

Eliezer's Impossible Test

Torah Portion November 11, 2017



Parashat Chayei Sarah

This week we will talk about the weekly Torah portion, Parashat Chayei Sarah.

The main subject I want to talk about is the assignment that Abraham gives to Eliezer - to find a suitable wife for Isaac.

There is a winning combination here between Divine Providence and human wisdom. I want to focus on this.

As an introduction to this teaching, I would like to emphasize that our world is very complicated, we are complicated people. God knows exactly what kind of world He has put us in, and so He created us with common sense and reason. God created us with a good and healthy mind, with the intent that we would use it! And the combination of good sense and Divine Providence brings success and blessing.

Sometimes we have no choice, and we are completely dependent on God, other times we can use the wisdom that God has given us.

Eliezer's Impossible Test

In chapter 24, Abraham has Eliezer swear that he will find Isaac a good wife. On one hand, there is no problem to find a family willing to give away it's daughter to a person of means such as Abraham's successor. (Note that Eliezer takes ten camels loaded with all kinds of good things.)

But on the other hand, a family who cares for it's daughter's well-being would not be happy to send her off to a faraway place, since the family will not be able to stand by her side when necessary.

This testimony can be seen in Laban's parting words to Jacob:

"If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me." – Genesis 31:50 [NIV]

Laban is concerned that when Jacob will be in a different country with his wives - Laban's daughters - he will not care to treat them well.

We must understand that this is the concern of every family. It's difficult to send your daughter off to a faraway country without the possibility of supporting her. This means that it will be difficult for Eliezer to find the right wife for Isaac, and persuade the family to send her far off.

Eliezer understood the weight of responsibility and the difficulty of his assignment, and he asks Abraham:

The servant asked him, "What if the woman is unwilling to come back with me to this land? Shall I then take your son back to the country you came from?" – Genesis 24:5 [NIV]

Abraham is opposed to the possibility of Isaac's "emigration":

"If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there." – Genesis 24:8 [NIV]

Abraham says that if the woman does not want to come to Canaan, then Eliezer is free from the oath, and he can find a local bride. The most

important thing is that Isaac will not leave the Promised Land.

Eliezer understands that he has two jobs: the first one is to find a suitable wife for Isaac, and the second one is to convince her and her family to agree to marry a stranger who lives far away.

This story works on two planes - a spiritual one and an earthly one. Spiritual: to find a suitable wife. Earthly: to convince her family to send her, on her own, to a distant land to marry a stranger.

I'll say it again: a family that is concerned about a daughter's well-being will not be happy to send her off to a husband from far away - because the family could not stand by her side if necessary.

Eliezer had three options:

At best, find a respectable family that is in dire financial straits, and is willing to send their daughter to a distant land in order to give her a chance for a better life.

Another possibility is to find a greedy family that will be dazzled by Abraham's great wealth, and will ignore any possible distress for the daughter (this is what actually happened).

And the worst option would be to find a family that would be happy to get rid of their problematic daughter, because of her behavior or because her chances of getting married locally were slim to none.

I am sure that these questions bothered Eliezer, and in the end Eliezer decided that only God could find the right girl under these conditions. The problem is how to ascertain what is God's choice when there is no explicit statement on the matter.

To ensure that God's guidance is in play here, Eliezer comes up with an impossible test, with no real chance of working to find a suitable wife for Isaac:

"May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master." - Genesis 24:14 [NIV]

Why would this be an impossible test?

First, she was a good girl from a good family. Good girls don't go to draw water. There are slaves for this kind of thing, or they could use the barter system - they could trade a garment or a fabric in exchange for water.

Pumping and hauling water is very hard work, and unsuitable for a girl. A clay jar full of water on a girl's shoulder is perhaps a romantic painting, but in reality it's a hard job.

Second, the girl must approach a man. And before her there's a strange man asking to drink water from her jar. A good girl would logically not talk with strangers, and she would not approach a man as to let him drink from her jar, as Eliezer spoke:

*“Please give me a little water from your jar.” - Genesis 24:17b
[NIV]*

And the final demand of Eliezer's test - that the girl willingly offered to water ten camels who had just finished a long journey, borders on absurdity. No girl from a good home would offer or initiate such hard labor. Perhaps a man of great strength would offer this option in return for decent wages, but not a girl.

How much water can a camel drink after a journey? The answer may surprise you - a camel can drink over 50 liters (13 gallons) in ten minutes. In other words, Eliezer is expecting this girl to volunteer to draw half a ton of water for his ten camels.

Even after this miracle occurs, it is written:

*Without saying a word, the man watched her closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful. -
Genesis 24:21 [NIV]*

Why does Eliezer watch her closely? This girl fulfilled every condition he set...

Even after we receive a sign from God, it is necessary to make sure it is indeed from God. Eliezer still does not know if she is available for marriage, or if she's engaged, or a slave girl, etc. Therefore he asks her who her father

is and if her father has any place for lodging. The girl can answer this question if she indeed still lives in her father's house and is a daughter and not a slave.

There are many who were tested in the Bible, such as Abraham, Job - even Yeshua.

In Matthew 4, Satan asks a hungry Yeshua to turn stones into bread, he puts Him above the temple and asks Him to jump as a test to the angels, Satan then shows the world to Yeshua and offers the kingdoms of the world in exchange for His bowing before him.

Yeshua meets all trials and tests and teaches us important lessons during the testing, with the climax being:

Yeshua said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" - Matthew 4:10 [NIV] (amended)

Divine Providence in Cooperation With Human Wisdom

Back to Eliezer - after the aforementioned test and the resulting answer, he makes use of his intelligence. Now we can see that Eliezer is clever. He begins by giving gifts to the girl. (Up until now we call her "girl", but we know that this is "Rebekah".)

...the man took out a gold nose ring weighing a beka and two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels. - Genesis 24:22b [NIV]

Even before Eliezer introduces himself, he gives the girl lavish jewelry in order to create a comfortable atmosphere for conversation.

Eliezer figured the girl would run home and tell her family what had happened. Indeed it is written:

The young woman ran and told her mother's household about these things. - Genesis 24:28 [NIV]

And as Eliezer figured, money did the job. Laban sees the gold nose ring and the gold bracelets, and he invites Eliezer over to the house.

Now we get to Eliezer's speech at Rebekah's father's house: Look at Eliezer, he's smart and he knows exactly what to say. First, Eliezer emphasizes that his master Abraham is rich:

So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys. – Genesis 24:34,35 [NIV]"

Eliezer describes in detail that Abraham is one of the richest men, and he goes on to say:

My master's wife Sarah has borne him a son in her old age, and he has given him everything he owns. – Genesis 24:36 [NIV]"

This means that Sarah gave birth to an only child, and there will be no more heirs. Abraham has already given all he has as an inheritance to Isaac. After Eliezer ended the part indicating the great wealth of Isaac and his future wife, he turns to talk about his assignment, and the test that he set. He points to the fact that Abraham wanted a wife for Isaac from his own family:

"...if, when you go to my clan, they refuse to give her to you—then you will be released from my oath." – Genesis 24:41 [NIV]"

Eliezer is saying that they're the first option, he is under an oath to go to their home first. But if they're not interested, he's free from the oath.

Eliezer ends his speech with this statement:

"Now if you will show kindness and faithfulness to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn." – Genesis 24:49 [NIV]"

Eliezer's speech is clever. He presents great wealth, alongside a clear threat: "Either you show kindness and faithfulness and send your daughter, or I'm

free to go."

It is clear to us that this marriage was ordained by God, but Eliezer understood that marriage requires the consent of Rebekah's family. And as for every earthly family, economics is a top priority. So Eliezer acted and spoke accordingly, and like in many other places in the Torah, God's help works in cooperation with human effort and wisdom.

In Conclusion

The big question I'm left with after this story is: how can I know what God's will is without having an explicit statement? And where do I stand in relation to Eliezer's test? Does this test apply to me today as well?

Take for example the test of Gideon's fleece - where Gideon asked to lay a fleece out where it would be dry while everything else around it would be wet, and vice versa, where the fleece would be wet and everything else around it would be dry.

Surprisingly, we find other similar tests in the Bible and the New Testament. Consider this verse:

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.
- *Proverbs 16:33 [NIV]*

The purpose of this is to clarify God's will. By casting lots to find out, for example, the culprit of a specific crime, or if a person is worthy of an important public office.

I will note a few instances of casting lots in Scripture:

Saul casts lots and finds out that his son Jonathan sinned by inadvertently breaking the vow of fasting.

The sailors in the book of Jonah cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

Joshua casts lots and finds that Achan brought disaster upon Israel by violating God's covenant not to take devoted things.

The division of the land into tribes and regions was done by casting lots.

When an apostle was chosen after the death of Judas, he was selected by casting lots.

By casting lots, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was chosen to sacrifice incense in the temple, as a priest.

Today, the vast majority of the Sages of Israel claim that we can't rely on casting lots, or similar signs and tests, in matters of injustice. I think so too.

And yet, I believe that God indeed puts signs before us even today.

In conclusion From Eliezer's test, and his wise conduct after the test, I am clear beyond any shadow of a doubt that God works in cooperation with our human effort and wisdom.

Shabbat Shalom

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