

Parashat Chayeh Sarah, 5781, 2020:

Who Was Sarah?

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with two well-known *pasukim*: “And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah. 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* 23:1-2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Following these verses, the Torah relates Avraham’s efforts to procure *Ma’arat Machpelah* as a permanent burial site for Sarah as well as his act of sending his servant, Eliezer, to Aram Naharaim in search of a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer was successful in his mission as he found Rivka and brought her back to *Eretz Yisrael* to be Yitzchak’s bride. The Torah’s final narrative that directly focuses upon Avraham actions describes his marriage to his second wife, Keturah, and the children that this union produced. Afterwards, the Torah recounts the story of Avraham’s death and burial.

A careful reading of our *parasha* leads to one conclusion: Avraham’s life story, as presented in Parshiot Noach, Lech Lecha and Vayera, ends with the death of his beloved wife, Sarah. As noted by my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal*

(1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, “Abraham’s life story, as told by the Torah, begins at the age of seventy-five and comes to an end with Sarah’s death.” (This, and the following quote, *Abraham’s Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, page 192) In other words, even though the Torah mentions his marriage to Keturah and his subsequent death and burial, these events are not germane to Avraham’s life story. Avraham without Sarah was simply not the same Avraham that he had been when Sarah was alive. As the Rav asserts:

The originator of the covenant and creator of a new moral code was not a single individual. Two people were charged with the task, a man and a woman, Abraham and Sarah. They were both indispensable for the implementation of the divine plan. Both of them converted people; both taught the many. Once Sarah died, Abraham’s assignment came to an end. He was ordered by the Almighty to withdraw from the arena of history, retreat into privacy and live like an ordinary person. (Underlining my own)

I believe we can gain greater insights into Sarah and her crucial role in Jewish history by exploring some of the celebrated words of the Rav, that he penned as a eulogy for the Rebbitzin of Talne:

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Massorah [tradition] 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.

In this eulogy, the Rav noted that the precise masoretic role of the Jewish mother remains undefined. As such, he turned to personal reminiscences of his own beloved mother to illustrate his understanding of the Jewish woman’s crown of *massorah*:

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 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 inimitable 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)

Both the Rav’s mother and the Rebbitzin of Talne were crucial links in the chain of *massorah* that extends from *Sarah Emainu* (our mother Sarah) to our present moment. I have no doubt whatsoever that one of the salient reasons we exist as a people today is because *Sarah Emainu* was able to impart to Yitzchak, “a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*,” and the palpable feeling that the Almighty is ever present in our lives. *T’hay nafsha tzrurah b’tzur ha’chayim* (May her soul be bound in the bonds of life), and may she ever be our guide. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

The email 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 email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.