

THE DIGNITY OF THE STRANGER

by Rabbi Label Lam

She descended to the spring, filled her jug and ascended. The servant ran towards her and said, "Let me sip please, a little, from your water jug." She said, "Drink my lord" and she hurried, and lowered her jug to her hands and gave him drink. When she finished giving him drink, she said, "I will draw (water) even for your camels until they have finished drinking." So she hurried and she emptied her jug into the trough and kept running to the well to draw (water) and she drew for all his camels. (Breishis 24:16- 20)

Rivka may not have known but she was trying out for the position of Matriarch of the Jewish People. What was her test and how did she display her worthiness? Well the story line tells us of her extraordinary display of kindness to even to the 10 camels of Eliezer the servant of Avraham. So she gets the job of Mother of a Nation because of her extra sensitivity and concern for animals? Realizing, of course, she did demonstrate, thereby, the abundance of her native kindness, there is still room to wonder aloud whether or not it was her concern for animals that tipped the scale in her favor or something else!?

Why does the Torah tell us that Rivka "emptied her jug into the trough" before running to fetch more water for the camels? Of all the matters in the universe why is it that this detail is included? Why did she first announce her intention to feed the animals before spilling the water into the trough and getting into high gear? What does this add? What do we learn about her unique qualifications for the task to which she is about to be appointed?

The story is told about Rabbi Akiva Eiger ztl. that a guest at his table had clumsily toppled a glass of red wine on the pristine white Shabbos table cloth. The Rabbi reacted immediately and almost instinctively. He jarred the table in such a way that his glass of wine spilled as well. What a ploy and play of unrehearsed sensitivity he displayed in that one move and all just to protect the other fellow's feelings of embarrassment.

In a similar way Rivka preserved the inherent honor of the man Eliezer. He had requested a drink. She could have poured into another vessel or into his mouth but rather she gave him to drink from the jug directly in the most dignified fashion. After this stranger drinks from her jug a new dilemma is born. Can she deliver home a partially filled jug or one out of which a stranger has just partaken? If you owned a grocery store and a customer, for whatever reason took a swig from a gallon container of milk, and returned it to the shelf, what would you, the proprietor do? 1) Would you reseal and resell it at a slight discount? 2) Would you spill it out! 3) Would you give to the cat?

Rivka was alert to a number of matters. 1) Spilling the water out is wasteful. 2) Spilling it in front of him is insulting. 3) The pain of thirst of the animals is also a pressing obligation waiting to be fulfilled by someone.

Therefore Rivka cleverly announced her intentions first before emptying the jug into the water trough to spare him even a moment of personal discomfort. Only then did she launch into her heroic activity to care for his ten camels, fueling them like ten Mack Trucks and all by hand. The whole giant effort may have included a desire to be economical as well as to quench some creaturely thirsts but it may have been mostly motivated by a desire to maintain to the dignity of the stranger.

Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.