

Looking for a Wife

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Avraham sends his manager, Eliezer of Damascus, to go back to his home town to find a wife for Isaac. The Torah actually gives three significantly different versions of what happened. It's a bit like "She said" "He said."

First of all, Avraham calls in Eliezer and gives him instructions. Avraham does not want to take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanite tribes. They are going to be displaced precisely because of their immorality. Instead he sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. He specifically commands him to go back to "my land and my birthplace." And his only other condition is that Isaac should not go back to live there. He says nothing about his family.

Then Eliezer amplifies those instructions and makes his own decision on the spot based on a test of character that is his own, not Avraham's. And notice how he calls on God to help his choice. But in telling the story of what happened to Rivkah's family, he changes some details saying that he was specifically sent to the family. What is going on here? Is this just a negotiating ploy? Which version was the truth? The answer is that all of them contain aspects of the truth. Truth like history, often depends on who sees what when.

Avraham gave instructions that were brief and the point. But he left out some obvious issues. He didn't say anything about the character of the girl, only her background. Does this mean nothing else mattered to him? The servant understands that character is the crucial issue. He comes across Rivkah, almost by accident though of course we know it is not. She has all the qualities he knows Avraham wants in daughter in law. Kindness, concern and modesty as well as beauty. And when he starts to negotiate, he tells them that Avraham specifically insisted that he go back to his family for his son's wife.

When Eliezer gets to meet her family and realizes that they are motivated by other and material considerations, he modified his narrative to win their approval. He focuses on the financial. Does this mean he was dishonest or that the Torah condones white lies? Not at all! It is just that we all see things from different angles with different priorities. Very often to achieve what we want or to persuade someone, we need to find the right way of conveying our intent. The way you present something is as important as the message itself.

Eliezer stood to gain by not finding a wife for Isaac. He might have preserved his indispensability. But he put duty above self-interest. This is a narrative about a genuine servant, a genuine person who goes beyond the letter of instruction to the meaning and intent behind them. Any agent if he is to succeed must try to understand more than just the instructions. He must try to gauge what is really needed in any particular situation and what is really wanted. The Torah recognizes that people are different, their values

differ as do their capacities and motives. This narrative tells us that if we want to succeed we must be prepared to look at things from very different angles and determine what the true priorities are.