

# Family and/or Character

## How Does One Choose A Mate

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One of the most “unsung” heroes of the Bible has got to be Avraham's trusted right-hand man and servant, Eliezer of Damascus. The Torah devotes the entire chapter of Genesis 24 to his fulfillment of an oath, to take a wife for Isaac, from Avraham's distant family. This episode reveals a lot about strong moral values, and proper character. It especially reveals to us essential values what to look for when selecting a proper marriage partner. Eliezer is a role model for faithfulness, integrity and devotion. A review of the biblical record is a valuable study.

Genesis 24 records that after Sarah's death, Avraham recognizes that it is the right time for his promised, and chosen son Isaac, to take for himself a wife. Now remember, in ancient times (as in certain modern circles), marriages were arranged. People did not date, ever! Avraham was a wealthy and powerful man. He could have easily approached any one of his righteous friends, such as those who accompanied him into battle against those who stole Lot. Anyone of them would have been proud to have given one of their daughters to Isaac for a wife. Indeed, Avraham's servant Eliezer, although not Biblically mentioned, most likely was a married man with children of his own, most likely with a daughter possibly of marriageable age, and suitable for Isaac. Yet, as good and righteous as these men might have been, their integrity alone was not the deciding factor.

Character counts, for everything! However, as I pray we all know, character is not something that can be passed on genetically. Character is a personal choice. So, therefore, although Avraham's friends and servants were righteous men, and may very well have had righteous children, nevertheless, this alone was not the defining criteria for selecting a marriage partner. Character counts for everything, yes, when defining the individual. We will see that even Eliezer was guided by this moral standard when choosing Rivka for Isaac. Yet, for selecting a marriage partner, character alone is not enough.

Avraham entrusted Eliezer with a sacred mission to take a wife for Isaac from Avraham's own people, his extended family, his own blood. This criteria was the single most important one in Avraham's mind. Although Avraham for sure surrounded himself with righteous friends, nevertheless, they were not family. They were close as covenanted brothers could be, but, they did not share blood and history. This made all the difference for Avraham.

What is surprising here, is that in all due respect, Isaac was born in a foreign land, “not his own.” He was raised there and had never seen or known the homeland of his father. He had never met his father's family, and had no contact with, or relationship to, his father's culture other than through him and his mother. Isaac was the one essentially cut off from everything that Avraham had left behind and as the narrative relates, Avraham was defiantly adamant that Isaac never ever go back.

Nevertheless, when it came to finding a wife, Avraham knew “there was no place like home.” We have no scriptural evidence to suggest that it was G-d who told Avraham to select a wife for Isaac from his distant homeland and his estranged kinsmen. This decision seemed to belong to Avraham alone. We equally have no scriptural evidence of Avraham giving Eliezer any instructions as to how to pick a bride for Isaac. Avraham's only recorded criteria was bloodline. It was Eliezer, on his own account who prayed to G-d asking for a sign, signifying kindness, that enabled him to chose the right girl.

Eliezer's own integrity really comes out in this story. Not only was his only criteria for picking Isaac's bride that she express kindness, he also showed no concern for his personal honor. When he does arrive in Aram and meets Avraham's family, he does not put on pretenses declaring himself Avraham's friend, business partner or equal, on the contrary he is most forthright in identifying himself as Avraham's servant, this, in spite of the fact that he is traveling as a wealthy and powerful man.

The Biblical account here relates to us two important elements with regards to choosing marriage partners. While Avraham made covenants of peace and business with local righteous individuals, this criteria was not enough when it came time to choose a marriage partner for his son. For although these other men were worthy to be called men of covenant with Avraham, still, they were foreigners. Their cultures were different and in the days before there was such an idea called the melting pot society, people married amongst their own.

*In spite of modern day sentiments and sensitivities to racism and other prejudices, marrying amongst one's own still stands out to be a very wise and psychologically sound course of action. There is a lot to be said about building a marriage and home on identical values, expectations, morays and social outlooks. When all the basics of life are the same, this removes from marriage the greatest source of contention and strife. Individuals will always disagree on personal matters, but these are easy to be resolved because there is a shared acceptance of common values and understandings. This does not exist with two people who were raised in entirely different circumstances.*

True, people from any and every walk of life can come together, get married and live “happily ever after.” However, we know from reality that such success stories are few and far between. Those who come together from very different backgrounds, even when their marriages do survive still go through major periods of adjustment that may not be the most peaceful.

Avraham chose family. Eliezer chose character. When asking G-d's guidance, the only sign Eliezer sought was the sign of kindness. He did not ask about wealth, beauty, or any other external. Eliezer knew full well that what a man wants from a wife is a good heart. When he saw Rivka acting with kindness towards a stranger, a rare and unique trait, he recognized right away that this was the one. Only after he was so convinced, did he make inquiry as to the girl's identity, only then to discover that indeed she was the one.

How great a difference this is from what attracts a man to a woman these days. While physical attractiveness has always been a factor, still when one reads the famous description of a woman of valor recorded in Proverbs 31, one finds there no mention of waist size, bust size, or how good the gal looks in high heels or in a tight dress. Such characteristics are not part of the description of a woman of valor.

Now, a woman of good character does not have to be ugly, but she does not have to appear immoral either! A woman of valor is hard working, therefore, by nature she will be tone and fit, and not overweight. A woman of valor will also not be anorexic, harboring fears about her body image. The woman of valor is first and foremost a trustworthy, hard working partner who spares no efforts to get the job done and to get it done correctly. In a single act of random kindness, Eliezer was able to ascertain that Rivka contained all these traits.

After Eliezer recounts to Rivka's family his story and their acceptance of the marriage proposal, the cultural norm of the time was to wait for about a year and then send the bride off to live with her husband's family. Yet, Eliezer knew very well that Rivka's character was not shared by her family. Later Biblical accounts record all too well how Rivka's brother Laban turns out to be much less than a decent man when it comes to his dealings with Rivka's son, his nephew Jacob.

Eliezer saw a ripe juicy fruit ready to be picked. He feared that if it stayed on the vine much longer it could begin to rot. Therefore, as the narrative explains, he took Rivka immediately, and left. G-d had blessed his mission and there was no stopping him. Apparently, Rivka too recognized this, much to her credit and agreed with Eliezer, that against the norm, she was willing to leave right away. And so she did.

Eliezer's character comes through this episode shining like a star. Indeed, Avraham was wise to put his faith in this righteous man. The Biblical narrative does not record for us Eliezer's future. We do not know what happened to him or his progeny. But, it would be hard to imagine that a man of such high character and his descendants would have found for themselves any place other than with Avraham's growing family, the future children of Israel. Indeed, in the prophetic/Kabbalistic tradition much is taught about Eliezer's soul, but that is a lesson for another time and place.

The biblical narrative instead of being a boring repetition of what may appear to be superfluous facts is nothing of the sort. Eliezer's encounter with Rivka's family is full of subtle hints of practical advice of how one must proceed in delicate negotiations. Finding the right marriage partner, by focusing on the proper values is one thing,

making the situation work when there are so many variables looking to twist and manipulate things is another.

This is why Eliezer took the direct approach. He explained himself clearly, invoked the authority and grace of G-d and then waited for his answer, which as we see came from Rivka, and not her family. Rivka's family would have held out for further negotiations to bring themselves a greater financial reward from the House of Avraham. Eliezer's argument saying how this was from G-d and it would be considered wrong to delay it was certainly one with merit. Rivka's family got the message. They left the decision up to her, thinking, that as one of them, she would take their side and demand a time delay with all the future financial negotiations that would entail.

But true to her character, and against that of her relatives, Rivka did not agree to further shenanigans. A G-d fearing, woman of valor she was. She did the right thing, in the right way. She travels with Eliezer and becomes Isaac's wife. And Isaac is comforted for the lose of the only woman he has ever known and loved, his mother Sarah. Rivka was indeed a most fitting replacement for her mother in law, and maybe one of the greatest misfortunes of history is that these two great women never got a chance to ever meet face to face.

So finding a mate can be as easy for anyone today even as it was for Eliezer to find Rivka for Isaac. The search itself is not the hard part, the hard part is first setting the proper criteria for the search.

There are a lot of potential mates out there for single people, with almost 99.9% of them not being a good match. What one has to do is to focus on not what one does not want, but rather on what one does want. One should not compromise. One should not date around. One should not seek to get involved with someone of a different background, culture, religion or of divergent values. While relationships bridging these gaps can be made to work, still, the amount of effort required for them is much more than simply finding someone just like you and making it work from the beginning based on almost all compatible issues.

*Most of all, even when we do find someone similar to ourselves and our backgrounds, we must still always place emphasis on the most important thing and this is one's character. One's personal code of honor, ethics and honesty makes all the difference in the world. And if on top of that one expresses kindness as a natural trait, well then, one has truly found a gem. This is true of both men and women.*

Avraham and Eliezer serve together as great role models of wisdom, discernment and clarity as to what to look for and what to accept in a mate. Avraham's praise is well renown, Eliezer's is not. I believe we all owe him a lot for his splendid role model and for his being one of the many unsung heroes of the Bible.