

HUMAN NATURE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"The servant [Eliezer] took ten camels from his master's camels..." (Bereshith 24:10)

The Torah mentions specifically that these camels belonged to Eliezer's master. Rashi explains that they were clearly recognizable as belonging to Avraham. Since Avraham was always meticulously careful to avoid stealing in any form, he took special care to muzzle each of his camels to prevent them eating from fields belonging to others. Anyone who saw these camels recognized this "trademark" of Avraham, who would have nothing to do with theft, even through his animals (1).

Was there really a need for Avraham to muzzle his camels? Rav Pinchas ben Yair's donkey refused to eat stolen food, for God makes sure that no transgressions occur because of a righteous person - not even through his animals (2). Avraham, the progenitor of the entire Jewish nation, certainly was not wanting in righteousness. Why would he have worried that some act of theft might come about through his camels (3)?

Although Avraham's extreme dedication to honesty kept him away from forbidden acts, he did not want to rely on his own righteousness. Avraham took nothing for granted; on the contrary, he employed every possible precaution to safeguard himself from sin. He would not place himself in a situation that held even the slightest possibility that sin might result. All the more so he did not depend on the nature of his camels; therefore he was not willing to assume that they would not steal (4).

Rav Yisrael Salanter once visited an acquaintance of his who was a wealthy banker. The banker was sitting at his table counting money when he looked out of the window and saw Rav Yisrael in the distance. Realizing that Rav Yisrael would soon be in his home, the banker went to change his clothes so that he would be able to greet the Rav with the honor that was due him. When Rav Yisrael arrived, the banker's servant invited him into the house but, seeing a large sum of money on the table, Rav Yisrael remained outside.

Several minutes later the banker entered the room and, seeing Rav Yisrael standing outside, asked him why he had not come in. Rav Yisrael explained: The Gemara states that only a minority of people commit immoral acts; nevertheless the Torah forbids a man to be secluded with a woman because it might lead him to transgress. The same Gemara states that most people transgress in monetary matters (5). It should be obvious to us then, said Rav Yisrael, that no one should allow himself to be secluded with someone else's money.

1. Rashi on Bereshith 24:10.
 2. Chulin 5b.
 3. Sifthei Chachamim on Bereshith 24:10.
 4. Rabbeinu Yerucham, Da'ath Torah, p. 154.
 5. Bava Bathra 165a.
-

Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Daniel Travis and **Torah.org**