

Rabbi's Column

I spent this past Shabbat at a different shul elsewhere. During one of the Divrei Torah (plural of D'var Torah = Torah talk) a particular story concerning Eliezer and Rivkah was mentioned. The point of the story in the context of the talk was that sometimes putting things off until the time seems right makes the action less a symbol of the emotional connectedness between human beings. However, there are other implications of the story, some of which are less kind to others.

The Torah text has Abraham give Eliezer the task of finding a wife for Isaac back in the old country where Abraham's family still lives. Eliezer arrives at the local well, designs a test for Isaac's potential wife, and immediately Rivkah arrives and passes the test by watering the 10 camels as well as Eliezer. This seems a quite reasonable test of a young woman's concern for others and upper body strength, both of which would be quite useful for Isaac's wife.

In the Rabbinic Midrash quoted at the D'var Torah, Rivkah is 3 years old when this happens. What Eliezer notices first is that the well waters rise to meet the girl, so that she doesn't have to lower the bucket to the water, she only has to bring the bucket to where the animals or people can drink from it. (which is probably hard enough, especially if you are 3 years old) and the water's actions were like neon signs for Eliezer, showing him that this was the right girl.

I am not going to discuss the modern implications of this story - I am sure all of you can think of plenty of ways that this Midrash colors everything else that happens for a couple of generations. My question is what are the implications of a betrothal story where the girl is three years old, and why tell this in this fashion here?

Putting this story in the best light: one issue that was quite important for several parents during the Roman Occupation was making sure that their daughters would be cared for if something happened to them. One way of doing this was to connect a daughter to another household through a betrothal. Jewish law allows for these betrothals to take place when the girl is as young as 3 years old. (Jewish law also allows the girl to void the betrothal when she comes of age - no legal contract is ever binding unless the party themselves agrees to it). Telling a story where one of the Matriarchs is 3 years old when she is betrothed could make this process more palatable.

A more worrisome implication of this story (which is what I had in mind in bringing it up in the first place): the Torah text has Eliezer doing something that makes sense and is quite laudable. He comes up with an idea of how to figure out who is the best match, and it has nothing to do with looks or simple strength. It could be that some of the Rabbis had a problem with somebody who was part of Abraham's household but not biologically related to him acting for the benefit of Isaac without explicit Divine intervention. As if somebody who works for us must have a hidden agenda that you have to control for, and can't actually be a person of integrity.

We often know why we tell particular stories about ourselves and others. What we remember and mention reinforces our particular view of reality and humanity. When we are certain others are not to be trusted, we remember and relate the times when people took advantage of our good nature. When we are certain people are worthy of trust, we remember and relate those stories where people justified

our opinion of them. One example which verifies our outlook is usually enough to entrench that outlook. Other example in our lives are usually considered mere exceptions, when they are remembered at all.

Unintended implications of the stories we tell ourselves exist. "I didn't mean it that way!" may be true, but does not remove the implication. Changing the way we tell the story sometimes can. At other times, the only thing we can do is continue to communicate with each other, and realize that is the story we tell can have hidden implications, the meanings we find in the stories others tell might not have been meant by them at all.

Multiple meanings of statements and events abound in every generation, and between generations. I am sure everyone can think of some recent events, decisions and statements to which the reactions have been varied.

On the other hand, when somebody clearly and simply threatens you, do not worry about finding a non-threatening implication of their statement. Take care of yourself. Likewise, when somebody says something positive or non-threatening to you, do not search out an implied threat - we do notice what we look for, so try to notice the good and protect yourselves from evil.