**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Chayei Sorah – Vol. 12, Issue 5**

**Compiled by Ozer Alport**

**והיה הנער אשר אמר אליה הטי נא כדך ואשתה ואמרה שתה וגם גמליך אשקה**

 **אתה הכחת לעבדך ליצחק ובה אדע כי עשית חסד עם אדני (24:14)**

In Parshas Chayei Sorah, Avrohom’s servant Eliezer established a litmus test to determine whether a potential match was the proper spouse for Yitzchok, saying that whomever would offer him and his camels water to drink would become Yitzchok’s wife. Similarly, in Sefer Shmuel (1 14:6-10), when a massive army of Philistine soldiers gathered to attack Shaul and his badly outnumbered army, Shaul’s son Yonason understood that according to the laws of nature, there was no way for them to defeat the Philistines, but he expressed his hope that perhaps Hashem would perform a miracle for them.

Like Eliezer, Yonason decided to set up a test by which he would determine how to proceed. He went with his armor-bearer toward their encampment, and said that if when the Philistine garrisons saw them, they told them to stay where they were and the Philistines would come to them, they would not take any action and would retreat to the Jewish camp. If, however, the Philistines responded by telling them to come up to their location, this would be a sign that Hashem had delivered them into Yonasons’s hands, and they could go up to the Philistines confident that they would be able to defeat and kill them.

The Rambam rules (Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 11:4) that if a person drops his bread or his cane falls out of his hand, he may not interpret this as a sign that he will not succeed if he goes on a trip that day, as the Torah’s prohibition (Vayikra 19:26) against sorcery includes giving credence to superstition or random acts of chance. The Rambam adds that another example of such forbidden behavior is setting up a litmus test and interpreting the results as an indication of which course of action one should take.

The source for the Rambam’s ruling is a Gemora in Chullin (95b), which states: כל נחש שאינו כאליעזר עבד אברהם וכיונתן בן שאול אינו נחש – any superstitious behavior that is not like that of Avrohom’s servant Eliezer and that of Yonason the son of Shaul is not superstitious behavior (and is therefore permissible). The Rambam interprets the Gemora as saying that the tests used by Eliezer and Yonason were forms of superstitious behavior, which is forbidden by the Torah. While both of these stories had happy endings, with Rivkah passing Eliezer’s test and marrying Yitzchok and Yonason and his armor-bearer defeating the Philistines, it is difficult to understand how they transgressed the Torah prohibition against sorcery, which according to some opinions (Sanhedrin 56b) also applies to non-Jews such as Eliezer.

Tosefos (Chullin 95b) asks this question and answers that although the simple reading of the text seems to indicate that Eliezer gave jewelry to Rivkah immediately after she drew water for him and his camels to drink, even before he asked about her identity, in reality he did not fully rely on his test, and even after she did what he had specified in his test, he did not take any action until he first clarified her identity. Only after Rivkah revealed that she was indeed part of Avrohom's family did he give her the jewelry, as this was the criterion that was given to him by Avrohom.

Regarding Yonason, Tosefos explains that he only devised his test as a means of motivating his armor-bearer, but in reality, it was meaningless in Yonason’s eyes, as his mind was made up to attack the Philistines regardless of how the garrisons responded to him, in which case he did not do anything superstitious and forbidden.

 The Ran (Chullin 95b), Kesef Mishneh (Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 11:4), and Maharal (Gur Aryeh Bereishis 24:14) disagree and maintain that Eliezer and Yonason did rely on their tests, but their actions were still not considered superstitious. They explain that if Rivkah came and drew water for Eliezer and his camels and he had not previously thought of such a test, he still would have recognized that Rivkah was such a tremendous ba’alas chesed (doer of kindness) that she was an appropriate match for Yitzchok.

 Similarly, even if Yonason had not designed his test prior to his interactions with the Philistines, he still would have come to the same conclusion. If the Philistines said, "Come up to us," this would indicate that they were afraid that the Jews had set a trap for them, and it would be a good time to attack because they were frightened and vulnerable. If, however, the Philistines told Yonason and his armor-bearer to stay where they were so that they could come down to investigate, this would reveal that they were not scared of them, in which case it would not be a good time to attack them.

 In other words, although Eliezer and Yonason did in fact utilize litmus tests, because their actions were logically justified and they would have come to the same conclusions even without the tests, their reliance upon them was not considered superstitious conduct and was therefore permissible. Accordingly, there would be no problem if a person says, "I will not go to the park if it is raining, but I will go if it is a beautiful sunny day," because what he is saying makes logical sense and is what he would do even if he had not spoken it out in advance.

According to this explanation, what does the Gemora mean when it says that any sorcery that is not like that of Eliezer and Yonason is not deemed sorcery? Although their tests were not considered irrational superstition and were therefore permissible, they were still fully reliant on the plans they designed. Therefore, the Gemora is teaching that even if a person does something that is truly superstitious, it is only forbidden if he completely relies upon his test in the manner that Eliezer and Yonason did, but it is permissible to take note of signs if one does not completely rely upon them in determining how to proceed.

 However, the Raavad (Hilchos Avodas Kochavim 11:4) vehemently disagrees with the Rambam and writes that if Yonason and Eliezer were alive in his times, they would have him severely punished for what he wrote about them, as G-d forbid that such righteous individuals would sin by engaging in sorcery, and Hashem would not have cooperated with their schemes if they were in fact forbidden. Although the Rambam was seemingly only quoting the Gemora, the Raavad maintains that his understanding of the Gemora is incorrect.

According to this opinion, the Meiri (Sanhedrin 68a) explains that the Gemora is not saying that Eliezer and Yonason’s actions were forbidden, but just the opposite, it is stating that the only form of sorcery that is allowed and upon which one may rely is a test that is spelled out in advance of the episode. Because Eliezer verbalized his condition prior to interacting with Rivkah and Yonason designed his plan before his encounter with the Philistines, they were permitted to rely on their tests.

According to the Raavad, if a person wishes to design a test and share it with Hashem with a request for guidance and clarity before entering a confusing situation, it would be permissible, just as Yonason and Eliezer did. Superstitious behavior is only forbidden when something spontaneous and unexpected occurs, and a person decides to rely on it as a Heavenly indication that he should continue with a project or abort it.

In Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 179:4), the Rema quotes both opinions, writing that some opinions forbid the use of any type of litmus test, while others permit them if they are spelled out in advance. However, he concludes by writing וההולך בתום חסד יסובבנו – a person who trusts in Hashem simply and wholeheartedly, without using tests to try to figure out what message Hashem is sending him, will surrounded by blessing and kindness.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. Rashi writes (23:1) that the Torah uses the expression שני חיי שרה – the years of Sorah’s life – to teach that her entire life was equally good. The Torah uses the same expression when relating the death of Yishmael (25:17) – שני חיי ישמעאל. As he spent a large portion of his life involved in terrible sins (see Rashi 21:9), how is this to be understood, as his entire life was clearly not equally good? (Daas Z’keinim)
2. Rashi writes (23:2) that the death of Sorah is juxtaposed to the binding of Yitzchok to teach that the shock and fear from hearing that her son was almost slaughtered was the cause of her death. How is it possible that the mitzvah of binding Yitzchok caused the death of Avrohom’s beloved wife when the Gemora in Pesachim (8b) teaches that those who perform mitzvos won’t be harmed in any way as a result of doing the mitzvah? (Taima D’Kra, M’rafsin Igri)
3. The Baal HaTurim writes (23:2) that the letter כ in the word ולבכותה (and Avrohom cried over Sorah) is written smaller than the other letters in order to teach that he only cried over her a small amount. Why didn’t Avrohom cry more over the loss of his beloved wife? (Baal HaTurim, Darkei Mussar, Kehillas Yitzchok)
4. Which three people resembled Avrohom? (Rashi 13:8, 25:19, Bereishis Rabbah 60:7)

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) The **Daas Z’keinim** answers that in the case of Yishmael, Rashi writes (25:9) that he did teshuvah for all of his sins, and Chazal teach that one who converts is considered to be reborn with no connection to his previous existence. As such, when Yishmael repented his sins, he was considered newly born with no sins on his record, and in this sense, all of his years were considered equally good just like Sorah. Alternatively, the verse regarding Sorah had already stated that she lived for 127 years, so there was no purpose to repeat the phrase “these are the years of Sorah” except for the purpose of deriving this lesson about her life. Regarding Yishmael, on the other hand, the phrase “these are the years of Yishmael” is written before stating his lifespan, and because it is not considered redundant, it is not intended to be interpreted in the same manner.

2) **Rav Chaim Kanievsky** explains that the intention of the Gemora is that performing a mitzvah won’t cause additional suffering. However, if a person’s natural time to die arrives and he is righteous, Hashem will cause him to die while doing a mitzvah. The Medrash teaches (Koheles Rabbah 3:22) that one who does a mitzvah right before his death is considered to have observed all of the mitzvos in the Torah. The **M’rafsin Igri** answers that although Hashem normally protects a person while he is doing a mitzvah, this principle was not applicable to the Akeidah, the entire purpose of which was to test Avrohom’s devotion to Hashem even in difficult circumstances. In this case, permission was given to the Satan to make the situation more difficult – even by showing Avrohom that his actions caused the death of his beloved wife – in order to magnify the trial and enable Avrohom to earn a greater reward.

3) The **Baal HaTurim** answers that they cried little either because she was already so old. Alternatively, the Gemora in Bava Kamma (93a) teaches that Sorah was punished for demanding (16:5) that Hashem judge her claim against Avrohom and died prematurely. Because she was considered partially responsible for her death, it was mourned with less intensity. The **Darkei Mussar** points out that Avrohom traveled three days to perform the Akeidah on Yom Kippur. By the time he returned home to bury and mourn Sorah, it was Erev Sukkos, so the mourning period was shortened to only one day. Alternatively, because Sorah left a righteous son to continue in her pious ways, she was considered on some level still alive, so the mourning was lessened. The **Kesef Nivchar** cites the Gemora in Moed Katan (27b), which teaches that one cries for the deceased for three days and mourns for seven. After traveling home for three days, only a few hours remained to cry. The **Kehillas Yitzchok** explains that hearing about the Akeidah caused Sorah’s death, and Avrohom didn’t want to cry excessively in a manner which could be interpreted by observers as regretting the Akeidah due to its consequences.

4) **Rashi** writes that the appearance of Lot and of Yitzchok was similar to that of Avrohom. The **Medrash** adds that Eliezer also looked like Avrohom, and for that reason, when he arrived at the house of Besuel and Lavan, he was initially mistaken for Avrohom.

© 2016 by Ozer Alport. To subscribe, send comments, or sponsor an issue, email oalport@optonline.net