

Parashat Toldot, 5775, 2014:

The Greatness of the Jewish Woman

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

How many of you have heard of the TV sitcom entitled “Father Knows Best?” For those of you who have not, *Wikipedia* describes the show in this fashion:

Father Knows Best was an American radio and television sitcom of the 1950s and 1960s, portrayed an idealized vision of middle class American life of the era. It was created by writer Ed James... While the show is often regarded as an example of the conservative and paternalistic nature of American family life in the 1950s, it is also cited as an overly rosy portrayal of American family life.

Like most shows of the time, all problems were relatively easily solved. In this case, a close to all-knowing father was at once oracle and hero – reflective of the fantasy families portrayed on the black and white television screen.

As Jews, however, we have two genuine examples within the period of the *Avot* and *Emahot* (Patriarchs and Matriarchs) wherein mother, rather than father, knew best. The first example is Sarah and her treatment of Hagar and Yishmael. *Sarah Emanu* (Our mother Sarah, the Matriarch) recognized the dangerous behavior traits and actions of which Yishmael was capable. She, therefore, saw him as a totally negative influence on her son Yitzhak and demanded his expulsion from her home. As a result, the Torah states: “And Sarah said to Abraham: ‘Drive out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 21:9-10, this,

and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Blinded by his love for Yishmael, Avraham demurred from fulfilling Sarah's request. Therefore, G-d directly interceded and insisted that he comply with her justifiable demand: "And G-d said to Abraham, 'Be not displeased concerning the lad and concerning your handmaid; whatever Sarah tells you, hearken to her voice, for in Isaac will be called your seed.'" (21:12)

The stamp of approval for Sarah's seemingly heartless actions was given by no less than *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He). Avraham's judgment was, quite simply, wrong whereas Sarah had the deeper vision and understanding that was necessary to guarantee the future of the Jewish people. As Rashi (1040-1105) notes on the words "*sh'ma b'kolah*" ("hearken to her voice"): "We learn from here that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy. — [*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 1:1, *Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot* 1]" Perhaps this was a direct outgrowth of what *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) taught us in *Talmud Bavli, Masechet Niddah* 45b: "*Ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu* gave an extra portion of understanding (*'binah yitarah'*) to women more so than to men."

Chazal coined a well-known phrase to describe the behaviors of earlier generations that foreshadow those of the future: "*ma'aseh Avot siman l'banim.*" Our *parasha* contains two stellar example of this principle in regards to *Rivka Emanu* (our Matriarch, Rivka):

And Rebecca said to Jacob her son, saying, "Behold I have heard your father speaking to Esau your brother, saying, 'Bring me game and make me tasty foods, and I will eat, and I will bless you before the Lord before my death.' And now my son, hearken to my voice ("*sh'ma b'koli*"), to what I am commanding you." (*Sefer Bereishit* 27:6-8)

In this first case, Rivka guided Yaakov in the usurpation of the *bracha* Yitzhak was poised to bestow upon Eisav. She knew full well that this blessing would change Jewish

history for evermore. She, therefore, trained innocent Yaakov (*ish taam yosheiv ohelim*) to beguile his father in order that he, and none other, would be the recipient of this G-d-inspired benediction. To achieve this goal, she invoked the phrase “*sh’ma b’koli*,” knowing beforehand that this was precisely what Yaakov would do. When Yaakov received this blessing, Rivka had effectively guaranteed his, and his children’s spiritual future, for all generations to come.

The second instance of “*sh’ma b’koli*” that appears in our *parasha* in reference to Rivka concerns Yaakov’s physical salvation. Rivka became aware of Eisav’s desire to murder Yaakov, and urged: “And now, my son, hearken to my voice, and arise, flee to my brother Laban, to Haran. And you shall dwell with him for a few days until your brother’s wrath has subsided.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 27:43-44) Once again, it is Rivka, the mother, rather than Yitzhak, the father, who steps forward and saves her beloved son from an all but certain death.

The greatness of the Jewish woman has by no means been limited to the *Emahot*; rather, it is manifest on an ongoing basis. In fact, it is a fundamental facet of what we call *Massorah* (the combined body of Torah knowledge and behavior handed down from generation to generation). My rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), formulated this idea in the following manner:

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Massorah and one Massorah community; the community of the fathers. It is not true. We have two massorot, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* – the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers...What kind of a Torah does the mother pass on? I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role of the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw upon my own experiences.

At this point we are privy to the Rav's personal reminiscences of his beloved mother:

I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I "happened" to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use an halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked *me-inyana de-yoma* [about the halakhic aspects of a particular holy day]. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

What, however, was the essence of that which the Rav learned from his mother? What gift did she give him that changed his being and perception of the world? As he states in his unique and unparalleled manner:

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne," Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, 1978, Vol. 17, number 2, pages 76-77)

For the Rav, the great scion of the Brisker Talmudic tradition, the most valuable of life's lessons was not learned from the Gemara or the Rambam, or even at the feet of his illustrious father and grandfather. Instead, "the most important thing in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders," was a lesson imparted to him through the love and devotion of his mother.

Shabbat Shalom

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