

Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife, because she was barren. (25:21)

We are accustomed to mentioning the *Avos* and *Imahos*, Patriarchs and Matriarchs, in one breath, as if they were all the same. When we stop to think, we recognize that there was one area in which they were not all the same. It appears at first glance that Avraham *Avinu* was not an *akar*, sterile man, since he fathered Yishmael. This is questionable from the *pasuk* in *Bereishis* 15:2, "What can You give me, seeing that I go childless?" Later in 16:5, however, Sarah *Imeinu* says to Avraham, "The outrage against me is due to you!" *Rashi* explains that Sarah complained to Avraham that he had *davened* to Hashem only for himself – and not for her. This indicates that both were sterile. Yitzchak *Avinu* prayed for Rivkah, indicating that he was fine, but Rivkah was not. Yaakov *Avinu*'s wives – both Rachel *Imeinu* and Leah *Imeinu* – were sterile. In conclusion, the only Patriarch that was originally sterile was Avraham. Yitzchak and Yaakov were not. The four *Imahos* were all sterile. *Horav Shlomo Levinstein, Shlita*, wonders why all our *Imahos* and one *Av* were sterile? Nothing just happens. It is by design. Why did Hashem establish the lineage of *Klal Yisrael* in such a distinctive manner?

He quotes the *Ben Ish Chai* and *Maggid m'Dubno* who address this question and render an explanation that both enlightens and inspires. Avraham *Avinu* had a father, Terach, who was not a saint. He had a store in which he supplied idols to the community. He even betrayed his own son to the evil king, Nimrod; he would have lost him, had Hashem not intervened. Think about it: had Avraham not been sterile, then, by natural course of science, Terach would also have been our ancestor. *Baruch Hashem*, Avraham became our progenitor *b'derech neis*, by way of a miracle!

Next, Sarah *Imeinu* was Haran's daughter – definitely nothing to publicize. Haran was no Terach, but he was far from the saint with whom we would want to identify. Hence, Sarah's barrenness was a good thing for our lineage. Yitzchak was a miracle baby whose parents had both been sterile.

Let us continue. Rivkah *Imeinu* was Besuel's daughter – also no reason for accolades. Hashem spared Yaakov – and us – from having Besuel as our natural ancestor. Therefore, Rivkah was sterile until Hashem listened to Yitzchak's prayers on her behalf. Now, we turn to Rachel and Leah, the two wonderful daughters of none other than Lavan, the swindler. Hashem once again stepped in and spared us from having to identify with him. Rachel and Leah were originally both *akaros*, sterile woman.

The situation which appears at first glance to be a tragedy or, at best, ambiguous, is that four Matriarchs and one Patriarch were each sterile. This, in fact, may have been Hashem's way of maintaining the purity of the bloodline of our People. The *Ben Ish Chai* interprets this idea as Bilaam's "blessing." *Mierosh tzurim er'enu u'migvaos ashurenu – hen am levadad yishkon u'vagyoyim lo yischashav*, "For from its origins, I see rock-like, and from hills do I see it. Behold! It is

a nation that will dwell in solitude and not to be reckoned among nations.” The word *tzurim*, rock-like (origins), is a reference to the *Avos*. The word, *gevaos*, hills, refers to our *Imahos*. The *rosh tzurim*, “head” of the *Avos* and all the *gevaos*, was created sterile in order that our People could dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations. This means that our lineage has no commonality with the *goyim*. We dwell in solitude without sharing any of them: Terach, Nachor, Haran, Besuel and Lavan!

Horav Reuven Shapiro, Shlita, adds a wonderful vignette. Chanah, mother of Shmuel *HaNavi*, was barren. She prayed for a miracle, and Hashem answered her prayer with an incredible child whom she named Shmuel. When he was two years old, she brought him to the *Bais Hamikdash* where *Eili Kohen Gadol* served. She brought a sacrifice as a form of giving thanks to Hashem for her miracle child. *Eili* called for a *Kohen* to slaughter the animal. Shmuel, who was only two years old, intervened, claiming that *shechitah k’sheirah b’zar*, even a *Yisrael* may perform the service of slaughtering. Why bother with a *Kohen*? Brilliant! *Eili* concurred and said to Chanah, “He is right – but wrong.” Right in his knowledge of *Halachah*, but he was *moreh halachah bifnei rabbo*, he rendered a *halachic* decision in the presence of his *rebbe*, the *Kohen Gadol* (who is everyone’s *rebbe*).

Chanah pleaded with *Eili* to spare her son. *Eili* countered that he would pray that she would be blessed with another son – one who would not be so insolent. She replied, *El ha’naar ha’zeh hispallalti*, “I prayed for this lad. I want no other child. I want this one.” *Eili* relented, forgave Shmuel – and they lived happily ever after.

We can ask a powerful question: If *Eili* could have easily been *mochel*, absolve, his honor, why did he not do so immediately? Why would he have created such overwhelming anxiety for Chanah, who had gone through so much already? Why add to her travail? Just overlook it.

The reason is, explains *Rav Shapiro*, that we forget who Shmuel’s ancestor was: Korach, who stood up to Moshe *Rabbeinu*. *Eili* feared that Shmuel’s premature insolence was part of his character-deficient blood line. Thus, he was prepared to pray for another child for Chanah. Chanah replied, “I prayed for this lad.” He is a miracle baby – not part of the original bloodline ascending to Korach! *Eili* listened, and we were blessed with Shmuel!

Things happen, and we wonder: Why? How? Why me? Can we begin to imagine what might have gone through the minds of our Matriarchs? Patience - and we see Hashem’s answer. I could not pass by this story, related by Rabbi Henach Teller. At the end of World War II, the Nazis saw that the end was near, but they still sought every which way to complete their diabolical Final Solution. They forced the surviving Jews to be taken (by foot or by cattle car) to Bergen-Belsen, the infamous concentration camp where over one million Jews were murdered. Following the war, it served as a Displaced Persons camp.

The situation in the camp was terrible. Hunger, disease, physical deprivation and emotional

depression ran the course of the camp. Furthermore, housed in this camp were Russian soldiers, prisoners of war, who lacked the niceties of human decency, even on a good day – let alone when they were locked in a prison camp. This is what the hapless Jews were exposed to.

The hunger was indescribable. People had not eaten for weeks, existing on moldy soup and potato skins. The Nazis cared about public opinion. The English victors were coming to the camp, and the Nazis wanted their Jewish and Russian prisoners to speak “positively” of their Bergen-Belsen “experience.” One Jewish prisoner had hardly eaten solid food for almost five years. It got to the point that all he thought about was food. Had he been asked what he would rather have, food or freedom, his answer would have been food – a good meal. The Nazis lined up a group of prisoners, in which he was included. They would each be given a roll – until they ran out. This Jewish fellow saw that there were seven rolls remaining, and six men in front of him in line. He could hardly wait for that last remaining roll. Finally, he received the last roll. How excited he was. With shaking hands, he took hold of the roll. It was small, but it was bread! As he was about to take a bite, he noticed that they had dropped a large sack of rolls behind the counter. He figured, why not? There are so many rolls. What difference would it make if he took one more? So, he went back into line. “Who has not received a roll?” the Nazi called out. “Me,” the Jewish prisoner replied as he received his second roll.

At that moment, he felt a strong hand on his throat, “Jew! I saw what you just did. You might be able to fool the Nazis, but not me.” A Russian prisoner stood there with two “friends.” They pulled him into a cubby, and, after relieving him of his two precious rolls, began to pound him mercilessly. When they were certain that they had killed him, they left with the rolls.

The Jew’s “last” waking moments were filled with sadness: “Hashem, I survived five years of terror and death just to die at the hands of Russians over two small rolls? Is this fair? You could have taken me together with my family during these past five years. Why did You wait until now?” Then everything went black, and the prisoner became unconscious.

A while later, he woke up and the sun was shining. For five years, he had not experienced seeing the sun upon waking in the morning, since they had woken them at 4:00 a.m. when it was still dark, so that they could have another hour of pre-dawn labor. Heaven help he who did not immediately jump out of “bed.” Today, the sun was shining. It was unreal. He was alive. The last that he remembered, he was about to meet the *Malach HaMaves*, Angel of Death. He slowly rose from the floor. Without much strength, he began to slowly walk around, wondering why it was so quiet. The Nazis were gone. They had run away during the night, pending the emergence of the English victors. The Russians – where were they? He kept on walking and, wherever he went, he confronted bodies. Everyone was dead, but he. Apparently, the bread had been poisoned. That is why they were feeding them. Hashem had decreed that he live. The Russians who beat him within an inch of his life were Hashem’s agents. Unknowingly, they had saved him from certain death. We never know. It is all a part of Hashem’s Divine Plan.