

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

CAN ONE EVER REALLY ASK AN EVED FOR A FAVOR?

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

As a grandstudent of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, I see human autonomy as a fundamental religious good and goal. I am therefore instinctively opposed to human relationships which involve one person subordinating their will to another.

As a Jew and as an American, and as someone heartily sick of "Downton Abbey," I see slavery as an evil, and permanent servitude as morally problematic.

All this makes the relationship between Avraham and his "eved" challenging reading for me, whether *eved* means chattel slave or some less severe servile relationship. So I present below what hope is a useful model of reading morally challenging texts with integrity.

Maybe the Ribono shel Olam shares my qualms about *avdui*? Every phrase in the Torah's report of the relationship in 24:2 can be read as reflecting and respond to this discomfort. Let's read the whole verse, then interpret it phrase by phrase:

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם
אֶל-עֶבְדוֹ
זָקֵן בֵּיתוֹ
הַמְשֵׁל בְּכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לִי
שִׁים-נָא
יָדְךָ תַּחַת יְרֵכִי:
Avraham said
to his eved
the zakein of his house
who ruled over all that was his:
Place, please,
your hand under my thigh

a. Avraham is described as *vayomer* (=speaking) to his *eved*, not *vayetzav* (=commanding) or even *vayidaber* (=speaking dominantly). The problem is that in a hierarchy, a superior's request for a favor will often be understood as a command, and often is a command. Condescension (in the original positive sense of the term) can be very helpful in preserving an underling's dignity, but doesn't change the underlying power dynamic. Any request to an *eved* is a command.

b. But the Torah describes this *eved* as *z'kan beito*. A *zakein* can be either an old person, or else someone with social authority.

Chizkuni understands it as referring purely to age; Avraham picked a servant who could be trusted not to molest the woman while bringing her back for Yitzchak. Bekhor Shor, however, translates *z'kan beito* as "who had aged in his house," meaning that the relationship was longstanding and therefore Avraham trusted him.

Malbim takes the opposite approach, understanding *z'kan beito* as "sage of the house," one whose advice was followed in all matters. Saadia Gaon similarly understands it to refer to knowledge of social norms.

Avraham is described as *zakein* in the previous verse, presumably meaning old, but it's not clear whether *z'kan beito* is intended to create a parallel or a contrast. Rav Hirsch argues that it does both at once; the *eved's* wisdom was a reflection of Avraham's, and derived from being raised in Avraham's house.

A Midrash Aggadah may go further. It understands *z'kan* as a contraction of *ziv okinin*, meaning that the *eved's* face looked just like Avraham's. This is often a motif for expressing identity.

c. The *eved* is not only the *zkan* of Avraham's house; he is also *hamoshel bekol asher lo*, the ruler over all that was his.

"*Mosbel/Ruler*" seems more antonymic than descriptive of an *eved*. A similar tension is resolved in the Yosef story when the master reasserts his power with regard to his wife; a parallel reading here would fit with Chizkuni above, that the *eved* would return to pure subordination if he mistreated Yitzchak's future wife. Torah Temimah similarly cites a responsum of Rosh as using this verse as evidence that the legal meaning of a contract declaring someone "master of all I possess" is revokable power of attorney and not gift.

However, some interpreters evade this tension by reading the *eved* as master of everything that was his own, not of everything that was Avraham's. For example, Keli Yakar understands the phrase to mean that the *eved* mastered his own possessions rather than being mastered by them and altering his lifestyle to protect and preserve them.

Yoma 28b resolves the tension by transposing "all that was his" to the realm of abstraction. The *eved* was *moshel betorat rabbo*, ruler of his master's Torah. Being *moshel* is stripped of any political or social implications, and the Torah he "rules" still belongs to his temporal master and teacher.

Bereshit Rabbah combines these approaches.

- "המושל בכל אשר לו"
שהיה שליט ביצרו כמותו,

Who rules over all that was his –

Meaning that he had control over his yetzer just like Avraham.

The *eved* was *moshel beyitzro*, master of his own evil inclination. This interpretation should be read in contrast rather than as parallel to Chizkuni. Chizkuni portrays the *eved* as reliable because he has aged beyond desire; this is no character reference. This midrash portrays him as virtuous and capable of resisting temptation. Moreover, it explicitly establishes him as Avraham's equal.

d. Finally Avraham qualified the opening verb of his request with the word *na* (=please). It seems that Avraham is trying his best not to address the *eved* as an *eved*. All the commentators recognize that the *eved* expresses his subordination by obeying and placing his hand where Avraham asks. Ibn Caspi graphically describes the posture

as "as if his hands are chained under the seat of the person he is swearing to." Ralbag may subtly add a crucial nuance:

והנה אמר אברהם אל עבדו
שעמד בביתו ימים רבים וגדל עימו,
אשר השליטו אברהם על כל אשר לו,
שישים ידו תחת ירכו
להורות שידו היא תחת רשותו,

Avraham said to his eved

who had been in his house many years, and who had grown up with him,

whom Avraham had given control over all that was his, that he should place his hand under his thigh to demonstrate that his hand was under his authority

In 47:29, Yaakov similarly says *na* when making the same request to Yosef. Public demonstrations of subordination are necessary only when no subordination is evident. Private demonstrations of subordination are necessary when subordination is voluntary. By saying *na* in private, Avraham is indicating that his prior grants of autonomy to Eliezer were genuine deserved, and he has the right to refuse to put Avraham's will before his own. Eliezer – not without hesitation, for a variety of possible motives – agrees.

It seems plausible to me that the verse's description of the *eved* is from Avraham's point of view. If that is so, and we take all the autonomy-friendly options for each phrase, the verse means that Avraham acknowledged the *eved*'s autonomy by speaking rather than commanding; by saying please; by allowing him authority over the rest of the household, or over the estate; by teaching him all he knew; and by recognizing him as a spiritual equal.

Some of these options seem mutually exclusive, and certainly some are more convincing textually than others. My contention is that collectively they weave a harmonic around the verse's tune that make it clear that the Torah here is not baldly describing or endorsing the culturally standard *eved*-master relationship.

Faith in Torah compels the belief that there is a morally acceptable way of reading the Torah's narratives. It does not guarantee that we will find that reading, and if we look for shortcuts, we'll end up cutting the Torah to fit our measure. But I think it is necessary to search, and fair to treat moral comfort as a "plus factor" when choosing among plausible interpretations.