



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Chayei Sarah

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October 26, 2013  
Chayei Sarah

**When In-Laws Are Outlaws**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

A recent poll found that most people would rather pray all day Saturday in a synagogue than spend it with their in-laws.

Now that’s saying something. But why do in-laws get such a bad rap? What is the root of the volatile in-law relationship?

It turns out that the best place to look when seeking to understand the in-law dynamic is in the Torah. Yes, the all-embracing Torah even ventures into this domain.

It is a fascinating foray, brimming with nose-rings, imposters and intrigue.

And there we discover the origins of the first matchmaker (*shadchan*), and we learn that striking a match is a combustible experience – truly – one that can leave you burning with love or just plain burning.

But, ultimately, we walk away all the wiser, having learned that if we are on the same spiritual page, the in-law dynamic will be so positive and wonderful that it might just have to be outlawed.

It’s incredible how a butler’s journey some 3,700 years ago could change the entire face of existence, and show us how – today – we can do the same.

## WHEN IN-LAWS ARE OUTLAWS

*Take-away message: The combustible in-law dynamic is an expression of the combustible dynamic between matter and spirit. If we can learn to harness the interplay between matter and spirit, we can also learn to get along with our in-laws (or anyone else for that matter).*

### 1. In-Laws Are No Joke (Joke)

The drive started off pleasant enough. The husband and wife were exchanging pleasantries.

“My dear, you look lovely today,” said husband to wife.

“Why, thank you darling,” replied wife to husband. “And I must say you are driving exceptionally well. So safe.”

This calm lasted for the first hour of the ride.

Into hour two, however, both he and she were beginning to grind their teeth. He turned the channel to sports talk radio. She changed it back to classical music. He rolled down the windows. She turned up the heat.

Inevitably, it devolved into full-out war. When the yelling stopped, stubborn silence permeated the vehicle, with neither wife nor husband willing to concede to the other.

After several miles down a country road, neither uttering a word, the husband pointed to a passing barnyard full of stubborn mules, and sarcastically asked his wife: “Are these, perchance, relatives of yours?”

“Yep,” the wife replied sharply. “They are my in-laws.”

### 2. Today’s Subject

On this most tranquil day that is Shabbat, I’d like to talk to you about a very tranquil subject. This is a subject that is very dear to all of our hearts – it is a topic that warms our insides and makes us supremely happy.

Today, I'd like to talk to you about in-laws.

All of us here, in this community, get along exceptionally well with our in-laws, so we may not be aware – and I kid you not – that out there in the world exists a very different stereotype. Out there, the popular conception is that mothers-in-law and sons-in-law, daughters-in-law and fathers-in-law, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law – all abhor one another.

Indeed, a recent poll found that most people would rather pray all day Saturday in a synagogue than spend it with their in-laws.

I know, it's hard to fathom.

The in-laws are comedy's venerable punch line. But why do the in-laws get such a bad rap? What is the root of the animosity?

Psychology has a theory – you stole their precious child from them, and they can't forgive you for it. But, hey, you love their child and you treat him or her like an angel! So why do they put you down all the time and stick their nose into your business?

Of course, I speak half in jest. Many of us actually have beautiful, very kind and supportive in-laws. But, as the cliché goes, every joke has a little bit of truth. Well, what then is the truth behind this combustible in-law dynamic?

Perhaps the root of all this in-law chaos can be found in the unlikeliest of sources – this week's Torah reading.

### 3. Millionaire Matchmaker

Up until this point in the Book of Genesis, the Torah makes no mention of any in-laws. Adam and Eve, the first couple, had no in-laws (and some say it was the happiest of marriages). Noah's in-laws aren't discussed at all, and neither are the in-laws of Abraham and Sarah.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, Terach is named as the father of Abraham, but none of his interactions with his daughter-in-law, Sarah, are recorded.

But then something happens. That something is Sarah's passing, which is described in this week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*. Right after, the Torah goes on to tell us that Abraham is getting older, which implies that Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, is not getting any younger.

He is 40-years-old for heaven's sake! *Nu*, what is he waiting for – it's time for him to find a nice Jewish girl and settle down!

Isaac, of course, is the most eligible bachelor in Canaan. The problem is that the number of eligible bachelorettes is about zero. (I guess some things never change – if there is an eligible girl there is no eligible guy, if there is an eligible guy there is no eligible girl...)

Isaac, everyone knows, is a devout scholar. As since this is before J-Date, and the studious Isaac has no time to travel far and wide to date, Abraham calls upon his butler, Eliezer, to find Isaac's soul mate.

When Eliezer accepts this mission, a new profession is born – the *shadchan*, the matchmaker!

Before he takes off, Abraham has Eliezer take an oath, and he gives him very specific instructions:

*And I will adjure you by the Lord, the God of the heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell. But you shall go to my land and to my birthplace, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Isaac.*<sup>2</sup>

This is a significant instruction. Canaan would become the Land of Israel, the Holy Land, yet Abraham bids Eliezer not to search for a wife in the vicinity but to travel far afield to the Land of Padan Aram, a place of idolatry and corruption.

Of course, Eliezer follows instructions:

*And the servant took ten camels of his master's camels, and he went, and all the best of his master was in his hand; and he arose, and he went to Aram Naharaim, to the city of Nachor.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 24:3-4.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 24:10.

Eliezer saddles 10 camels, takes all the best of his master Abraham's riches in hand, and sets out on a journey to the city of Nachor, in Padan Aram.

At the well in the center of town, Eliezer encounters a young beautiful girl named Rebecca, who offers water to both Eliezer and his camels – and Eliezer knows that she is the one. Knowing that this girl is the future mother of the Jewish nation, Eliezer presents her with gifts from Abraham's considerable stash:

*Now it came about, when the camels had finished drinking, the man took a golden nose ring weighing half-a-shekel, and two bracelets for her hands weighing ten gold shekels.<sup>4</sup>*

Rashi, the great 11th century Torah commentator, explains that these items of jewelry were not merely material offerings, but reflected a spiritual reality.

The nose-ring weighing half-a-shekel was indicative of the half-shekel that was incumbent upon each Jew to donate to the Tabernacle as a token of national unity. The two bracelets that weighted ten gold shekels alluded to the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.

So we see that there is more to this story than meets the eye. And to emphasize this, the Torah actually recounts the whole episode twice, once as it happens in real time and a second time as Eliezer relates it to Isaac's future in-laws.

So let's now meet the antagonists, our beloved in-laws.

#### **4. Meet the In-Laws (Joke)**

And to ease the burden of this tumultuous meeting, let's temper it with a little humor:

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<sup>4</sup>Genesis 24:22.

Moshe is traveling on the New York subway and is sitting opposite a middle-aged man sporting a yarmulke. Moshe says, “Shalom. Do you have the time?”

The man ignores him.

“Excuse me,” Moshe asks again, “what time is it please?”

The man still doesn’t answer him.

“Sir, forgive me for interrupting you again, but I need to know the time. Why won’t you answer me?”

At last the man speaks: “Son, the next stop is Boro Park, the last station on this line. I haven’t seen you before, so you must be a stranger. If I answer you now, it’s Jewish tradition that I must invite you to my home. As you are young and good looking and I have a beautiful daughter named Esther, you will fall in love with her and will want to get married. So tell me, why on earth would I want a son-in-law who can’t even afford his own watch?”

Laban thought the same exact thing: Why on earth would I want a brother-in-law whose wallet isn’t stuffed with Benjamins like a zaftig yenta at an all-you-can-eat buffet?

## 5. The Future Brother-in-Law

When Eliezer is introduced to Isaac’s future brother-in-law, the Torah states:

*Rebecca had a brother whose name was Laban, and Laban ran to the man outside, to the fountain.<sup>5</sup>*

In commenting on this verse, Rashi cites the Midrash<sup>6</sup> to explain why exactly Laban ran to the fountain. One would think that Laban was running with joy to meet the representative of his future brother-in-law

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 24:29.

<sup>6</sup>Bereishit Rabba 60:7.

– a sister’s engagement is, after all, a great *simcha*, a great celebration, deserving of a *L’Chaim* and a *Mazal Tov!*

But no, that’s not why Laban ran to see Eliezer. Laban made haste because he had heard that there was a new guy in town who was flashing some serious bling – nose-rings and bracelets and a caravan of ten camels heaped with treasure. So he wanted to check out the scene, to see how he could swindle Eliezer out of his valuables.

You can only make a first impression once, right? The first impression we get of Laban is as a schemer and swindler.

Not a good start. In-law relations are going to be *fun*. Just imagine if the first time you met your in-laws, they were scheming to rip you off.

But this is Rebecca’s family. And this, my friends, might just be the root of the complexity in all (well, not all, but many) in-law relationships.

## 6. Thorny, Prickly In-laws

The Midrash<sup>7</sup> quoting *Shir Hashirim*, Song of Songs,<sup>8</sup> describes Rebecca in stark contrast to her family as “a rose among the thorns” (*k’shoshanah bein hachochim*). Rebecca’s family was a bunch of prickly thorns and she was like a beautiful rose among them.

What made them like thorns? The Midrash says that we can see it in their names – her father was named Bethuel Ha’Arami, her brother was named Laban Ha’Arami, for they came from a town called Padan Aram. Aram/Arami is rooted in the word *ramai*, meaning “deceiver/imposter.” They pretended to be one thing, while being something else altogether.

Indeed, in two weeks we will read in the Torah about the ultimate bait-and-switch pulled by Laban. Treat turned into trick, just in time for Halloween.

<sup>7</sup> Bereishit Rabba 63:4.

<sup>8</sup> Shir HaShirim 2:2.



Laban and his father Bethuel epitomized the material world, where what you see is not always what you get. They were deceivers, imposters, people for whom the outer mirage of the body was everything, and the inner purity of the soul was irrelevant.

This is why they are described as thorns and Rebecca as a rose. The rose is the essence, the soul of the experience, while the thorns exist to merely protect the rose. It is like the body and the soul – the body is the hard and prickly thorn meant to protect the soft and innocent soul within.

But, instead of protecting the rose, Laban and Bethuel were schemers and deceivers with their own agenda.

And the real reason that Abraham sent Eliezer specifically to Padan Aram was to save her from the thorns.<sup>9</sup> So this story really relates a showdown between truth and falsehood, rose and thorn.

## 7. The Inside Scoop

In addition to its literal meaning, every story in the Torah also has a deeper meaning, an inner dimension. So what is the inside scoop behind the tension between Laban and Eliezer?<sup>10</sup>

Laban and Bethuel weren't merely tricksters on a superficial level. Rather they reflected the tricky nature of the duplicitous material world.

And the marriage between Rebecca and Isaac was not merely the marriage between two individuals. Rather, it was the union of two forces in existence that reflect the purpose of all creation – to merge the duality of matter and spirit into one. Their marriage reflected a cosmic union which perpetuated everything Abraham and Sarah stood for – it was the continuation of their legacy to build a Jewish nation.

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<sup>9</sup>See Klei Yakar, Chayei Sarah 24:3.

<sup>10</sup>See Sefer Hasichot 5742 vol. 1, pp. 104 regarding this whole subject, based on Likkutei Torah, Bracha 94c.

This is the first marriage described in the Torah, and it embodies the very essence of marriage – the union of heaven and earth itself.<sup>11</sup> Marriage, as the Kabbalah teaches, represents the marriage and unity of all things. And this marriage between Rebecca and Isaac was the first its kind, blazing the trail, setting the trend, establishing a precedent for all future generations how to tackle the conflicts of a duplicitous universe, and create peace and harmony in our world.

Indeed, next week's Torah portion is called *Toldot*, meaning "offspring," and it describes the realization of what happens this week, when Rebecca and Isaac embark on a mission to build a family (both literally and symbolically) through good deeds, which are called "fruit" and "offspring."<sup>12</sup>

This is why the Torah recounts Eliezer's journey twice – to underline its paramount importance, not only then but for all future generations.

## 8. Asset Management

And this is also the inner meaning of why Laban came to check out Eliezer's assets. He wasn't merely checking out the physical value of these assets, but also the spiritual significance of Eliezer's and Abraham's portfolio. Laban knew that the stakes were high. He knew that Eliezer was representing Abraham. He knew that the union of Isaac and Rebecca would impact all of history ... that it would be the next step in the building of the Jewish nation ... that it would challenge the deceit and duality that he and his father represented.

This is also why Abraham made his vast holdings and considerable assets available to Eliezer. Abraham knew that it was going to be very difficult to accomplish this divine mission of marrying Rebecca and Isaac, of bridging heaven and earth. This union would be the manifestation of all his life's work, leading to *Toldot*, the offspring,

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<sup>11</sup> In the words of Kabbalah, as quoted in Likkutei Torah (ibid): "the Yichud of MaH and BaN."

<sup>12</sup> See Rashi on the opening of Toldot.

and the continuation of the Jewish people. And for this, all of his assets – his material assets but especially his spiritual assets – had to be on the table.

Realizing this, Laban and Bethuel did everything in their power to undermine this union. Their actions represented deceit challenging honesty, duplicity challenging harmony.

## 9. The Root of All In-laws

This, I submit, is the root of all in-law tension (even though in-laws may not be aware of this). It is the battle between matter and spirit, between body and soul, between heaven and earth. In other words, it is the battle of life.

The antidote? Well, any in-law dispute can be quelled when both sides are on the same spiritual page. This is one-hundred-percent guaranteed or your money back.

Abraham, father-in-law to Rebecca, is the alter-ego of Bethuel, and an example of what it means to be a loving and healthy in-law. Though Sarah was no longer alive, her enduring spirit served as a model for Rebecca and was the ultimate sign to Isaac that Rebecca was his soul-mate.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Abraham and Sarah were the consummate in-laws – a shining example for all of us how to infuse spirituality into our homes and families, and how to be stalwart pillars of support to our children and their spouses.

In our beautiful community, all of us certainly (or hopefully) get along swimmingly with their in-laws – and by swimmingly I don't mean you wish to throw them in a pool. As for the rest of the world, the solution is to realize this simple truth:

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<sup>13</sup> See Genesis 24:67 and Rashi.

We are all on the same spiritual quest – to unite heaven and earth, body and soul, matter and spirit.

When we realize that by marrying into each other’s families we become in-law partners in unifying the whole world, then it matters less how often our daughter-in-law comes for Thanksgiving or why our son-in-law is not a doctor. What matters is that we, like our grandparents, Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Rebecca, are here to change the world!

## 10. In Conclusion: Thorny Roses, Rosy Thorns

As mentioned, Rebecca was described as a rose among thorns.

But consider this: Isn’t it fascinating how God, in creating the universe, provided every species with a means to protect itself? The dreamy romantic that is the rose was given thorns to protect it from those wishing to do it harm.

An unhealthy plant is one whose very defense mechanisms turn on its own self. A rose that is stabbed by its own thorns is the ultimate desecration of purity.

The rose is like the soft, pure soul, and the body is like the hard thorn designed to protect. When a body – whose very purpose is to protect the soul within, just like the thorn protects the rose – turns on its own self, this is called exile, darkness, a real prickly situation.

So, we have to go on a journey to free our rose from the thorns by showing and teaching the thorns that they are there to protect, but never to hurt, the rose. In the same way, the body is the bodyguard, but never the assassin, of the soul. And every asset – both the rose and the thorns, the body and the soul, the physical and the spiritual – is needed to accomplish our life’s mission.

When the two sides work in concert, this leads to the ultimate marriage between body and soul, heaven and earth. The fruit/offspring of this marriage – *Toldot* – is realized for all eternity.

And we, you and I, are proof-positive that a journey to bridge matter and spirit results in the sweetest fruit.

On a practical note:

Whether you are a parent in-law or a child in-law, or whether you are a future in-law, you can glean many lessons from the out-law Bethuel and his counterpart Abraham. For example, self-absorption does not bode well and does not make for a good in-law. Indeed, it is the root cause of the negative in-law stereotype. But, selflessness, dedication to the cause, dominance of spirit over matter – these are the ingredients that makes for a healthy and giving in-law.

Two fathers-in-law, Bethuel and Abraham, offer their opposing models for us to emulate or reject. The choice is ours.

On this most tranquil day that is Shabbat, we just spoke about a very tranquil subject – a subject that is very dear to all of our hearts, that warms our insides and makes us supremely happy.

Look how much positivity, warmth and joy just resulted from a talk about in-laws! Who, in their wildest dreams, could have ever thunk it?

Shabbat Shalom!