



Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the story of Avraham's servant, commonly identified as Eliezer, who is sent to find a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham's brother's family in Charan. Eliezer offers a prayer to God as he approaches the city, asking for assistance and establishing the terms by which he will choose a suitable mate for his master's wife. He would approach a well and ask one of the townswomen for some water to drink. The girl who responds favorably and offers water even to his camels would be the girl destined to marry Yitzchak.

Maimonides makes reference to this incident in Hilkhos Avodat Kokhavim (4:11), invoking Eliezer's tactic as an example of the prohibition of *nichush*, superstition. It is forbidden, Maimonides writes, to decide upon a course of action based on a certain occurrence. Making "signs" for oneself, by saying, "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," is, in Maimonides' view, forbidden, and he specifically mentions the example of Eliezer's "sign."

The Ra'avad and others disagreed with Maimonides' ruling, noting the famous Rabbinic tradition avowing Eliezer's piety. Is it possible, they ask, that a righteous man such as Eliezer, whom the Midrash describes as a man who "drew from the teaching of his master [Avraham] and poured it for others," could violate this grave transgression?

Numerous answers have been offered in defense of Maimonides' view. Most famously, perhaps, the Ran, in his collection of *derashot* (*derasha* 12), explains that in truth, Maimonides did not disapprove of Eliezer's sign. Maimonides forbids only signs that have no logical relationship to the decision at hand. For example, Maimonides mentions in this passage superstitious beliefs that one should not leave his home if a jackal passed to his right, and one should not engage in his profession on a day when a piece of bread slips from his mouth. Eliezer, however, hinged his decision on an inherently logical indicator, namely, the girl's quality of *chesed*. He searched for a woman of kindness and generosity and therefore decided he would select a woman who graciously offered far more water than he requested. Maimonides pointed to Eliezer's "sign" as an example of forbidden superstition only in the respect that he determined his course of action based on a certain outcome. Generally, such a tactic would be forbidden, but in this instance it was permissible due to the logical connection between the event in question and the decision rendered as a result.

This distinction between the two different kinds of *nichush* helps clarify the concept underlying this prohibition according to Maimonides. People are to reach decisions in life based on sound reasoning and careful calculation. When a person makes a decision based on arbitrary events, he in effect shirks his personal responsibility for his choices. Rather than thinking through the situation to decide upon a course of action, he resorts to random, coin-flip tactics that do not necessarily yield the most desirable result. Superstition strips the human being of his most vital faculty – his intellect – and he thus loses his ability to control his own destiny. Maimonides therefore allows determining one's course of actions based only on logically sound decision-making, such as in the case of Eliezer, and not on random, superstitious "signs."