



Eliezer's "Sign"
By David Silverberg

Parashat Chayei-Sara presents a detailed narrative of the selection of a wife for Yitzchak, a task that Avraham (Yitzchak's father) assigns to his trusted servant, generally identified as Eliezer. (The Torah does not actually identify the servant's name in this parasha, though it is assumed that the Torah refers to Eliezer, whom Avraham mentions earlier, in Bereishit 15:2.) Eliezer arrives at the well of Aram Naharayim and declares to God the method by which he will choose a suitable match for Yitzchak:

Behold, I am positioned near the well of water, as the townspeople's daughters come to draw water. Now the girl to whom I shall say, "Please lower your pitcher so that I may drink," and she shall say, "Drink, and I shall give your camels to drink, as well" – she is the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Yitzchak.

(24:13-14)

Eliezer thus designs a system whereby he will determine God's choice on the basis of a "sign": whichever girl responds to his request by offering water to both him and his camels is destined to marry Yitzchak. Eliezer's sign indeed proves effective, as Rivka, Avraham's grandniece and a most worthy bride for Yitzchak, approaches the well and responds to Eliezer's request by offering water even to his camels.

Maimonides addresses the propriety of Eliezer's system amidst his discussion in *Mishneh Torah* of the prohibition against *nichush*, superstition. The Torah introduces this prohibition in the Book of Vayikra (19:26 – "*lo tenachashu*"), and Maimonides includes it in his listing of the commandments (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot – lo ta'aseh* 33). In *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Avodat Kokhavim 11:4), Maimonides, based on the Talmud (Masekhet Sanhedrin 65b), brings a number of examples of *nichush* forbidden by the Torah:

What is "superstition"? Such as those who say, "Since my bread fell from my mouth" – or "My stick fell from my hand" – "I am not going to such-and-such place today, for if I go, I will not achieve my goal"; "Since a jackal passed to my right, I am not leaving the door of my house today, for if I leave, an unscrupulous person will come upon me." Similarly, those who hear the chirping of a bird and say, "This will happen" or "This will not happen"; "It is good to do such-and-such thing" or "It is not good to do such-and-such thing"...

After providing these and other examples of forbidden superstition, Maimonides proceeds to define this category in general terms:

Similarly, whoever makes for himself signs – "If such-and-such will happen to me, I will do such-and-such thing, and if it does not happen, then I will not" – like Avraham's servant, Eliezer, and all similar types of things – it is all forbidden, and whoever performs an action because of one of these things is flogged.

At first glance, Maimonides appears to view Eliezer's "sign" as an example of *nichush*, precisely the type of superstition forbidden by the Torah. Since he selected a mate for Yitzchak based purely on

this sign, and not as a result of careful, rational thinking and consideration, his system constitutes *nichush*, comparable to one who reaches decisions based on arbitrary factors such as whether his cane slipped out of his hand or the rhythm of a bird's chirping.

This is indeed the implication of the Gemara, in Masekhet Chulin (95b), which tells that the *Amora* Rav arrived at the dock to cross the river, and just at that moment a ferry arrived. He remarked that when the transport greets a traveler in this fashion, it foretells good tidings for him. The Gemara explains that such a remark did not constitute a violation of *nichush*, because, as Rav himself commented on a different occasion, "Any superstition that is not like the superstition of Avraham's servant, Eliezer, or of Shaul's son, Yonatan, is not superstition." As Rashi explains, both Eliezer and Yonatan (the prince of Israel who determined whether or not to launch an offensive based on the Philistines' response to his challenge – Shemuel I 14:9) decided upon a particular course of action based on their stipulated sign. This form of *nichush*, therefore, is forbidden, as it resembles the examples of superstitious decision-making enumerated by Maimonides. Rav, however, did not alter his plans based on the coincidental arrival of his transport. He merely anticipated a successful or joyous trip on the basis of this good fortune, and "superstition" of this nature, which does not affect one's practical course of action, is permissible. Indeed, Maimonides (Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:5) rules explicitly that one does not violate *nichush* by attributing success to some mystical source of blessing, such as a new home or new spouse, or to anticipating good fortune on the basis of some perceived sign.

In any event, both the Gemara in Masekhet Chulin and Maimonides very strongly imply that Eliezer acted incorrectly by choosing Yitzchak's wife on the basis of his sign.

The Ra'avad's Position

The Ra'avad, in his *hasagot* (critique) of *Mishneh Torah*, emphatically rejects this position, accusing Maimonides of misreading the aforementioned passage in Masekhet Chulin. According to the Ra'avad, *nichush* of the sort practiced by Eliezer and Yonatan is permissible. When Rav determined that specifically signs such as these constitute *nichush*, he meant not that they are therefore forbidden, but rather to the contrary, that only upon these forms of *nichush* is it worthwhile for someone to rely.

The Ra'avad does not specify which particular feature of these instances of *nichush* lends them their significance, or explain why this feature helps avoid the prohibition against superstition. He most likely refers to the position expressed by Rabbi Menachem Meiri, in his commentary to Masekhet Sanhedrin (68a), as well as by the Radak, in his commentary to the Book of Shemuel I (14:9). These writers explain that *nichush* is a valid means of charting one's course only if the individual himself establishes the terms ahead of time. The examples mentioned by Maimonides involve incidents such as the falling of one's bread and an encounter with a jackal, which superstitious movements invested with universal significance. Following these doctrines assuredly violates the prohibition of *nichush*, insofar as they presume inherent, "spiritual" meaning within these inconsequential events. However, the Meiri and Radak contend, if an individual himself establishes a certain sign on the basis of which he will determine a course of action, he may, indeed, act in accordance with the outcome. It is to this distinction, they claim, that Rav refers when he comments, "Any superstition that is not like the superstition of Avraham's servant, Eliezer, or of Shaul's son, Yonatan, is not superstition." Only in situations such as those of Eliezer and Yonatan, where the individual himself establishes the sign, does the sign have validity.

(As noted by many writers, the Ra'avad's reading of the passage in Masekhet Chulin does not seem to accommodate the context, which, as mentioned, deals with Rav's prediction of a successful trip based on the sudden arrival of his ferry. We refer readers to the Radak's commentary to Shemuel I 14:9, where he explains the Gemara based on the Ra'avad's reading.)

Maimonides, of course, disagrees, not only denying the validity of such signs, but viewing them as a Torah prohibition, where one determines his course of action based on the sign's outcome.

The Ra'avad cites no concrete proof against Maimonides' view, and merely exclaims, "How did he [Maimonides] accuse *tzadikim* [righteous men] like they of this sin? If they were alive, they would come before him with fiery discs [meaning, they would excommunicate him]." The Ra'avad's evidence against Maimonides' position is the stature of piety traditionally ascribed to these two Biblical personalities, Eliezer and Yonatan. It is inconceivable, the Ra'avad contends, that men of such stature would violate the grave transgression of *nichush*; we must therefore conclude that signs of this nature, where the individual himself establishes the terms, are permissible.

To the Ra'avad's challenge we might add yet another question: why does Maimonides make no mention of Yonatan in this passage? Yonatan's decision to attack the Philistine camp based on their response to his invitation to conflict seems to sufficiently resemble the sign designed by Eliezer to warrant its inclusion in Maimonides' discussion. After all, the Gemara itself associates both incidents, speaking of them as the two prototypes of *nichush*. Why does Maimonides distinguish between the two cases, by referring only to Eliezer's system as an instance of *nichush*?

***Nichush* and Gentiles**

One approach to explain Maimonides' position, suggested by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his *Kesef Mishneh*, and emphatically endorsed by Rabbi Yosef Kapach in his commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, claims that Eliezer was not bound by the prohibition of *nichush*. Choosing a bride for Yitzchak based on the system he devised indeed constitutes *nichush*, but as a gentile, Eliezer was not included in this prohibition. The *Kesef Mishneh* refers us to a view recorded in Masekhet Sanhedrin (56b) that applies the seemingly related prohibition of *kishuf* – witchcraft – to gentiles. But, as the *Kesef Mishneh* notes, Maimonides makes no mention of *kishuf* in his presentation of the seven Noachide laws binding upon all mankind (in Hilkhoh Melakhim 9:1), so he presumably did not accept the position recorded there in Sanhedrin. Accordingly, gentiles are not bound by the prohibitions against sorcery and superstition, and it should therefore not surprise us that Eliezer, Avraham's gentile servant, resorted to such practices. Thus, Maimonides justifiably invokes Eliezer's tactic as an example of *nichush*, but this reference does not implicate Avraham's pious servant in any misconduct, since he was not bound by this prohibition.

Rabbi Kapach extends this theory even further, claiming that all views would restrict the *nichush* prohibition to Jews. As mentioned, the Gemara in Sanhedrin includes gentiles under the prohibition of *kishuf* – witchcraft – and the *Kesef Mishneh* assumes that this view would likewise include non-Jews in the prohibition of *nichush*. Rabbi Kapach, however, disagrees, and distinguishes between witchcraft and superstition. Sorcery and witchcraft, as Maimonides discusses at length in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:37), are very directly associated with idolatry. Naturally, then, the prohibition against idolatry, which applies to all mankind, includes as well a ban against practices of witchcraft. But superstitious signs, Rabbi Kapach argues, do not involve pagan beliefs or rituals, and they are thus not included under the Noachide ban on idolatry. Therefore, even the view in Masekhet Sanhedrin that extends the *kishuf* prohibition to gentiles, would not include gentiles under the prohibition of *nichush*, and hence Eliezer was justified in resorting to *nichush* as he searched for a bride for Yitzchak. For a Jew, however, such means of selection would be outright forbidden.

Of course, this approach does not resolve the instance of Yonatan, a full-fledged Jew generally seen as a pious Torah-observer. How could he have so flagrantly violated the prohibition against superstition?

Both the *Kesef Mishneh* and Rabbi Kapach speculate that Maimonides drew a distinction between the instance of Yonatan and that of Eliezer. The *Kesef Mishneh* suggests that Yonatan had already decided to launch the offensive, and initiated this "sign" only for the purpose of encouraging his otherwise ambivalent attendant to join him in this daring campaign. Rabbi Kapach, on the other hand, suggests that Yonatan's sign did not involve superstition at all. As the verses describe, he announced that if the Philistine warriors would respond to his provocation by descending towards

him, he would retreat, whereas if they would dare him to approach their camp, he would proceed with the offensive. Many writers explained that this "sign" worked not as a superstitious oracle, but rather as a reasonable means of determining the courage and confidence of the enemy combatants. Therefore, Yonatan's "sign" did not violate the *nichush* prohibition at all.

Needless to say, this leaves unanswered the question of why the Gemara speaks of the situations of both Eliezer and Yonatan as instances of *nichush*, if, in truth, Yonatan did not engage in *nichush* at all. To resolve this difficulty, the *Kesef Mishneh* raises the possibility that Maimonides had before him a variant text of the Talmud, which made no mention of Yonatan. Rabbi Kapach, by contrast, suggests that the Gemara refers as well to Yonatan's sign only because of its superficial resemblance to superstition, whereas in reality, it involves no *nichush* at all.

To summarize this approach, it asserts that Eliezer indeed engaged in *nichush* by selecting a suitable match for Yitzchak based on the girl's response to his request for water, but as a gentile, he was permitted to resort to measures involving *nichush*. Yonatan, by contrast, did not violate *nichush* by establishing a sign to determine his course of action, since he did so either to boost the confidence of his reluctant attendant, or to assess the courage of the enemy.

Rereading Maimonides

A second approach, taken by many writers in several different variations, rereads Maimonides' comments, such that it does not consider Eliezer's tactic an example of *nichush*. When Maimonides writes that making signs "like Avraham's servant, Eliezer" constitutes *nichush*, he means that one violates this prohibition by acting decidedly on the basis of a sign, as Eliezer did, but not that Eliezer himself violated this prohibition. Other factors are necessary to render a given "sign" a violation of *nichush*, and in Eliezer's case, not all these factors were present. Thus, according to this approach, Maimonides invokes the example of Eliezer only to demonstrate the general type of system forbidden by the *nichush* prohibition; however, Eliezer's specific case did not constitute a violation of *nichush*.

Various suggestions have been made to explain why the circumstances in Eliezer's case disqualify it as an example of *nichush*. Most intuitively, perhaps, as suggested by the Ran (Rabbenu Nissim of Gerona, 14th century, Spain) in his commentary to Masekhet Chulin and his *Derashot Ha-Ran* (chapter 12), *nichush* entails irrationally hinging a given course of action on an intrinsically unrelated event. The dropping of one's cane obviously yields no effect on one's success at work that day, just as the chirping of birds sheds no light on the future dividends of a given transaction. Eliezer's sign, however, was intended to determine the extent of the prospective girl's generosity and selflessness, critically important qualities for a daughter-in-law of Avraham. Since a strong, rational connection exists between the sign and the action dictated by its outcome, it did not violate the prohibition of *nichush*.

Another, common explanation for why Eliezer did not transgress *nichush* is suggested by Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, in his commentary to Vayikra 19:26. The Malbim writes that Eliezer did not afford inherent significance to the sign as an independent indicator of the most auspicious course of action to take. Rather, he trusted that in Avraham's merit, God will bring him the suitable girl through this system. Eliezer says explicitly, "Now the girl to whom I shall say, "Please lower your pitcher so that I may drink," and she shall say, "Drink, and I shall give your camels to drink, as well" – she is the one **whom You have decreed for Your servant Yitzchak.**" Eliezer employs this system not out of belief in some mystical power, but rather as a means of determining whom the Almighty has chosen as Yitzchak's wife. Thus, his sign was not a superstitious method of reaching a decision, but rather a request that God assist him by providing him with the suitable girl through this system. A similar explanation (albeit in slight variation) is offered by Rav Yoel Sirkis, in his *Bayit Chadash* (classic commentary to the Tur, *Yoreh Dei'a* 179).

Interestingly, Rabbi Menachem Karkovsky, in his *Avodat Ha-melekh* (a commentary to the *Mada* section of *Mishneh Torah*), suggests that Maimonides himself actually alludes to this

distinction. In introducing the prohibition of *nichush*, Maimonides writes, "*Ein menachashin ke-ovedei kokhavim*" – "One may not make superstitious predictions **like the idolaters.**" Maimonides very clearly defines *nichush* as superstitious practices prevalent among the pagans. This definition, Rabbi Karkovsky suggests, would presumably exclude signs like those of Eliezer, which one devises as a means of determining the Almighty's will. Of course, such a system would be valid only when employed by a person of high enough stature for God to respond to through this method. Eliezer, as embarking on a mission assigned to him by Avraham, assumed – reasonably enough – that God would indeed respond favorably, which, of course, He did. But in any event, a method of this type very clearly differs from the superstitious practices of the pagans, who afforded intrinsic, mystical significance and power to their signs, and it therefore does not fall under the rubric of *nichush*.

We might add yet another possible reason why Eliezer's system did not violate *nichush*. Rabbi Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his Biblical commentary *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, cites a fascinating approach to understanding Eliezer's motive in devising this sign. When Avraham instructed his servant to travel to his (Avraham's) homeland to find a wife for Yitzchak, Eliezer asked, "Perhaps the woman will not agree to follow me to this land?" (24:5). Eliezer was understandably concerned that the suitable girl will refuse to travel to a distant land to marry Yitzchak. This concern is perhaps what bred the anxiety he expresses to God as he stood near the well of Aram Naharayim. How would he convince the family of a prospective bride that they should allow their daughter and sister to follow him to Canaan? He therefore devised this system where God would intervene to prove to the family that this match was preordained. Sure enough, after Eliezer tells Rivka's family of the entire incident – the sign he established, and its immediate response through the sudden arrival of Rivka – they declare, "*Mei-Hashem yatza ha-davar*" – "This matter has come from the Lord" (24:50), and immediately consent to the marriage.

If so, then we can easily explain Maimonides' comments concerning Eliezer's sign. In and of itself, the sign indeed constitutes a violation of *nichush*. However, Eliezer resorted to this method not to absolve himself of the responsibility of judging the prospective girl's credentials, but rather as a means of persuading her superstitious family. Therefore, although the sign itself qualifies as *nichush*, as Maimonides indicates, Eliezer did not transgress this violation.

Summary

Maimonides refers to Eliezer's sign as an example of forbidden *nichush*, seemingly indicating that Eliezer – generally portrayed by the Rabbis as a saintly man – was in violation of this prohibition. Two general approaches have been taken by later scholars to reconcile Maimonides' comments with Eliezer's presumed piety. Firstly, he may have, indeed, committed *nichush*, but as a gentile, he was not bound by the prohibition. According to the second approach, Eliezer in fact did not commit *nichush*, and Maimonides enlists this incident as an example only because of its external resemblance to *nichush*, in that Eliezer decided upon a course of action on the basis of the outcome of a certain event. In truth, however, Eliezer's sign did not involve *nichush*, either because Rivka's response to his request for water is logically connected to her suitability as Yitzchak's bride, or because Eliezer established this sign as a means of determining God's choice, not as a magical indicator of the correct course of action. Alternatively, we suggested that Eliezer conducted this system not for his own sake, but rather as a means of persuading the prospective bride's otherwise ambivalent family to allow her to relocate in Canaan to marry Yitzchak.