

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

Walk a Mile for a Camel

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Wouldn't it be great if we could receive divine guidance in every decision we make? Imagine having a question about which way to proceed and seeing a sign from Heaven that ends all doubt.

Eliezer the servant of Abraham was given the most important assignment of his career -- a mission that carried with it the future of the Nation of Israel: finding a wife for Isaac. Abraham had dedicated his life to teaching the world about the fact that there is one G-d who wants us to live a life of kindness and righteousness. The entire future of Abraham's legacy rested with his son Isaac. Whom would he marry? Who would be the mother of Israel, the wife and life's partner of Abraham's successor?

This was not a mission that could be left to chance. Abraham summoned his trusted servant. Abraham insisted that he swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the local Canaanites. *"Go to my native land, to my birthplace, and find a wife for my son Isaac... G-d... will send His angel before you, and you will find a wife there for my son."* (Genesis 24:4,7)

Loaded up with ten camels' worth of gifts, Eliezer journeyed to the City of Nachor, hoping to find a worthy bride for Isaac among his relatives. Once he arrived at the outskirts of the city, he turned his eyes Heavenward and asked for a Sign. There were several young ladies coming out of the city to draw water from the well. Eliezer asked G-d to help him with a test: Eliezer would ask a young woman for a drink of water. If she would offer to give water to his camels, that would be a Heavenly sign that this was the girl whom G-d had chosen for Isaac.

Eliezer had barely finished his prayer when Rebecca, the daughter of Isaac's cousin "happened" to arrive at the well with a water jug. Although Eliezer was not yet aware of her identity, he knew that she was obviously a very special young lady because the waters of the well miraculously rose to greet her.

Eliezer asked her for a drink, and Rebecca, as if reading from a script, replied in the affirmative: *"I will also draw water for your camels until they have finished drinking." So she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough and kept running to the well to draw water, and she drew for all of his camels.* (24:19-20)

The Torah goes on to tell us that Eliezer stood there watching to see if G-d had fulfilled his request.

Two questions:

1. Why was he still wondering? Hadn't G-d already shown him the sign? Eliezer requested that G-d show him Isaac's bride by her offering to water the camels. The offer had been made! Why did he stand there and make her work so hard? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH WATER TEN THIRSTY CAMELS CAN DRINK?!!!! Wasn't it already clear by her offer that this was the right person?
2. Why did Eliezer pick that particular sign in the first place? If you're asking for a miraculous sign, it could be any sign. Wasn't the miracle of the water rising from the well to greet Rebecca a sufficient sign? How about requesting a Heavenly halo overhead? OR WHY DON'T YOU JUST ASK G-D TO TELL YOU HER NAME?!!

The answer, I believe, is that Eliezer wasn't asking for a miracle at all. He was administering a very practical admission exam to see if Rebecca was worthy of entering the family of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. When Abraham, at the age of 99, on the third day after his Bris, saw three strangers walking past his tent, he RAN to greet them and waited on them hand and foot.

If there was one thing that Eliezer learned in Abraham's home, it was that performing Chessed, acts of kindness, is an obligation which must be undertaken with the same zeal and commitment as any other religious requirement like Shabbos or Kashrus.

How do we respond when asked for a favor? If someone asks us for a ride, do we jump at the opportunity? When an appeal for charity comes in the mail do we tear out our checkbooks as quickly as possible to assist? When our wife/mother/father/conscience asks us to take out the garbage, do we drop everything and run like Abraham to do it?!

If Rebecca was to be the next mother of Israel, it was essential that she have ingrained in her personality that we must be kind to everyone -- human and animal. She could have said to this tall, strapping, stranger, "Would you like to borrow my jug so you can draw some water for your camels? I'm sure they must be thirsty."

But that would not have sufficed. Our mother Rebecca taught us that day that when we do a favor for someone, it must be absolute. It must be done with zeal and with generosity. It must be done with dedication and pride in having the opportunity to do this lofty and holy Mitzvah.

May the merits of our mother Rebecca who rests in Hebron serve to protect her children in Israel who desperately need Divine protection from those who seek to destroy us.

Let us learn from her ways and dedicate ourselves to loving and helping each other.

Being part of the family of Abraham demands no less.

Have a great Shabbos.

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