



## Eliezer's "Sign" at the Well

By Rabbi David Silverberg

The Torah in Parashat Chayei Sara tells of the experiences of Avraham's servant – commonly identified as Eliezer – in Aram Naharayim, Avraham's birthplace, where he was sent to find a suitable mate for Yitzchak. Upon arriving at the well outside the city, Eliezer spoke to God and established a "test" whereby he would find the right woman to marry Yitzchak. Namely, he would ask a water girl approaching the well for some water, and the girl who would agree to give him and his camels water was the girl destined to marry Yitzchak.

God indeed "went along" with Eliezer's plan. The first girl who approached the well – who also graciously gave water to the servant and his camels – was Rivka, Avraham's great-niece. And from Eliezer's account of the instructions he received from Avraham (24:38,40), it appears that Avraham specifically requested that he bring a girl from his family.

Maimonides makes mention of this episode in the *Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* section of his *Mishneh Torah* (11:4), amidst his discussion of the Torah prohibition of *nichush* – divination. He writes:

What is "divination"? Such as those who say, "Since my bread fell from my mouth" – or "My stick fell from my hand" – "I am not going to such-and-such place today, for if I go, I will not achieve my goal"; "Since a jackal passed to my right, I am not leaving the door of my house today, for if I leave, an unscrupulous person will come upon me." Similarly, those who hear the chirping of a bird and say, "This will happen" or "This will not happen"; "It is good to do such-and-such thing" or "It is not good to do such-and-such thing"...

Similarly, whoever makes for himself signs – "If such-and-such will happen to me, I will do such-and-such thing, and if it does not happen, then I will not" – like Avraham's servant, Eliezer, and all similar types of things – it is all forbidden, and whoever performs an action because of one of these things is flogged.

Maimonides explicitly points to Eliezer's "test" at the well as an example of a kind of *nichush* which the Torah forbids. It is forbidden to determine one's course of action based on an external occurrence. We must act and make choices based on sound reasoning and our understanding of right and wrong, rather than on the basis of random, coincidental circumstances.

The Ra'avad, in his critique of *Mishneh Torah*, strongly disputes Maimonides' position, noting that one cannot ascribe such a violation to Eliezer, whom our tradition generally portrays as a righteous man who was faithful to the values of his master. If

Eliezer was truly a loyal student and adherent of Avraham's teachings, as is commonly assumed, it is difficult to imagine that he would be guilty of superstition.

Various different approaches have been taken to explain Maimonides' position. Most notably, perhaps, the *Kesef Mishneh* commentary (among others) claims that gentiles are not included in the Torah prohibition against *nichush*. It should therefore not surprise us that Eliezer engaged in a practice forbidden by Torah law, as he was not bound by the Torah's commands. Others suggest that Maimonides pointed to the incident of Eliezer as an example of the general definition of *nichush*, even though in Eliezer's particular situation no prohibition was violated. Eliezer conducted a test that determined the girl's character, and it was therefore entirely legitimate. Maimonides meant that generally, hinging a decision on external factors is forbidden on the grounds of *nichush*, even though Eliezer's test was acceptable because it was built upon a rational basis.

Alternatively, however, it is possible that Maimonides was not uncomfortable with the notion of Eliezer committing a grave mistake such as *nichush*. In fact, the Talmud (Ta'anit 4a) lists this incident as among the three instances where a Biblical figure "*sha'al she-lo ke-hogen*" – inappropriately asked God to make a decision for him on the basis of a "sign." Maimonides perhaps accepted the plain reading of the Gemara's comment, whereby Eliezer acted incorrectly in resorting to a process of divination in choosing a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer may have indeed been taught to believe in the true Creator, as Avraham preached, but his belief in God and Providence perhaps misled him to shirk personal responsibility and leave his work in God's hands. Our belief in God and His ultimate control over world events does not undermine the importance of personal effort and initiative. We are to do what is necessary for our well being based on the natural laws of the world, and pray that God blesses our efforts with success. Possibly, Eliezer erred in expecting God to do his work for him. He may have misunderstood Avraham's prayer, "He shall send His angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there" (24:7) to mean that God will miraculously send him a suitable mate for Yitzchak, as opposed to a prayer that God should help Eliezer in his endeavor.

In the end, of course, God ensured the success of Eliezer's "test." As the Gemara notes, despite the fact that he made a request that was "*she-lo ke-hogen*" ("inappropriate"), God responded "*ke-hogen*" ("appropriately") and provided the right woman. However, according to Maimonides, God's favorable response does not reflect the propriety of Eliezer's request. We certainly can and must beseech God for assistance, but this does not allow us to shirk our own responsibility; only if we are willing to do our job are we then able to petition God to do His, and grant our work blessing and success.