

BEHIND EVERY SUCCESSFUL MAN IS HIS MOTHER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 72, Superstition in Halacha. Good Shabbos!

Behind Every (Spiritually) Successful Man, There's a Woman: His Mother

The pasukim [verses] at the beginning of the Parsha tell us that Sarah died when she was 127 years old "... and Avrohom came to eulogize her" [Bereishis 23:2]. There is a famous Medrash which asks, "From where did Avrohom come?" The Medrash responds, "From Mount Moriah" (the place of the Binding of Yitzchak).

We have to understand what the Medrash means by its questions and what it means by its answer. They both seem to be obvious.

According to the Mikdash Mordechai, Rav Mordechai Ilan, the Medrash is telling us as follows: We know that Avrohom rose to the occasion of G-d's test on Mount Moriah. But so did Yitzchak. Our Sages derive from the verse "And the two of them went together" [22:8] that Yitzchak (who was 37 years old at the time) knew full well what was about to happen, and nevertheless went willingly with his father.

It was at that time that Avrohom recognized what a person of great stature his son Yitzchak was. This in turn told Avrohom what a great person his wife was. Because if one has a child on the spiritual level of Yitzchak, who is willing to go through an 'Akeidah', that says as much about Sarah as it does about Yitzchak. Such a son does not grow up by himself. He is raised. He has to have been raised by a mother who instills in him a tremendous degree of Fear of Heaven.

When our Sages tell us that Avrohom came from the Akeidah to eulogize and to weep for Sarah from Mount Moriah, they are explaining that it was at the Akeidah that he got the insight that enabled him to properly evaluate and describe the role of Sarah and the contribution she made to the spiritual life of her descendants.

The Angel of Death Had One More Trick Up His Sleeve

I saw a different interpretation from Rav Dovid Keviat. There is a well-known Medrash, which says that the Malach haMaves [Angel of Death] came to Sarah and told her that her husband took her son Yitzchak, bound him up to the altar, lifted the knife to slaughter him, brought the knife down to the child's neck, ... and then the angel paused. When Sarah heard this part of the story, she died from the shock of what she thought was the death of her only son, Yitzchak.

Rav Dovid Keviat asks a simple question. When the Angel of Death comes to any of us, when our time is up, he does not require any scare tactics to accomplish his task. Why then, did the Malach HaMaves, scare her to death, so to speak? Was he being sadistic? Did he get gleeful pleasure from shocking Sarah, so she would die like this? Why didn't he just come, take her neshama [soul], and be finished?

Sarah, after all, lived a full 127 years. Her time was up. In no way did she die prematurely. Why does the Malach haMaves have to resort, all of a sudden, to tricks before taking her neshama?

The answer is that this is what our Sages mean when they say "Where did Avrohom come from? He came from Mt. Moriah." The Malach haMaves did not give up! He was not satisfied that Avrohom passed the test of the 'Akeidah,' the binding of Isaac. The Malach haMaves had one more trick up the sleeve.

"I'll kill Sarah as a result of the Akeidah! When Avrohom Avinu comes back, proud of having come through the test unscathed, when he feels good about himself, and good about the 'Akeidah,' he'll come back and find a dead wife, who died as a result of the 'Akeidah.' We'll see what his attitude will be then!"

Will he say "Oy, the Akeidah cost me my wife!?" Will Avrohom Avinu have regrets, perhaps, even for an instant, about the Akeidah?

This is a common phenomenon. People die. Doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists will tell you that one of the most common reactions after people die is that relatives start blaming themselves. "Had I taken them to the doctor one more time, perhaps they would have lived; had I done this and that, maybe they would have lived. Maybe if I would have been a better person, they would have lived." Guilt!

The Malach haMaves wanted to see whether he could get Avrohom, even for an instant, to regret his actions at the Akeidah. That is what our Sages mean when they say "And Avrohom came from Mount Moriah" -- i.e. with Mount Moriah fresh in his mind, knowing that he had passed the test.

"Maybe," the Angel reasoned, "I can get him to have second thoughts about his righteousness on Mount Moriah." But, the Malach HaMaves was not successful. Avrohom came from Mount Moriah --

to mourn and to eulogize Sarah -- with the same dedication and trust in G-d that he demonstrated on Mount Moriah.

The Evil Inclination Never Lets Go

I once heard an insight from Rav Aharon Kotler, z"tl: It says at the end of the Akeidah that the ram was entangled in the bush. Rav Aharon asked, "Why did that happen?" The test was completed and Avrohom was found to be righteous. What need is there for the pasuk to emphasize that the ram was caught up in the bush?

Rav Aharon says that this shows that the Yetzer Hara never gives up. "Avrohom, you think you passed the test. Fine. You won that round, now there's another round -- the ram. You think it's going to be easy from now on? You're wrong. There are always trials and tribulations, always problems and temptations. There are always tests."

This was the same ploy and the same trick with Sarah. You think, Avrohom, you came unscathed from the Akeidah? No you didn't. I'll show you that you didn't. I'll give you a dead Sarah and see how you react.

Efron and Rivkah: Opposite Ends of the Chessed Spectrum

In this week's parsha we have the incident of Avrohom purchasing the field from Efron. We all know the story -- Efron insisted Avrohom take the field for nothing, but in the final analysis, went ahead and charged an exorbitant amount. The Medrash says that Efron was a stingy man (ish rah ayin) and he did not know that because of his stinginess he "wound up lacking." This means that although the word Efron is always spelled with a 'vov', but after he took the money from Avrohom, the name is spelled without a 'vov' -- lacking, so to speak. This the Sages says was a result of his stinginess.

In Parshas Chaye Sarah, we see a contrast of personalities between that of Efron and that of Rivkah. Efron speaks in grandiose terms of what he will do, but in fact doesn't even do a little. He's a 'big talker.' "I'll give it to you for free." But in the end, he doesn't even do a little. He takes not only the normal price, but he takes a stiff price.

Immediately afterwards, the Torah shows us the other end of the spectrum. The Torah contrasts Efron with Rivkah, who says little ("I'll give you water"), but does more than she speaks ("I'll also water your camels.")

The contrast in personalities is the difference between the house of Avrohom and an Efron. Avrohom Avinu and his house -- Yitzchak and Avrohom's future daughter-in-law, Rivkah -- have the hallmark of the house of Avrohom which is the hallmark of Chessed (the ability to give graciously and

generously). Where does that stem from? What motivates a person to give generously? Such Chessed, obviously, stems from a person who has his life's priorities straight. He knows that money and physical possessions do not bring happiness. Since money is not that important to me, I can give it freely. A Rivkah can give effortlessly of her time and money because she knows the value of money. She knows that money, in and of itself, is not what life is all about.

This is exactly what our Sages tell us even about Eliezer, the servant of Avrohom. The pasuk tells us that "he ruled over all that he had" [24:2]. The Kli Yakar interprets this to mean that he ruled himself. He ruled over his money, rather than allowing his money to rule over him.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have an Efron, who lives for money. He is the example and the epitome of "One who loves money will not be satisfied with money" [Koheles 5:9]. He cannot part with his money because he needs his money; his money is all that he lives for.

Our Sages tell us that such a person will never be happy. Why? Because it is impossible to ever satiate a person's desire for physical needs. This is what the Rabbis mean when they say "Efron is written missing" -- a person like Efron is always missing something. He is intrinsically lacking.

This was not just a punishment to Efron. This is a lesson to us. If we will be like Efron, unable to part with our money, always living for our money, then we will -- like Efron -- always remain lacking.

The pasuk says, "The sound of Rejoicing and Salvation in the tents of the righteous" [Tehillim 118:15]. The lashon [language] "ohel" ["tent"] always signifies a non-permanent dwelling. A "bayis" [house] is a permanent dwelling; an tent is something you pitch to live in temporarily. The reason there is rejoicing and salvation, enjoyment and contentment, in the lives of the righteous is because their existence in this world is like that of a tent -- temporary. We have to be in this world, we have work to do here, mitzvos which must be performed. But, our physical surroundings are only temporary dwellings -- tents.

There is a famous story about the Chofetz Chaim. A visitor saw that the great sage had no furniture in his house and asked him where his furniture is. The Chofetz Chaim, in turn, asked the traveler, "Where is your furniture?"

The traveler looked surprised at the question and said "What do you mean, I'm only passing through." The Chofetz Chaim responded, "Yes. I, too, am also only passing through."

If a person's perspective of this world is that it is only in the category of a 'tent,' a place where he lives while he is 'passing through' then there will always be sounds of rejoicing and salvation in his dwelling.

Glossary

'Akeidah' -- (literally 'the binding') refers to the 'offering' of Yitzchak on the altar on Mt. Moriah
Maggid Shiur -- One who delivers a class or lecture.
cheder -- (literally room) classical Torah educational institution for young children
Malach haMaves -- Angel of Death
neshama -- soul
Yetzer haRah -- Evil Inclination

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Dovid Keviat -- contemporary Maggid Shiur at the Mirrer Yeshiva in New York.
Rav Aharon Kotler -- (1892-1962) founder of the Lakewood Yeshiva; Lakewood, N.J.
Kli Yakar -- (1550-1619) Rav Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz. Rosh Yesiva in Lemberg; Rabbi of Prague; popular Bible commentary.
Chofetz Chaim -- (1838-1933) Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen of Radin. Author of basic works in Jewish Law and Jewish values (halacha, hashkafa, and mussar).

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