorities and recognising the fleeting value of material goods weighed against the eternal value of matters spiritual.

Who and what we trust others about is a telling indicator of our own priorities and value systems. And that is what Avrohom Ovinu and Rav Yisroel Salanter are teaching us.

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