



# “The Torah Came to Make a *Mensch*”: Reflections on the Discovery of Rebecca

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## Parashat Hayyei Sarah 5781

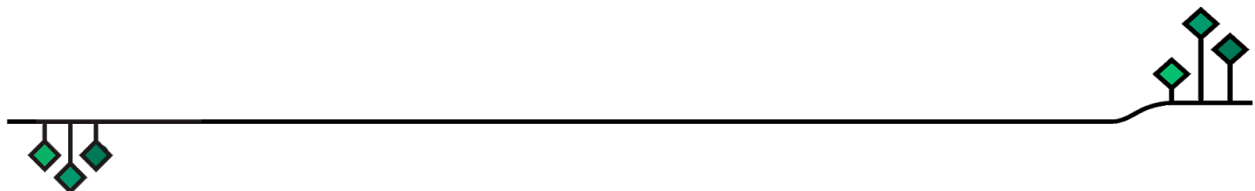
This *parashah* contains the single largest narrative unit in the Five Books of Moses: the story of Abraham’s servant Eliezer<sup>1</sup> and his mission to find the right wife for Isaac. He sets out to find a woman who is by descent a member of Abraham’s family, and by culture not steeped in the local Canaanite ethic; only such a person would be the appropriate woman to become the mother of the next generation of covenant keepers, the second matriarch of the people of Israel.

Somewhat puzzlingly for a Torah that is often laconic in giving over laws and commandments, this telling stretches over sixty-seven verses. This includes Eliezer’s own retelling to Rebecca’s family of his journey and his encounter with her, which the Torah has already described for us as it happened.

With a touch of irony, one *midrash* rolls its eyes at this expansive and repetitive treatment. Apparently, “the routine conversation of the servants of the patriarchs is more beautiful to the

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<sup>1</sup> While he isn’t called by any name in this passage, he is traditionally connected to Abraham’s servant “Damesek Eliezer” in Genesis 15:2.



Blessed Holy One than the Torah of their descendants!” In contrast to the repetition of Eliezer’s report, “the laws of Shabbat are like mountains hanging on to the Torah text, suspended by a hair’s thread.”<sup>2</sup> There is only a hint or an extra letter or word in the Torah text pointing to this vast corpus of laws.

So why is there this extended retelling?

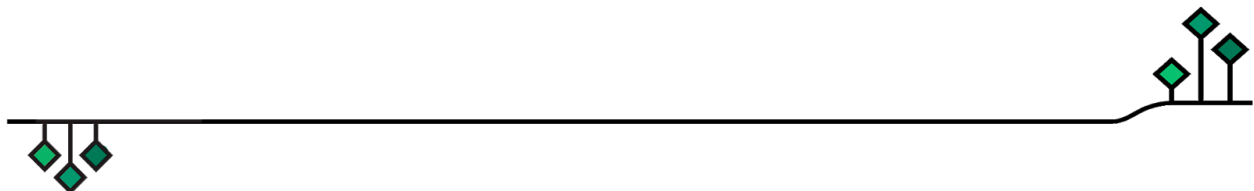
The answer lies in a different question: What is the Torah’s main goal in giving over to us its complex mix of laws, commandments, institutions, history, and personal narratives?

In the nineteenth century, Rabbi Israel Salanter asked this question. Salanter founded the Mussar movement to renew Judaism from within. He drew on the Mussar tradition, a literature going back to biblical times focused on human character development and ethics. This tradition stressed the Torah’s implication for personal life, the spiritual meaning and spirit of Jewish observances, and the importance of internalizing one’s relationship with God and the virtues prescribed in the Torah.

**Salanter said that the Torah’s main goal was to develop an ideal human being.** In one of his most famous sayings, he stated: “The Torah came to make a *mensch*.” Salanter insisted that the Torah was not primarily seeking to train people in religious observances, as important as they are; nor was it adequate religiously to learn the vast, diverse corpus of rabbinic sources. Rather, the Torah sought to create a human ecology. Out of its mix of story, narrative, observances, experiences, guidelines, and community building, a human being would grow. This human would be of good character—ethical, caring, not ego driven to stand out but motivated to be kind and helpful to others. This human would relate to God and therefore be humble and aware of their limitations. This person would be inner-directed—connected to people but not needing to curry favor at the cost of principles or values. The Torah’s stories, commandments, wisdom, instructions, and ways of living—all

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<sup>2</sup> See Bereishit Rabbah 60:8. See also Rashi on Genesis 24:42.

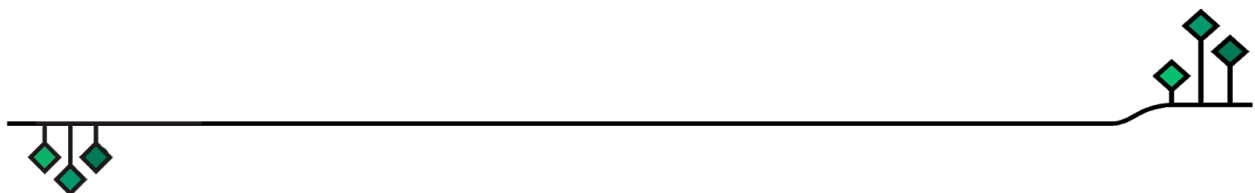


were intended to nurture a good human being—with reverence for God, for fellow human beings, and for life itself.

To Salanter and his students the point of the Rebecca narrative was self-evident and absolutely correct. What should Eliezer be looking for in the woman who would exemplify the teachings of the covenant? What qualities would enable her to transmit them and inspire the next generation to carry on the chain until *tikkun olam* would be achieved? The answer is not physical beauty, not wealth or superior genealogy, not even wisdom or piety. The primary quality to be sought out was kindness and caring, so ingrained that she would respond to a thirsty stranger's request for water to drink. Although she had to work hard to gather sufficient water, she naturally and instinctively volunteered to draw water, again and again, to sate the travel-weary camels and livestock as well. The Torah drives this point home by telling and retelling Eliezer's thinking and considerations.

There are rabbinic commentators that criticize Eliezer's judgement. He should have first checked out Rebecca's family background which he knew was a major concern for Abraham. He should have been concerned that the unknown woman might prove to be haughty or a social climber who arbitrarily or on a whim did this one favor. Indeed, it would be wise to follow up on all the other issues. But given that the Torah is a covenant of ***hesed***—love, caring, human solidarity, striving for a better world, Eliezer had his priorities straight. Having a strong character imbued with kindness, caring, and generosity is the top primary signal of fitness to be a matriarch of this covenant.

Salanter insisted that becoming a *mensch* would not be a casual outcome of Torah study and practice. He called for people to set aside time and energy to develop their character and internalize their values. Reading and analyzing and drawing the lessons of the Torah's stories was as fundamental as mastering its legal literature. He quoted the traditional dictum that "*ma'asei avot, siman la-banim* / The acts and experiences of the ancestors [as told in the



Torah] are meant to signal and guide their descendants [to live the good life].”<sup>3</sup> The Torah and talmudic figures should be studied as role models, including learning from their mistakes.

Salanter and his students developed special personal development methods. They set up a list of character traits and values needed to be a good human being, qualities such as kindness and responsibility for others, patience, inner tranquillity, self-criticism, perseverance, and energetic pursuit of the good. Some students would concentrate on one quality, one week at a time. During that week, they would make a special effort to track every time the virtue came up and honestly assess to what extent their behavior matched the desired goal. Some formed small circles of friends who evaluated and gave feedback to each other on their traits and values. The point is that it takes awareness and much effort to become a good human being, even with the help of a good tradition. Conversely, without this effort, one can end up observant or learned yet lacking in goodness, fairness, or concern for others.<sup>4</sup>

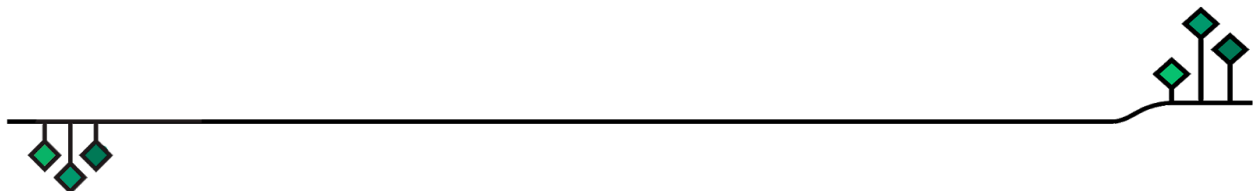
Salanter insisted that it was worth a lifetime of effort to achieve becoming a good human being and one should try to educate everyone in the community to this goal. Even if I do not succeed in getting others to that level, then it is reward enough if I improve myself—even a little bit.

By modeling ourselves on Rebecca, on Moses, on Ruth, we seek to realize the Torah’s primary goal of making a *mensch*. Or as Salanter said on another occasion, “They say that the Maharal [Rabbi Judah Low] of Prague took some clay and fashioned a miraculous Golem to protect the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bereishit Rabbah, chapter 48 “אתה סימן לבניך” / “You are a sign to your children.”

<sup>4</sup> On Salanter, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement* (1993). The classic expanded treatment in Hebrew is Dov Katz, *Tenu’at ha-Mussar (The Mussar Movement in Judaism, new edition 2015)* vol. 1, albeit it is somewhat hagiographic. In Israel, there is a set of Mussar Yeshivot and great teachers of Mussar. In the United States, in recent years, there has been a grassroots effort to revive the Mussar movement for our time. See the work of Ira Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (2013); Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (2008), Rabbi David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change* (2016), and Justin Pines, justinpines@gmail.com.



Jewish people. That would be a great miracle. Yet, it is an even greater miracle to take any individual—a limited, flesh and blood, mixed traits human being, and turn them into a *mensch*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ephraim Zaitchik, *Sefer Ha-Me'orot Ha-Gedolim* (Jerusalem: 2013), p. 129.

