

FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

God said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Can I indeed have a child when I am so old?'" (Bereshith 18:13)

In fact these were not Sarah's words at all. She actually said, "My husband is old," yet when God "quoted" her to Avraham, He told him that Sarah had said it was she who was old. Rashi explains that this teaches us that it is permissible to deviate somewhat from the facts in order to avoid harming relationships. Yet in this case, it is difficult to understand why the circumstances posed any threat to Avraham and Sarah's peaceful relationship. Avraham was one of the most righteous individuals that the world has ever known. Would it really have bothered him so much to know that when he was ninety-nine, his wife thought he was getting a little old?

The ability to bring children into the world is a very personal aspect of a husband/wife relationship. Although Sarah never intended her remark as an insult, the issue is so sensitive that in fact her comment could have proven harmful to their marital harmony. This being the case, God saw fit to conceal Sarah's actual words from Avraham.¹

It is worth noting that this is the only instance in the Torah where we find that God deviated from the facts. God's seal is truth, and a seal implies absolute consistency, with no exceptions. Why then did this one statement of Sarah's warrant making an exception to the principle of truth? ²

On a similar theme, peace is so significant that in the case of a sotah (a specific set of circumstances which require that a woman undergo a "test" for marital fidelity), the name of God is erased in order to prove the innocence of the wife. Since obliterating the Divine name is ordinarily considered a serious transgression, why is it justified in the case of a sotah? ³

God's names are all descriptions of His attributes. They allow man to perceive His actions, and thereby to come closer to God. Yet there is another way to develop one's relationship with God. If there is harmony between husband and wife, then the Divine Presence actually resides with them.⁴ This is the reason God is willing to destroy His seal and name for the sake of peace between a married couple. Although one can come very close to God through His names, harmony in married life is at least as effective a means by which to forge a relationship with Him.⁵

1. Commentary of Etz Yosef on Yevamoth 65b.

2. Shabbath 55a. See also article on Bereshith 1:1, "Signs of Truth," (page 9).
3. Vayikra Rabbah 9:9.
4. Sotah 17a.
5. On a similar note, if one is forced to choose between lighting Chanukah candles and Shabbath candles, the Shabbath candles take precedence. The light of the Shabbath candles make it possible for a family to enjoy their meal together, instilling an environment of tranquility in their household. Although through the publicization of the miracles that happened at the time of the Chashmonayim, the Chanukah candles are an impressive display of Divine glory, the actual Presence of God in a serene home outweighs this.

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