

CLASS 27 - CHAYEI SARAH

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

Sarah Imeinu, the mother of Klal Yisrael, is eulogized by her husband, and idealized by Chazal as the perfect woman, Eshes Chayil. After interpreting each verse as an allusion to her life, the Midrash Tanchuma continues:

"Zamemma Sadeh VaTikachehu - She planned for the field, and took it - She planned and took the field HaMachpela, and there she was buried." (Midrash Tanchuma, Chayei Sarah, 4)

This is a bit puzzling. The Torah clearly describes the endeavors of Avraham Avinu in his search for a proper burial place. He approaches Efron HaChitti only after the death of his wife. Nowhere does the Torah indicate that Sarah had expressed any interest in this particular field, and she certainly was not party to its purchase. By what effort is the field considered to be hers?

Apparently, it is the unique nature of the Ma'aras HaMachpelah, and the special qualities of Sarah Imeinu, that make them fit for one another.

In our shiur this week, we will define the model of a Jewish woman.

1

"Rebbi Akiva was lecturing, and the group was dozing. He wanted to awaken them, and said: Why was Esther fit to rule over one hundred and twenty-seven countries? Let Esther, who is the granddaughter of Sarah, who lived for one hundred, and twenty, and seven, come and rule over one hundred, and twenty, and seven countries." (Midrash Rabbah, 58:3)

Esther rises to the throne in a direct line, drawn from the royal lineage of her mother Sarah.

This ascendancy indicates more than political power:

"VaYehi BaYom HaShlishi, VaTilbash Esther Malchus - And on the third day, Esther dressed with royalty. Shouldn't it read 'Bigdei Malchus' - clothing of royalty? Said Rebbi Eliezer, in the name of Rebbi Chanina: Teaching that she was adorned with Ruach HaKodesh. Here it is written, 'VaTilbash', and elsewhere (Divrei HaYamim, 12:18) it is written: 'V'Ruach Lavsha Es Amasai' " (Megillah 15a)

A true King is not one who imposes his dictates upon a resistant populace. Rather, he rules by the force of his own personality, his superior human qualities commanding the respect of a people anxious for leadership. He doesn't utilize his position for selfish profit, but tends benevolently to the needs of his faithful followers.

This idea is true as well from a broader perspective, the deeper vision of the prophet of G-d. His Ruach HaKodesh renders him fit to direct all the world in pursuit of the Divine plan. All of creation becomes subservient to the holiness he reveals, with each element of life directed towards the fulfillment of its own special role.

Much as the king lovingly cares for each of his subjects, aware of the needs and dreams of his nation, the prophet understands the true function of the physical world, its purpose in the unfolding of G-d's word. Undeterred by the constraint of popular perception, he leads the Jewish people in the direction he knows best.

2

Sarah Imeinu was the consummate prophet, her level of Divine intuition surpassing even her husband. What is behind this one hundred, and twenty, and seven, this crown of her achievement?

"For this reason, each of the years are distinct categories, teaching that each category is interpreted on its own. When she was one hundred, she was as twenty, in regards to sin. Just as a twenty-year old has not sinned, for she is not subject to punishment, similarly, when she was one hundred, she was without sin. And, when she was twenty, she was as beautiful as when she was seven." (Rashi, Breishis, 23:1)

Who would we consider prettier, a girl of twenty, or a child of seven?

Twenty years marks a person's physical perfection, a woman's beauty is then at its peak. Yet, Sarah, renowned for her good looks, is praised for having the innocent appearance of a young child?

The point is this: a girl of seven may very well be stunning, but she doesn't know it.

Nor does she care.

Sarah understands that the physical world is merely a tool to be used in pursuit of a higher purpose, it has no meaning or value of its own. She sees no sense in fawning over her own good looks. Beauty is not hers, and physicality has no independent substance worthy of notice or attention.

She is worthy of Ruach HaKodesh.

Subordinating herself and her identity in light of a deeper truth, she merits to see a light beyond the darkness, a prophetic vision that teaches the world obedience, to follow a benevolent King.

Years later, her own daughter follows in her wake, echoing the silent modesty of a beauty that is heaven-sent. Esther twists the will of a mighty king and nation, conquering the power of evil with a force that cannot be denied.

3

In the language of Chazal, Avraham and Sarah are more than man and wife, more than the biological

parents of our nation.

They are the soul and body of Klal Yisrael, each reflecting the consummate perfection of a Divine creation.

"Eishes Chayil Ateres Ba'alah" - a good wife knows how to be her husband's crown.

Let us explain.

The soul of man attaches himself to heavenly spheres, his life illuminated by the spiritual insights of an intellect that cleaves to G-d.

But, man's body can go two ways.

He can be filled with yearning for the One above, dedicated and committed to life as a faithful servant.

Or, he can sink into an abyss of physical desire, longing to satiate the gaping hole of material want.

Sarah is the Eishes Chayil, heeding her husband's call, reflecting the prophetic vision of a world beyond our own. With this, she overtakes Avraham, her word mirroring her Creator. Hence, Hashem commands Avraham: "Whatever Sarah says to you, accept from her." (Breishis 21:12)

Sarah is the master of desire, and she recognizes that the hope for holiness cannot coexist with appetites of the flesh. She orders the banishment of Yishmael from her sanctified home, lest his evil presence rub off on Yitzchak, the pure sacrifice, servant of G-d.

With this, she merits the field worth Arba Me'os Kesef, purchased with solid silver from Efron HaChitti.

"VaYishkol Avraham L'Efron Es HaKesef - this is the great 'Kesef' (yearning), for the desired worlds. 'Four hundred silver Shekel' are the four hundred [heavenly] worlds of pleasures and desire." (Zohar)

Sarah teaches her children a woman's place - taming the body of man to submit to a higher call. This is her place in eternity, 'Va'Ta'as B'Chefetz Cappeha' - 'her hands work willingly' - a woman faithful to her sought-after task.

She claims her birthright, the Ma'aras HaMachpelah that is justifiably hers.

4

Let us take this one step further.

" 'VaYakam Sede Efron Asher BaMachpelah' [why is it referred to as 'Machpelah' (doubled)?]All who are buried within are promised that their reward is doubled." (Midrash Rabbah 58:10)

"...What is the word's secret? A field that is certainly doubled. What is doubled? The letter 'Heh' of the Divine name. It is doubled, and they both stand as one." (Zohar)

Both Sarah and Avraham have added to their name the letter 'Heh'. These two letters of the Divinity are reflected in their lives, the will of G-d manifest in the nation they sire. Working in tandem, together as one, they add up to ten, the 'Yud' that is the origin of G-d's essential Name.

Avraham is the 'Heh Ilayah', the upper 'Heh', influencing the multitudes with a shower of love and kindness, the soul of the nation.

Sarah brings this letter to physical life, the lower 'Heh', basis of our world. Accepting the guidance of her creator, she is crowned as its queen, deserving of the Malchus that reflects the King of all kings.

Sarah's world is one-dimensional and closed, she knows only of her need to bring this world back home.

She casts out all desire, purifying her body and cleansing her people, leading her children towards the only goal that counts.

Faithful to her role, she unites heaven and earth, together as one.

"Batach Bsah Lev Ba'alah, V'Shallal Lo Yechsar"

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