



November 11, 2023



Parshas Chayei Sarah

27th of Cheshvan 5784

Who Was Sarah?

When one thinks of Sarah, one thinks of the ultimate tzadekes, the ultimate matriarch, the loving wife of Avraham, one of the greatest women in the history of the planet. What is peculiar is that when one looks at the Torah itself it seems to give a very different impression. When one reads the pasukim one finds nothing about Kiruv conventions, seminars, challah bakes, or Torah tours. There is not a single mention of any acts of chesed she did. Any community work she did. In fact, the Torah seems to paint Sarah completely differently. The very first time the Torah mentions Sarah it calls her Yisrah, which means to gaze. Rashi explains that she was so attractive that people would stare at her. This is the very first thing the Torah says about Sarah! Which is odd, because when we think of a tzadekes we don't exactly think of this attractive woman whom people can't stop staring at. It strangely seems that her beauty was so much a part of her identity that even her name Yisrah alluded to it. How does that fit with the holy perception we have of her?

The next time the Torah talks about her, Sarah gets kidnapped and almost violated by Pharaoh, and in order to save herself she lies and says that Avraham is her brother.

Then the story goes on to say that she despised Avraham's concubine Hagar and began to torture her to the point that Hagar ran away into the desert to flee from the pain. Again, not exactly what we would think a tzadekes would do.

Next, when she is told that she will finally have a child, she laughs, seemingly not having faith that she can bear children. And then when asked whether or not she laughed, she denies it. Seems strange to us. Again, not exactly the way our Morahs portrayed Sarah when we were younger.

Next, she again gets kidnapped due to her beauty, and again almost gets violated. Then she sees her stepson Yishmael being a naughty boy, and she kicks him out of the household to live in the desert, in which he and his mother, Hagar, almost die, for the second time. Finally, when she hears the news that her husband considered slaughtering her son on an altar, she dies out of shock, before she hears that her son wasn't ultimately slaughtered. Thus concludes the life of Sarah!

It seems strange. Where are the pasukim talking about her tremendous tzidkus? Where are the pasukim talking about her tremendous chesed and tefilla? All we see is a woman who was extremely attractive, who sent her maidservant away twice, who laughed at the thought that Hashem would give her a child, and then denied having done so. What is going on over here?

In truth, we know, of course, that Sarah was the ultimate matriarch and her righteousness knew no bounds. The Oral Torah tells us that she would go around with Avraham and diligently teach the ways of God and purity to all the women around her, thus creating a tremendous following, which is alluded to in the pasukim. We are told that the level of ruach hakodesh and nevuah that she attained was even greater than Avraham's. The power of her prayer pierced the heavens.

Now you are going to ask, fine, very nice that the midrashim tell us that she was a tzadekes, but why doesn't the Torah tell us explicitly about her greatness, about all the wonderful deeds she did, about how caring and loving she was? Why only allude to it?

The Sparkle Within

The answer to this entire quandary lies in one pasuk in Vayeira: "Vayomer eilav ayei Sarah ishtecha vayomer hinay ba'ohel" (18, 9). When Avraham is recovering from his Bris Mila, he is visited by three angels. He serves them a feast. The angels ask Avraham a question they already know the answer to. They ask him, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" Now, if they knew the answer, why are they asking? Rashi explains that they were asking this question in order that Avraham should think when he responds: she is ba'ohel. She is in the tent. She is in the kitchen. She is tzanua. She is modest. She is pure. She doesn't look for fame and recognition. She keeps

the world running while remaining in her home, taking care of her bais hamikdash mi'at. That's her praise. That is what her ultimate praiseworthy personality trait is. That's what the Torah wants to emphasize. The angels wanted to tell Avraham, and subsequently all husbands, as well as women for the rest of time, that **a woman is praised for her modesty above all else**. She does not choose the spotlight. She does not use her profession as the makeup of her identity. True, she lives her life doing as much good as possible, bringing as much love into her home and the world around her as possible, but the ultimate is her modesty. The ultimate is her attachment to her husband and family. She is confident that it's what's on the inside of her that counts. For she knows that there is a treasure chest of kedusha that's stored inside of her. She will protect it at all costs.

The very name that the Torah calls Sarah is Yiscah. Not because she was so attractive that people couldn't stop looking at her, which implies that she was out there, immodestly attracting attention to her beauty; but rather, as the Sifsai Chachamim in Megilla (14a) says, it means that people couldn't stop *talking* about her beauty. Her beauty was world famous and **yet she still stayed in her tent**. She still kept to herself. She didn't go out to get head turns. So impressive was the fact that she stayed modest, even though her beauty was world-renowned, that the Torah calls her Yiscah. The one people tried to look at. The one who despite having world-class beauty felt comfortable staying home. Focusing on things that really matter.

So mysterious was her beauty that kings the world over could not function until they saw it for themselves. Yet so important was it to her to maintain her holiness and modesty that she was willing to lie, yes lie, to maintain it. So important to her that she give over to the next generation the lessons she had to offer and the holiness she built inside of her house, that she was crushed when it seemed that Avraham might live the rest of his life with Hagar, a woman from Egypt not equipped with the same modesty and purity as Sarah. Sarah saw in Hagar a threat of bequeathing mediocre qualities of modesty and holiness to the next generation, and thus producing a world of mediocrity. Sarah felt forced to do something about it, and made the bitter decision to remove Hagar from the house. She was well aware that this wasn't merely a decision for her household, but for households of Jewish families destined to come out of Avraham for millennia. How it pained Sarah to think that Jewish families will look up to Hagar as their paradigm.

And years later, when she saw that Yishmael was acting in a way that contradicted her level of holiness, purity and modesty, she felt the need to do what was immensely difficult. To remove the source of the bad influence that would potentially inject venom into the holy Yitzchak she was so painstakingly raising.

And then when she heard that her son gave up his life for the service of God, she was so overcome with emotion and pride, that her soul floated out of her body and returned to Heaven.

The Torah doesn't rattle off Sarah's character traits, for by doing so, it would be the very antithesis of her character. She was modest. She was private. She was the mother of a dynasty of women who would lead heroic lives without fanfare or fame. She was the mother of our mothers who relentlessly injected holiness into our homes despite the tsunami of impurity raging outside.

The Strange Age

And then Parshas Chayei Sarah begins, and it says that Sarah lived 100, and 20, and 7 years. Reb Shmshon Refael Hirsch points out that nowhere else in Tanach does it record the age of a woman. It records the ages of men all the time, but never a woman. Sarah is the only exception. Reb Hirsch explains that the reason for this is because the purpose of a woman is not to be on display. No, a woman's life is private, and saying a woman's age would be a contradiction to this. And yet, Sarah was so modest, so respectful, so precious and pure that even recording her age, something the Torah will never do, isn't a breach in privacy. That's the level she was on. The Torah tells us her age and famously splits it up to tell us that no matter what stage in her life she was at, she remained the same pure, holy and modest Sarah. This is the lesson we learn from Sarah Imeinu. Sarah our mother. Sarah who showed us what a mother is: a beacon of holiness. Sarah who showed us that a mother must stand up for purity. Sarah who showed us that a mother must stand up for the sanctity of her children. Now more than ever our children desperately need this. Now more than ever our children need their mothers to be like Sarah.