

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Uncommon Decency

When the time arrives to find a bride for Yitzchak, Avraham sends his most trusted servant on a quest to find a suitable spouse. Those familiar with biblical courtships are not surprised that the fateful meeting takes place at a well; both Yaakov and Moshe meet their future wives at wells. And yet, despite the similarities, our present case differs from the others in several ways. The first such difference is the most obvious: This case is the only instance of courtship by proxy. Additionally, Yaakov and Moshe demonstrated both physical and moral strength and won over the “damsel in distress”, whereas in this case, Avraham’s servant, identified as Eliezer, takes the opposite view. He creates a test; the first woman to pass it will be deemed suitable.

The test he puts in place is one of kindness and generosity: Will she offer water not only to a wayward traveller but to his parched camel as well? This is surely no arbitrary test: This servant of Avraham, raised in Avraham’s holy tent, was privy to the inner workings of Avraham’s mind, and he knew the significance of kindness within the hierarchy of his master’s value system. Someone stingy or misanthropic could not be a part of Avraham’s camp, certainly could not take on a leadership role, nor transmit Avraham’s values to the next generation.

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While in no way wishing to minimize the importance of decency and generosity, there seems to be a glaring omission from this test: What of her beliefs? What if the person who passed the test was a good-hearted polytheist? Could such a person really be chosen as a bride for the son of Avraham? Surely the nascent Jewish nation would need at its

very core good deeds, generosity, sharing and giving, but if we know nothing else about Jewish thought, we know that all of these traits are seen as outgrowths of a highly developed sense of monotheism: The recognition that there is but one all-powerful God who has no needs, leads to the realization that creation was not designed to solve a problem or fulfill some need within God, but rather was an act of absolute altruism. Because God lacks nothing and is not affected by human behavior, because there is nothing humans can do for God, all we can do is attempt to emulate God and mimic His altruism. This realization was Avraham's contribution to the world, what set him apart from the society into which he was born, what informed his behavior and gave form and content to his life's work.

Was this what Eliezer was thinking? Did he see kindness as an expression of monotheism? Although we cannot know his motivations, one early commentator, Rabbenu Nissim, suggested that Eliezer was in fact not at all concerned with the religious beliefs of the prospective bride. In fact, we may surmise that this aspect of her biography was not on the checklist at all: By sending an emissary back to his homeland, Avraham almost guaranteed that any bride Eliezer might find would be the product of an upbringing steeped in the idolatry that was standard fare in Mesopotamia. Avraham knew the place all too well: He had put quite a distance between himself and that culture, even prior to God's command to leave his family and birthplace. Surely, the prospective bride would have been raised and educated in that very same world, exposed to the same idols Avraham had smashed in his youth. What, then, was Avraham's strategy in sending his servant there, of all places, and what was Eliezer thinking when he created his test?

Rabbenu Nissim suggests that when beliefs are compared with personality traits, the former are far easier to change than the latter. Presumably, as Avraham's *major domo*, his 'right-hand man', Eliezer had seen people come and go. He saw how quickly and easily people changed their belief system, especially under Avraham's tutelage, yet he also saw how difficult it was for people to change personality traits. Even among Avraham's flesh and blood, poor character traits overshadowed religious belief; Lot and Yishmael both parted ways with Avraham's camp over differences that were not "religious" in nature. On the other hand, all four of our matriarchs were born and raised

in Avraham's hometown, and all were from the same extended family of idol worshippers, yet each of them rose above the value system in which they were raised, and exhibited the extraordinary character traits that are the core of Jewish ethics.

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According to Rabbi Nissim, Eliezer was quite confident that after spending time with Avraham, any idolater would become enlightened, would be liberated from polytheistic beliefs -- but changing their character would be far more difficult. Simply put, teaching decency is far more difficult than teaching theology. This is not

to say that is impossible for people to change their ways. Quite the opposite: this may be mankind's most important task-- to change and elevate character traits. Yet when looking for a fitting spouse for Yitzchak, Eliezer chose decency over doctrine. In our generation, when common sense has become uncommon and common decency increasingly rare, the poignancy of this lesson should not be overlooked.

For a more in-depth analysis see

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/essays-and-audio-parashat-chayei-sarah.html>