

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5771, 2010:

Of Mothers and Massorah (Tradition)

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* begins with the death of *Sarah Imeinu* (our mother Sarah), the first of the great matriarchs of our people: “And Sarah died in Kiriath Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:2, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). Throughout history, the names of people and places have conveyed meaning. By definition, this means that names are not arbitrary, but purposeful in nature. If this is the case in general, it is certainly true in reference to the names of people and places in the *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible). Little wonder then, that *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) focused upon understanding the meaning of “Kiriath Arba” which literally translates as the “City of the Four.” Naturally, we must ask: “Who were ‘the Four?’”

As with most questions of this nature, the best place to begin our journey of understanding is with Rashi (1040-11045), the greatest of all Torah commentators. He suggests two very different possibilities for the name “Kiriath Arba”:

in KiriathArba: literally the city of the four. So named because of the four giants who were there: Ahiman, Sheshai, Talmai, and their father (*Bereishit Rabbah* 58:4 from *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:22). Another explanation: Because of the four couples that were buried there, man and wife: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah (*Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 20).

Rashi's first explanation is based upon the verse in *Sefer Bamidbar* 13:22 that describes the initial stages of the travels of the *Meraglim* (the Spies): "They went up in, the south, and he came to Hebron, and there were Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the descendants of the giant. Now Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan of Egypt." In this instance, *Bereishit Rabbah* adds the father of the three explicitly mentioned giants to complete the number four.

Rashi's second explanation refers to the four couples buried within the Cave of the Patriarchs (*Maarat Hamachpelah*) that is located in Kiriath Arba. As noted in the above found translation, one of the sources for this interpretation is the midrashic work entitled *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*. A direct parallel is found, as well, in *Talmud Bavli, Eruvin* 53a: "Rabbi Yitzchak said: '[This name refers to] the city of the four couples, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.'" (Translation my own)

A very intriguing version of the "Couples" Midrash is found in the aforementioned passage in *Bereishit Rabbah*:

Another explanation: "Kiriath Arba" – There are buried therein the four righteous ones who are the Patriarchs of the world: *Adam Harishon* (Adam the first man), Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Another explanation: The four Matriarchs are buried therein: Chava (Eve) and Sarah and Rivka and Leah. (Translation my own)

The difference in formulation between *Bereishit Rabbah*'s rendition and the other versions of the Midrash noted above is nothing less than striking. In the prior instances, the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and *Imahot* (Matriarchs) are presented as couples. In this case, however, they are presented as individuals. I believe the Midrash is conveying a very significant and fundamental message by this change: As great as the *Avot* and *Imahot* were as couples they continued to maintain their own singular identities and make their

own unique contributions to the world. Moreover, both the *Avot* and the *Imahot* shaped the nature and future of Judaism and the Jewish people. Allow me to share several examples from the lives of Sarah and Rivka.

Sarah Imeinu recognized the terrible 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: “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, engaged in idol worship.” (Translation based upon Rashi) Therefore, the Torah continues and 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) Avraham, whose vision in this instance was blinded by his love for Yishmael, initially refused to accede to Sarah’s request. Therefore, G-d directly interceded and insisted that Avraham 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.’” (Ibid. , verse 12)

The stamp of approval for Sarah’s seemingly heartless actions was given, in this instance, by no less than Hashem. Avraham 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 notes on the words “*sh’ma b’kolah*” (“hearken to her voice”): “We learn from here that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy. — [from *Shemot Rabbah* 1:1, *Tanachuma, Shemot* 1].” Clearly, when it came to understanding family matters and the destiny of the Jewish people, Sarah was a greater *naviah* (prophetess) than Avraham was

navi (prophet). Perhaps this was a direct outgrowth of what *Chazal* taught us in *Talmud Bavli, Niddah 45b*: “*HaKadosh Baruch Hu* gave an extra portion of understanding (*‘binah yitarah’*) to women more so than to men.” Be that as it may, it was Sarah who charted the future course of our people, rather than Avraham.

Our Sages coined a well-known phrase to describe the behaviors of earlier generations that foreshadow those of the future: “*ma’aseh Avot siman l’banim.*” Parashat Toldot contains two stellar examples of this principle in regards to *Rivka Imeinu* (our mother 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 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.*” When Yaakov received this blessing, Rivka effectively guaranteed both his and his children’s spiritual future, for all generations to come. The second instance of “*sh’ma b’koli*” that appears in Parshat Toldot in reference to Rivka, concerns Yaakov’s physical salvation, when she became aware of Eisav’s desire to murder Yaakov: “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 was Rivka, rather than Yitzhak, who stepped forward and saved her beloved son from

an all but certain death.

The greatness of the Jewish woman has by no means been limited to the *Imahot*; 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* (1900-1993) 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.

May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to recognize the presence of the Almighty in our own lives, and to feel “the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon [our] frail shoulders.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html .

Do you have questions, comments, ideas, or thoughts about this *drasha*? Would you like to share them? This *drasha*, and my blog are located at: tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com .

The E-mail list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via E-mail rdbe718@gmail.com.