

# A WOMAN OF VALOR, WHO CAN FIND?

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## Friday Night:

When Moshe approached G-d at the end of Parashas Shemos, complaining about the increasement of slavery for the Jewish people, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 111a) says that G-d responded (paraphrasing):

"What a shame. They don't make them like they used to! Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov also suffered tests, but they never questioned what I was doing..."

Yitzchak had to dig five wells before he was able to keep one undisputed. Ya'akov had to pay for the place to pitch his tent, and in both cases, if the occurrences had been in Eretz Yisroel, the land that G-d had promised would belong to them in the future! Yet, neither complained, nor did they question the Divine Providence in all of it.

What had been Avraham's test? The Talmud says that Avraham's having to buy the burial spot for his beloved wife from Ephron in this week's parsha, also in spite of the fact that he knew the land would one day belong to him.

You may ask the question: What comparison can there be between Moshe's worrying about the suffering of the entire Jewish people, in spite of the promise of G-d to free them, and Avraham's having to spend only 400 pieces of silver to buy a piece of land he would one day own anyhow? After all, it had only been Moshe's love and concern for the Jewish people that had prompted him to speak up in the first place?

But that was the whole point. If Moshe's love and concern for the Jewish people made him question Divine judgment, then he had acted as if G-d had been less concerned, and less loving of his children than himself. On the contrary: if Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov never doubted the love of G-d in even so "small" an incident, and they proceeded without any sense of Divine rejection, how much more so should Moshe have not complained, given that so many Jewish lives were at stake, and that G-d had already directly interceded and had announced the upcoming redemption!

The operating principle is: what the Fathers (Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov) did is a sign for the Children (all the generations that followed). Sometimes we find ourselves involved in situations that don't make sense to us, given what G-d had promised the Jewish people, and what we expect from

G-d. It may even feel as if what we are doing is futile. However, as we learn from Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, it is our job to respond to the reality as it presents itself to us at the time, and to act with complete faith and trust that G-d knows what He is doing, and that in the end, it will come back to us as a reward.

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## Shabbos Day:

When G-d changed Avraham's name from Avrom to Avraham, the letter "heh" was added. This signified that he was to be a "father of nations," and it also made his name equal 248 (aleph = 1; bais = 2; raish = 200; heh = 8; mem = 40), the number of important limbs in the body, as if to say, Avraham served G-d with all of his limbs.

Sarah, Avraham's wife also had been given a Divine name change, from Sarai to Sarah. Like her husband's name, it received the letter "heh." However, unlike Avraham's name, the transformation from Sarai to Sarah required not just an additional letter, but the subtraction of the letter "yud," which, according to the midrash, created a real tumult in heaven!

As the story goes, once the yud was removed from Sarai's name, it came before G-d and complained:

"Is that fair! Before I was attached to that righteous woman's name, and now what?"

G-d, having mercy on the yud, answered,

"Don't worry, little yud. You'll have a new place, for Moshe will attach you to the righteous Hoshea's name, to make his name become Yehoshua, and it will be the addition of you that will protect him from the evil plan of the spies when they return back from spying the land of Israel!"

Mollified, the yud went on its merry little way, anticipating his future role in the destiny of the Jewish people.

It is a nice midrash, and without going into exactly what all of this is supposed to mean (do letters of the Aleph-Bais actually speak?), let's instead focus on the meaning behind this account. First of all, the Talmud states (Menachos 29b) that this world, the physical world we live in now, was made from the letter "heh," whereas, the World-to-Come was created from the letter "yud" (according to the Maharal, since the letter yud is the only letter in the Aleph-Bais not comprised of other letters, it symbolizes the pristine simplicity of the Eternal World).

However, Sarah's name change was supposed to add something, not take away something. The inclusion of the heh into Avraham's name made it possible for him to father the pure and holy Yitzchak. If the yud symbolized Sarah's innate connection to the World-to-Come, why would G-d

take that way from her? And if He didn't take it away from her, then what was gained by taking the yud and "handing" it over to Yehoshua's name instead?

The answer lies in this week's parsha, as you hoped. (Otherwise, why would I bring up all of this now?)

The Torah does not tell us much about our Foremother, Sarah, in any overt way. Indeed, most of our exposure to Sarah is when she seems to be upset about Hagar and Yishmael, and she therefore seems to appear like a very austere person. What was her principle trait? What earned her the right to be the mother of all mothers to the Jewish people, even to the world? Why did Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) compose "Aishes Chayil" (sung in Jewish homes each Friday night after Shalom Aleichem and before Kiddush) with Sarah Imeinu (lit. our mother) in mind?

We can find the answer to these questions from what occurs once Yitzchak brought his new wife, Rivka, into his mother's tent, and was comforted after the loss of his mother. There and then, Rashi points out, all the miracles that had happened for Sarah, and had ceased upon her death, resumed once again for Rivka. It was as if she was the spiritual heir of her deceased mother-in-law.

What were the three miracles that occurred for Sarah? According to the midrash, the Shabbos candles used to burn non-stop from Shabbos to Shabbos, the dough she kneaded would produce more than was prepared, and a special cloud enveloped her tent (reminiscent of the special Clouds of Glory that would later envelope the Jewish people during their forty years in the desert after leaving Egypt).

Why these three miracles specifically? Because, when Chava (Eve) ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil against G-d's will, she caused three things to happen. Firstly, Adam, who was "kneaded" from the earth and who was therefore referred to as "challah," was blemished through the sin, initiated by his wife. Secondly, eating from the tree brought spiritual darkness to the world; thirdly, eating resulted in death, and it is death that is the primary cause of spiritual impurity.

After almost 2,000 years, Sarah grew in spirituality to the point that she, personally, had counteracted the spiritual effects of Chava's sin. Her candles burned weekly to indicate that she had returned the light to the world extinguished at the time of the sin; her dough miraculously produced more challah, to represent the "challah" she had restored to the world by allowing her husband to rise to such spiritual greatness. And the clouds that enveloped her environment revealed that she had been successful (to a large degree) to create a super-spiritually pure atmosphere while living within a world that was quite steeped in spiritual impurity.

The only question is, what does all of this have to do with the letter yud taken from her name, and its transference from Sarah to Yehoshua?

In Parashas Sh'lach, twelve spies were sent out by Moshe to spy the land of Israel. Ten returned with an evil report, as a result of which the Jewish people were forced to spend an additional thirty-eight

years in the desert wandering. Only two spies came back and reported favorably, Kaleiv and Yehoshua, and it was only these two who merited to survive the desert and enter Eretz Yisroel later.

Kaleiv was saved because he first visited Ma'areh Mahkpelah and prostrated himself upon the graves of our Forefathers, asking them for help; he was successful. However, what did Yehoshua have to protect him from the spies' evil advice? The yud from Sarah's name, because embodied within it was the capacity to recreate a "Garden of Eden" atmosphere, even though the surrounding environment doesn't support such a high spiritual reality. This was the spiritual greatness that Yehoshua had inherited from Sarah via the yud attached to his name. In spite of the stormy world that surrounded Yehoshua, he was insulated against it by the spiritual capacity to rise above it, inherent in the letter yud from Sarah's name.

This is what makes a true Aishes Chayil, of whom Shlomo HaMelech wrote. She possesses the ability, above all else, to transform her non-spiritual reality into one of tremendous spirituality, even when all the surrounding elements are working against her.

This was Sarah Imeinu, and this was the legacy that she left to her descendants. I remember reading a story from the Holocaust of a train-full of Jews on its way to one of the Nazi death camps. They had been told to quickly gather together a small bag of belongings before being loaded onto a cattle car. It had been erev Shabbos at the time. As the train traveled down the line to a place no one knew, yet everyone feared, great despair set in. Yet, amongst all the despair, one woman pulled out one of the few belongings she had bothered to pack for her long journey: Shabbos candle sticks. With as much devotion as always (if not more), she recited the brochos and lit the candles, and instantly the car full of trapped and distraught Jews was transformed by the warm glow of the Shabbos candles, and the woman's devotion to G-d, albeit temporarily.

Some may see this woman's lighting of her Shabbos candles on her death-train as futile attempt to hang on to a lifestyle that had clearly passed for good for her, the product of wishful thinking. However, the Torah looks at this woman as a true Aishes Chayil, a woman who clearly had incorporated the "yud" of Sarah's name into very way of thinking, and was therefore able to hold onto the values of her ancestors in spite of the direction of the world around her-forever.

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## Seudos Shlishi:

It had been a close call. True, in the end, G-d had never intended to have Avraham slaughter his only true son. Still, nevertheless, Avraham realized how vulnerable his spiritual legacy was until Yitzchak married and had children. Therefore, his top priority after the Akeida had been to find a suitable shidduch for his spiritual heir.

To accomplish this, Avraham sent his trusty servant, Eliezer, back to the land of his birth in search of a family member who could marry Yitzchak. He even made Eliezer swear that he would not deviate from his master's wish, so important was this to Avraham.

Immediately, Eliezer set out on his mission, and already a miracle occurred: G-d had shortened the distance of his journey, and he arrived ahead of schedule. Then, to make sure he would not err, Eliezer invoked Divine assistance in the selection process, saying: If the woman who comes out to the well offers to draw water for me and my camels, then I shall know that she is the Divinely-chosen spouse for my master's son.

Well, it happened just as he had requested. Rivka had come down to the well to fetch water, and, according to the midrash, the water even came up to her to be fetched! However, it was a time in history when real magic was common, and there was no telling from the miracle that Rivka was indeed the true soul-mate for Yitzchak.

However, once Rivka saw Eliezer and the camels, and offered to provide them with drink, then food and lodging, Eliezer knew that G-d was involved directly, and that his mission had proven to be fruitful. It was not long before Eliezer was on his way home with the young Rivka in tow, on her way back to meet her destined husband.

This is just another example of how, to the Torah, as impressive as miracles may be, they don't fully catch our attention. What draws a Torah-crowd? A person steeped in Torah, one committed to the values of the Torah. The Torah-zealot is one who is prepared to risk himself to uphold Torah, not one who is prepared to risk Torah to uphold himself. It is such a person whom G-d, in the end, will give His backing to, and even change the world for him, if need be, to allow him to do his work.

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## **Melave Malkah:**

Avraham died at the age of 175 years, five years early to avoid seeing his grandson Eisav go off in the wrong spiritual direction. However, as Rashi points out, the fact that Yishmael gave respect to Yitzchak by allowing him to precede him at Avraham's burial, indicates that Yishmael did tshuva. Furthermore, the Talmud (Babba Basra 91a) states that on the day Avraham died, all the heads of nations came out to mourn, "Woe to the world that has lost its leader! Woe to the ship that has lost its captain!"

As mentioned before, what happened to the Forefathers is a sign of what is to happen to the future descendants. We have already witnessed firsthand the evil wrought by the hands of Eisav. May we therefore witness the full tshuva of Yishmael and his descendants, and may we live to witness the day that all the nations of the world recognize the value of the Jewish people to the world, and allow

us all to live in peace and respect of each other.

Have a great Shabbos.

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