

THE WATER TEST

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And it should be, that the girl to whom I will say, 'give me water to drink from your pitcher,' and she will reply, 'drink, and I will also water your camels' She should be the one that You have decreed for your servant, for Yitzchak, and thus will I know that you have done kindness with my master." [24:14]

Avraham sends his servant Eliezer on a mission: to find a wife for Yitzchak. So Eliezer goes to Charan, to Avraham's relatives (as he was instructed to do), and he prays for Divine Guidance to find her. Yet we must ask: what motivated Eliezer to choose this particular set of criteria? What is so exceptional about the desired response, "drink, and I will also water your camels," that Eliezer could know from this alone that she is the right woman to marry Yitzchak? Was Eliezer simply requesting a sign from Heaven, or was he looking for a "rational," this-world signal from the girl as well?

The Bais HaLevi, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of Brisk, analyzes Eliezer's request, which he believes he may have seen in yet an earlier source.

Although Eliezer was requesting a sign from Heaven, he did so with wisdom - because several crucial traits of the girl in question would be revealed.

First of all, it would demonstrate good and generous disposition to give water to someone she does not recognize. This is all the more so because a girl coming to get water for the house would not bring a glass, and she would therefore have to permit Eliezer to drink directly from the pitcher - and she could not know if he would dirty the water or transmit any germs or illness.

Second, if she would take the pitcher back to the house, this would show lack of intelligence and thought - because perhaps he really would put his dirt or germs into the water.

Her final test would be how she disposed of the water, given that she was not taking it home. Were she simply to pour it out, this would be an embarrassment to Eliezer and reflect a lack of Derech Eretz, consideration. Rather, she would do the intelligent and considerate thing - feed the remaining water to the camels.

Given that these three traits would not prove that a particular woman should be the wife of Yitzchak, Eliezer then prays to G-d that even with all of the signs, He should send the right person to show them.

In reality, we see that Rivka does not do precisely what Eliezer had said - rather, she demonstrates even greater concern. First of all, though the Bais HaLevi does not mention this, I remember

someone else pointing out that she does not immediately mention what she will do with the remaining water. Her first priority is to give water to Eliezer, and only afterwards does she mention the camels. In addition, she says that she will draw additional water until the camels are sated - in order to prevent Eliezer from even thinking that her only real interest is pouring out the water.

It is interesting to note to what extent the Bais HaLevi distinguishes generosity from Derech Eretz, consideration for others. Just as it is possible for a person to be considerate but not generous, he also tells us that a demonstration of generosity is not enough to prove consideration.

The Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisroel Mayer Kagan, says the following in his Ahavas Chesed (love of kindness). When Avraham receives his three visitors, he does not invite them into his tent - rather, he offers them shade under a tree. In addition, he first offers them a light meal, before sitting down to eat meat. Why? Because Avraham understood that much as he would like to show his generosity, travellers might not be interested in stopping for several hours. This is why he waits - and then offers more extensive hospitality only once he knows that they are interested.

The Torah shows us that both Avraham and Rivka shared not only generosity, but sincere consideration as well - and this is an important lesson. What a host may regard as great generosity on his or her part, could be seen as a lack of consideration by the guests. May HaShem always grant us the intelligence and thoughtfulness to show both generosity and consideration and to properly balance the two.

Good Shabbos

Text Copyright © 2001 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis.