

Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years and seven years, the years of Sarah's life. (23:1)

Rashi explains the seeming redundancy of *shnei chaye Sarah*, the years of Sarah's life, by asserting that *kulam shavin l'tovah*, all of the years of Sarah *Imeinu's* life were equal in their goodness. This does not mean that Sarah did not experience adversity in her life. Childless for ninety years is definitely not what anyone would call "good." Sarah, however, accepted whatever was thrown at her as being the *ratzon*, will, of Hashem. Sarah had many positive character traits and attributes, abiding commitment to Hashem which she instilled in our nation's DNA. As the first Matriarch, she is the Mother of our People. Yet we know little about her life. We know that she was the life companion of Avraham *Avinu*, who worked side by side with him to bring the world's pagan population under the wings of the Divine Presence. That she was righteous is without doubt. Interestingly, the Torah does not allude to any specific quality, especially one which would transform her life to a life of *tov*, good. It was her attitude toward life that was transforming. Why did the Torah not emphasize a unique attribute, a manner of serving Hashem, that was specific to her?

I think the Torah does allude to a powerful life lesson concerning Sarah. We revert back to *Parashas Vayeira* to see the *middah*, attribute, that defined our Matriarch. When Sarah *Imeinu* sought to send Yishmael away, Avraham was not happy. Yet Hashem said to him, *Kol asher tomar eilecha Sarah, shema b'kolah*, "Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice" (ibid 21:12). *Horav Shlomo, zl, m'Radomsk* interprets this *pasuk* in a novel manner. When Hashem instructed Avraham to listen to Sarah, He was doing more than simply pointing him in the right direction. (Sarah's leadership was based upon her acute ability to see beyond the superficial innocence of young Yishmael and his Egyptian mother.) Hashem was intimating to Avraham the reason that Sarah was spiritually above and beyond everyone else: *Shema b'kolah*. Every word that emerged from her mouth, every sound that she uttered, echoed *Shema*, the word/expression which denotes one's overriding commitment to *kabbolas ole Malchus Shomayim*, accepting the yoke of the Heavenly monarchy upon herself. Whenever Sarah spoke, it was no ordinary form of expression, since *Shema Yisrael* – the depth, commitment and devotion represented by these words – was apparent and emergent from her voice. Sarah lived for the Glory of Heaven. Sarah reflected *kabbolas ole Malchus Shomayim* in her every expression. *Shema* was always *b'kolah*. This was Hashem's beautiful tribute to our first Matriarch. She lived with *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, guided by her desire to sanctify Hashem's Name.

The words that we speak, the things that we say, are extraordinary manifestations of Divine Creation. Hashem created Adam *HaRishon* in that he express himself using the power invested in him by Hashem when "He blew into his nostrils the breath of life", *Vayipach b'apav nishmas chaim.*" *Targum Onkeles* writes: *V'hava b'adam l'ruach m'malela*; "And it was for a speaking spirit in man.") The power of speech is G-dly, because it contains within it a component of the Divine. This is all the more reason for maintaining the consecrated status of speech. Obviously, one who protects his/her power of speech from spiritual contamination will find special Heavenly favor.

Giveret Frieda Mendelson, *H.Y.D.* was one of the victims of the Sbarro terrorist attack in Yerushalayim in the late summer of 2001. She rarely frequented a restaurant. It was just not her thing. She devoted herself to setting up Torah classes for women, specifically *shiurim*, classes, that addressed the ills of *lashon hora*, evil/slanderous speech. On the day that she died a martyr's death, she had fasted in preparation for a test that had to be taken on an empty stomach. Originally, she had planned to pack a sandwich which she would eat after the test, but she had decided against it. If she was hungry, she would pick something up. For some reason, after the test, she decided to go to Sbarro's for brunch.

Shortly before she left for the test, she had spoken with her son (*Rav* Mendelson) and said something totally atypical, "I am getting on in years, and I already see the end coming." Her son wondered why she would speak like that. "*Ima*, you're still a young woman. There is no reason for you to worry. You have so much to accomplish for the women in the *shchunah*, neighborhood, who rely on you for inspiration."

She replied, "It is not as if I want to die. It is just that after reading *sefarim* which address the period immediately following death, I have become very fearful of *chibut ha'kever*, punishment of the grave. (During the body's decomposition in the grave, the soul is aware of, and identifies with, the decomposition which is very painful to it. This is a painful and frightening period, especially for those who have placed a premium on material and physical pleasure.) Indeed, I pray constantly to Hashem that He spare me from this pain. I ask that when my time comes, that I be taken straight to my place in *Gan Eden* without having to suffer along the way."

Understandably, this was not a usual conversation between a healthy mother and son. She had no reason to give any thought to an early demise – no more than for anybody else. She was in her prime, healthy, active, inspiring, and spiritually impacting the lives of others. Yet, she expressed to her son that her request of Hashem was that her soul ascend to *Gan Eden* without having to "stop" along the way.

Hashem listened to her request. The *Rambam* writes that the *neshamah*, soul, of anyone who leaves this world *al Kiddush Hashem*, who dies sanctifying Hashem's Name, who dies because he or she is a Jew, ascends immediately to *Gan Eden*. *Giveret* Mendelson's last minute decision to eat at Sbarro's was as surreal as it was propitious, because now she would have her plea answered. Her life was devoted to elevating Jewish speech through awareness of the holiness of the Jewish tongue. Thus, when she made a request of Hashem, He listened.

This, however, is not the end of the story. There is more. On the day of the bombing, a woman who was not from the *shchunah* came to the *shul* in Yerushalayim where *Giveret* Mendelson *davened*. Her husband (*Rav* Mendelson) is the *Gabbai Rosh*, Chief Sexton, of the *shul* in charge of seating and all daily shul business. The woman asked *Rav* Mendelson to sell her a seat. He explained that no seats were available. The *shul* was full. The woman was obstinate. She must have a seat. When he saw that she was not going away, *Rav* Mendelson, in an attempt to stall her, asked her to

select a seat. The woman walked through the women's section which seated a few hundred women. She walked from seat to seat, looking, sitting, standing, until finally she stopped at a seat, and said, "This one. I want this seat." This was *Giveret* Mendelson's seat which had tragically become available that day.

Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, writes (*Koveitz Shiurim, Kesubos 208*), "Whenever we find that the blessings or curses uttered by *tsaddikim*, righteous Jews, are fulfilled, it is because the word that emanates from a holy mouth/tongue achieves, even if there is no *kavanah*, specific intention behind it (just an utterance). It may be compared to the ax that is wielded without intention (on the part of the ax). Likewise, man's speech has incredible power and validity behind it. One who has contaminated his speech through inappropriate use, however, will wield an ax blade that is rusty and dull. It has been weakened through improper use. This is food for thought – or speech.