

AVRAHAM, THE LOCOMOTIVE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Was Eliezer correct in establishing a pre-ordained sign of behavior to determine which woman would be the proper mate for Yitzchak? This is a long running debate among the commentators and scholars until our very day. Maimonides criticizes him for so doing while Rabbi Avraham ben David (Raavad) severely criticizes Maimonides for criticizing Eliezer.

The Talmud in the Tosefta to the eighth chapter of tractate Shabat discusses all sorts of superstitions, signs, indications of good fortune or danger, etc. that are forbidden to Jews to indulge in. The clear indication of the Tosefta is that anything that has been empirically proven to be of practical value is permitted, whereas good luck charms and other empirically unproven signs and omens are forbidden, as being akin to pagan belief and practices.

Due to many historical and social pressures over the centuries, many such omens and signs have seeped into Jewish society eventually acquiring the status of accepted custom. And we are all very aware of the power and hold that customs have upon individuals.

I am always reminded of the rueful comment of Rabbi Yaakov Emden who famously said that "it is regrettable that 'not to steal' was a commandment and not a custom for had it been a custom more people would attempt to observe it." Part of the problem in today's society is the prioritization of omens and signs and questionable customs over the values and observances of Judaism itself as proscribed by the Torah and rabbinic writings. The spooks apparently always win out.

Of interest, at least to me, is the fact that Eliezer disappears completely from the narrative of the Torah after the mission of bringing Rivkah to Yitzchak is accomplished. If one adopts the opinion of Maimonides regarding Eliezer's use of signs and omens as being incorrect and unjustified, perhaps that would inform his later disappearance from the Torah's text. However, those who laud his behavior and view him as a greatly righteous person, must confront the issue of his absence in the narrative of the Torah after fulfilling the mission that Avraham placed upon him.

A parable is related in the name of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Chafetz Chaim): A person who never saw a railroad train before stands at a crossing and sees the train whiz by his eyes. He notices that all of the cars of the train are moving at the speed as is the locomotive. He does not therefore realize that the cars have no power of their own independent of the locomotive. When the locomotive can pull no longer then all of the cars will come to a halt.

Our father Avraham was the locomotive that pulled Eliezer and many others along in their search for

God. When he passes from the world, as recorded in this week's parsha, then Eliezer remains frozen and unable to grow spiritually. Thus the Torah has really nothing more to say to us about him. Jews are supposed to be locomotives, not just train cars being pulled along.

Shabat shalom,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com