To Each, A Perfect Match

by

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We think *we* understand pressure.

We think we know pressure when we come up to bat in the bottom of the last inning, two outs and runners in scoring position; when we sit in classrooms, our palms sweating, waiting to take an exam; when we argue in courtrooms and make investment decisions; when we move our families from one community to another… the list goes on and on. There are so many times when we have to get it *right*.

We feel pressure to *succeed*. Yet we don’t realize that our “success” often depends on knowing who we are and what we can accomplish; that when we bat in the bottom of the ninth our task is very different if we are a utility player than if are “Babe Ruth”.

Not everyone’s success is defined by hitting a home run. Some are successful by simply keeping the rally going!

If we feel pressure in our lives, imagine the pressure Eliezer felt when he was sent out by Avraham to find a wife for his beloved son, Yitzchak! The challenge of finding the right life mate might be the single, most overwhelming task there is. In Jewish tradition marriage is a holy union, one that God takes special delight in. Indeed, each of us has a soul mate that God has chosen for us. To find the *right* one… oh, now *that* is pressure. Finding that special person and engaging in the act of bravery necessary to *make the connection* is not for the weak of heart! Our perfect match might cross our path a hundred times a day. Or she may happen to be visiting family and crosses our path but once.

Our beloved may be *right there in front of us,* but we do not see her.

With so many opportunities *to miss* our perfect match the risk of failure is too great to leave to chance; the great personal relationship drama of our lives is too essential to trust our transitory passions; the sudden lightness in our hearts or our own fleeting hopes and dreams.

So, it is for us now, so it was when Avraham turned to his trusted servant to find a match for Yitzchak.

After the early promise of becoming the father of our great nation, Avraham waited a long lifetime for the privilege of having a son. Now, in his later years, he knew that the promise of that nation to be realized, Yitzchak’s life partner would have to be committed to the ideals Avraham and Sarah had instilled in Yitzchak.  But how could such a partner be found?

In Abraham’s eyes, there could be no *Shadchan* as trustworthy as Eliezer. So, Avraham instructed him where to go and the qualities to seek. Prepared to fulfill his master’s directive, he paused to ask what might seem to us to be a logical question, “Perhaps (*ulai*) the woman will not go after me?”  What if, he feared, he was successful in finding Yitzchak’s match, *but she refused to return with* him?

*Ulai*!

Imagine! The future of the Jewish people rested upon this “perhaps”!

Rashi cites Midrash which focuses on the spelling of *ulai* (*alef, lamed, yud*) and notes those same letters, with a simple vowel change, could also be read as *eilai* – “**to** me”. What could be the consequence of this “minor” change? A great deal, as it turns out. Our tradition teaches that Torah is perfect and complete, each letter and space that is there must be there; every letter and space that is not there, should not be there. Therefore, any change in reading must teach deep lessons about the narrative, about Eliezer, and about ourselves!

So it is that the Midrash suggests that even as Avraham sought to find a match for Yitzchak, Eliezer was thinking of himself. As it happened, he had his own daughter he was anxious to “marry off” and by his question, his *ulai*, he was attempting to draw Avraham’s attention to *his* family. “Why,” he was asking, “send me out on this long trek to find a *shiduch*? Look, look at me (*elai*).  *I* have a daughter for Yitzchak to marry!”

Who was this Eliezer, who suddenly imagined himself to be on a par with his master, capable of imaging himself as Yitzchak’s father-in-law? This is not the question asked by an innocent, honest *shadchan*. Quite the opposite. His *ulai* betrayed his true intent.

Often, it is just such a “slip” that gives away our deepest thoughts and intent.

*Ulai*.

The Gaon of Vilna explains that there are two words in Hebrew both meaning “perhaps” – *ulai* and *pen*. Although both mean “perhaps” there is an important distinction between the two. When one uses the term *pen*, he is suggesting that he hopes that the possibility spoken about *does not take place*, as in God’s warning against idolatry – *hishamru la’chem* ***pen*** *yifte le’vavchem* (Beware, lest your hearts will become seduced.) It is clear that God hopes that we not go astray and follow idolatry – *pen*.

However, when one *hopes and anticipates* that the option he mentions should occur, he uses the word *ulai*, as when Avraham beseeched God not to destroy Sodom, “*Ulai* – perhaps there are fifty righteous people…”

And that is why Chazal were critical of Eliezer’s use of the term and in it discerned his true intent.  He did not use the word *pen*. Instead, by using the word *ulai*, we learn that *he did not want* the woman to follow him. Instead, he hoped that by her *not* following, the result would be that Avraham would have no option but to marry Yitzchak to Eliezer’s daughter!

*Ulai*.

Eliezer using this term lays bare his true intent in his task, *even though* he was Avraham’s most trustworthy servant. Like the utility player deluded into thinking he was Babe Ruth, the situation clouded Eliezer’s thinking and made him think he was more than he was; that he should swing for further fences.

Eliezer’s behavior teaches us many things, the most important that we need to know who we are and to understand our place. Indeed, the *S’fas Emes* (Chayei Sarah 5639) cites a Midrash that states “Who is wise? Someone who knows his place.’  Further, “knowing one’s place” is one of the forty-eight ways by which Torah is acquired (Avos 6:5)

A qualified and trusted servant like Eliezer was required to know and accept who he was and who he was not.  Without accepting and embracing his own gifts, Eliezer could not be successful in his task. How much more true is this lesson for us!

Eliezer lost sight of the difference between himself, the faithful servant, and Avraham, his master, the righteous, wise teacher and leader. In his confused thinking, *ulai* became *elai*.

We have all been Eliezer. We have all fantasized that *we* would be the one to hit the home run, to close the deal, to make the final argument. In doing so, we fail to acknowledge that our coworkers, friends, and spouses often possess talents and abilities that we do not.

That realization is sometimes hard to accept. Yet our success often depends on that realization; it often depends on knowing when to stand back and let another lead!

Our desire to be the one to “carry the day” is not wickedness, no more than Eliezer was being devious in this narrative. As Reb Yitzchak of Vurka suggests, as long as Eliezer was in Avraham’s company it never would have occurred to him to consider a marriage between his daughter and Yitzchak. It was only when sitting in the company of Bethuel and Lavan that he thought to himself, “Hmm. I am good enough for these people; I am certainly worthy of such a *shiduch*…” and began to imagine his own daughter married to Isaac.

So too we, in the presence of those who might sway our thinking, have our minds play tricks. It is when we are away from the community of those we can trust to keep us on the straight and narrow that we rationalize and compromise and find ourselves making excuses for why things *should* be the way *we’d* like rather than the way God intends!

If the good and trustworthy Eliezer could be swayed in his thinking when in the presence of so much license and power how much more might we be vulnerable to twisted logic and devious thinking?

The ways of man are wily. The ways of God are true.

When God determines a match “made in heaven”, no trickery of man can stand in the way.