

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

The Torah informs us that Sarah *Imeinu* lived to be one hundred twenty seven years old. We are now aware of the Matriarch's longevity, but what about her life? Very little is recorded concerning her actual life, what happened, what she did, what type of person she was: simple questions whose answers would characterize the first Matriarch. We have some idea concerning her outreach activities. *Chazal* teach that Sarah converted the women, while Avraham *Avinu* converted the men. They derive this from the *pasuk*, *V'es ha'nefesh asher asu b'Charan*, "And the souls which they made in Charan" (*Bereishis* 12:5). Sarah taught monotheism alongside Avraham. Together, they succeeded in reaching out to the pagan population. This is taught to us by *Chazal*. The Torah, however, does not elaborate about Sarah. Why are we not accorded a better perspective on the life and personality of this elusive Matriarch? One hundred twenty seven years is a long time. Certainly, Sarah accomplished much during her life that would serve as a worthy inspiration to her descendants.

Apparently, Sarah *Imeinu*'s concealment from the public eye is her greatest virtue and most "prominent" quality. When the angels who visited Avraham inquired concerning Sarah's whereabouts, *A'yei Sarah ishtecha*, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" the Patriarch had replied, *Hinei! b'Ohel*, "Behold! She is in the tent!" (*Bereishis* 18:9). *Rashi* comments, *tzenuah hee*, "Sarah is a private person." Avraham was not simply informing them of Sarah's present location, but rather, he was intimating a powerful and penetrating characterization of his wife: "She is in the tent! Sarah is a private person!" Sarah was modeling for her daughters throughout the future generations regarding the role of a *bas Yisrael*. The most fitting description of a Jewish girl/woman is: *hinei b'ohel* – "She is in the tent."

This does not mean, of course that the Jewish woman must remain sequestered in the home, locked up in the kitchen – as many secularists and modernists would have you think the Torah is suggesting. This description does not imply inferiority, since we know that Sarah was superior to Avraham in *nevuah*, prophecy. David *Hamelech* writes in *Sefer Tehillim* 45:14, *Kol kevudah bas Melech penimah*, "The entire glory of the daughter of the King lies on the inside." This *pasuk* tells it all. A Jewish girl/woman is a *bas melech*, daughter of the King; hence, she is different than her non-Jewish female counterpart. The Jewish woman neither needs, nor is it appropriate for her, to be involved on the public stage, in the spotlight, calling attention to herself. It is not something that she craves, because she is the daughter of the King. She is above it.

Furthermore, David *Hamelech* is not only addressing the private nature of the female role, he is issuing a statement concerning the religious experience in general: it does not have to be filled with marching bands and advertisements, calling attention to one's religious service. The religious experience is designed to be between man and G-d. While the concept of *tznius* applies to both men and women, the private sphere should be the dominant area of a woman's life. Thus, we

know very little concerning the life of Sarah *Imeinu*. After all, she was a *tzenuah*!

Women throughout the generations have always been defined and presented as figures of great moral strength – especially during periods of crisis. After Sarah passed away, no one was able to fill her shoes until Yitzchak *Avinu* married Rivkah *Imeinu* and brought her to his mother's tent. Immediately, the daughter-in-law revived the spiritual atmosphere that had been missing since Sarah's passing. Rivkah assumed the role of Matriarch. She was the one who saw through the ruse of Eisav. She perceived his malevolent nature. Her moral courage helped Yaakov to retrieve the blessings, thereby preserving the future of *Klal Yisrael*.

*Tanach* constantly reiterates this idea, and *Chazal* underscore it. It was the women who refused to participate in the creation of the Golden Calf, and it has been the *nashim tzidkanios*, righteous woman of every generation, who have given the Jewish People their moral strength to survive and triumph over the vicissitudes that we face individually and collectively as a nation.

In a *shmuess*, ethical discourse, on the religious function of a *bas Yisrael*, **Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl**, focuses on a practical question: How do we determine the *gadlus*, greatness, of a woman? We hear of *gadlus ba'Torah*, distinction in Torah erudition; likewise, we are aware of *gadlus in chesed*, kindness. There are individuals who stand out in areas of philanthropy, but what defines a woman's *gadlus*? The *Chafetz Chaim* was a *gadol*; so was the *Chazon Ish*. Does this mean that their wives were also distinguished? At first, *Rav Shimshon* posits that the term *gadlus* applies to men. Since the areas of women's involvement are limited, they are all great!

After hearing, however that the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*, had etched on his late wife's monument: *Lo hinichah acharehah k'mosah*, "She left over none other like her," we understand that apparently there is a concept of *gadlus* of a woman.

Now that we know of this concept – how does one earn the distinction? Let us face it. Men are in the public eye. Therefore, others view and scrutinize their actions. Thus, they have the ability to inspire others. What does the average person observe concerning a woman's *avodas ha'kodesh*, service to the Almighty? Imagine entering the home of the *Gaon m'Vilna* to find the sage in his study, deeply engrossed in a most difficult *sugya*, topic, in the *Talmud*. One observation is enough to tell us that we are privy to greatness. The *Gaon's* encyclopedic knowledge, brilliant mind, and exceptional diligence are all evident. Now, we pass through the house in search of the *rebbeztin*. She is in the kitchen preparing the *Shabbos* meal. To paraphrase *Rav Shimshon*, "Is her *kugel* better than anyone else's?" What determined the *gadlus* of the *Gaon's* wife? Clearly, if the *Gaon* made such a statement concerning his wife, it was true. Since her virtue was not prominent, however, how should we, who did not see or hear, define her area of distinction? This question applies to all women. Since *tznius* is their salient characteristic, how are we able to determine their *gadlus*?

*Rav Shimshon* quotes *David Hamelech's* description of a *tzaddik* and applies it appropriately to his

female counterpart. The Psalmist says *Tzaddik katamar yifrach*, “A righteous man will flourish like a date palm” (*Tehillim* 92:13). The nature of a date palm is unlike that of other trees. It has a feature that is possibly due to its unusual height. Commensurate with the tree’s height above ground are its roots below ground. In other words, if the tree is fifty feet high, its roots will spread fifty feet underground!

A similar idea may be applied to man and woman in their contrasting roles. They both ascribe to a concept of *gadlus* – but in different areas. The man distinguishes himself in the public arena, while the woman individualizes herself in an area hidden from the public eye. *Tzaddikim* are compared to the date palm, because its unusual height elevates it above all others. Thus, it may be detected from a distance. The righteous person stands out above the common man. He distinguishes himself in scholarship, piety, virtue and acts of loving-kindness. The woman does all of these, but her behavior is not brought to anyone’s attention. Her distinction is privacy. This is her greatness. The *Gaon m’Vilna* was great. His wife was also great. His distinction was noticed by all, while her virtue was recognized only by those who had a discerning eye. When the *Gaon* said, “She left no one to replace her,” he was reflecting his personal knowledge.

When we observe the awesome majestic height of a skyscraper, we seldom consider the depth of its foundation. Without a foundation that is very deep and extremely solid, the formidable structure would topple. Regrettably, no one takes notice of the foundation. They take it for granted. Undeniably, this reflects superficial shortsightedness, since the foundation is (at least) equally important.

Women are the foundation of *Klal Yisrael*. The proof: matrilineal lineage. A Jew’s pedigree is determined according to his mother. She is the origin of his *Yiddishkeit*. She remains inconspicuous by nature. She does not need the public arena, because she is the daughter of the King.