



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Chayei Sarah 5771

By Dani Passow  
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During his journey to find a wife for his master Avraham's son, the servant Eliezer<sup>1</sup> turns to God for help: "Let it be that the maiden to whom I will say, 'Please tip over your jug so I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will even water your camels,' her will You have designated for Your servant, for Isaac."<sup>2</sup> God's response is immediate: Even before Eliezer finishes his request, he spots Rivka and asks her for water. As in his prayer, Rivka offers water not only for Eliezer to drink but also for his camels.

After requesting shelter for the night, Eliezer meets Rivka's family and retells the story of their meeting. Why does the Torah dedicate so much space to this tale? What about offering water to camels is so important that this specific act must be performed in order for Rivka to qualify as a future matriarch of the Jewish people?

Eliezer's prayer makes it clear that simply helping him quench his thirst would not have been enough to set Rivka apart. Providing water for Eliezer's camels, however, demonstrates a much more attentive form of *chesed*, or loving-kindness. Rivka's gesture expresses an understanding that we should feel morally compelled not only to assist others in response to their requests, but to go beyond what has been asked of us. In other words, we should notice, even anticipate, additional aspects of a situation that may warrant attention or improvement.

Eliezer asks Rivka for water because, as a traveler, he does not have any of his own. Similarly today, on a global scale, approximately one billion people around the world do not have access to clean drinking water.<sup>3</sup> There are many reasons for this, from the natural distribution of renewable fresh water sources on the planet to government and corporate malfeasance. What steps can we take to rectify this imbalance that would embody the *chesed* exemplified by Rivka? Simply providing clean drinking water is not enough. Like Rivka, we have to take the next step and ensure ongoing access to sustainable sources of clean water. In order to do so we have to identify—and then address—the reasons so many in the world lack such access.

One reason is that a number of corporations have engaged in activities that have been extremely harmful to natural water sources, especially in developing countries. A recent example comes from June 2007, when *The Hindu*, India's national newspaper, reported that a Coca-Cola bottling plant in the Kaladera industrial area of Rajasthan was "not only extracting colossal amounts of water but also causing ecological imbalance in the region by disturbing the deeper aquifers through its heavy-duty borewells."<sup>4</sup> The result, according to the article, was that the water table in the area fell by over 125 feet in the last decade.<sup>5</sup> And in Plachimada, in southern India, Coca-Cola's operations dried up hundreds of public wells, forcing the Kerala High Court to close the plant. The company has yet to pay any

<sup>1</sup> Though never mentioned explicitly in the Torah, the midrash understands this servant to be Eliezer (Bereishit Rabbah 60:8).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 24: 12–14.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. "Health through safe drinking water and basic sanitation." World Health Organization, 2010. Web. 14 Oct. 2010. [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/mdg1/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/mdg1/en/index.html)

<sup>4</sup> "Coca-Cola Responsible for Decline in Groundwater Table in Rajasthan." *The Hindu* 1 June 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

compensation to the local community and in fact continues to operate plants in other areas that cause similar damage.<sup>6</sup>

What can be done in the face of such all-too-common negligence and outright wrongdoing on the part of corporations? One way to motivate greater corporate responsibility is to evaluate companies using different measures than are currently employed. One specific method is called “triple bottom line,” which evaluates a corporation’s performance based on three criteria for success: economic, social and environmental. According to the triple bottom line (TBL) approach, corporations have a responsibility to stakeholders in addition to shareholders. For example, a company such as Coca-Cola should be concerned not only with its profit margin, but also with those affected by its practices—who are often also those whose resources enable the company to produce its goods in the first place, i.e., the local communities whose ecosystems it may be compromising or even destroying.

As consumers and investors, we can make our voices heard by directing our investment and consumer dollars to companies that pay attention to their triple bottom lines. By doing so, we encourage corporations to transform their business practices. This can be difficult, of course. Since paying attention to values other than the bottom line means the bottom line may suffer, ethical investing may not be as lucrative as investing purely for profit. Similarly, purchasing our goods from stores or companies with transparent and ethical business practices may limit our selection and be more expensive. We must ask ourselves, then, how many and which criteria make up our own *personal* bottom lines? Are we prepared to use our wallets in ways that reflect our moral values?

In today’s world, we can effect positive change by spending our money conscientiously and mindfully. First, however, we must make ourselves aware of the multiple and multifaceted nature of the needs of those we wish to aid. Rivka merited entry into the family of Avraham precisely because she was willing to give more of her efforts and resources, anticipating needs that were beyond what she was asked to give but clearly critical to another’s well-being. Are we ready to actively follow her example?



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<sup>6</sup>Corporate Accountability International. “Tell Coke to Listen to the People & Stop Draining Their Water!” Corporate Accountability International, 2010. 13 Oct. 2010. [http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2215/t/8971/content.jsp?content\\_KEY=4652](http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2215/t/8971/content.jsp?content_KEY=4652)

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