



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Chayei Sarah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 30, 2010
Chayei Sarah

Two Sermons

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Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart*

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Enter the Heart”

Bereishit >> Chayei Sarah > Your Soul-Mate

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ABSTRACT

A group of about fifty students was asked how many believed in love forever after. And only one responded positively. When asked why nobody else agreed, one of the students volunteered: “Everything in this world is constantly changing. We live in a transient world. Everything erodes and ages and disappears. So why should love be any different?” And others commented that, once upon a time, when they were idealistic and naïve, before they were hurt and disappointed, they did believe in love forever after, but now they know better.

It is true that people change and their interests change. And after being married for a while, they find that they have less in common with their spouse, and that there are others out there who are more attuned to their current state of being and for that reason more stimulating to be with. Simultaneously, the passion of the relationship disappears, because pleasure, by definition, has to have a certain novelty to it.

The divorce rate in America is 50% but how many more couples have emotionally divorced but have never legally formalized it? How many couples lead a life of quiet desperation convinced that the person they share their home with is not their soul-mate?

For those who fear making that fatal mistake, for those who are looking for their soul-mate and coming up empty, and for those who have yet to discover their soul-mate in their spouse, the Torah has some startling advice:

Love is forever after!

The key to finding that love and discovering your soul-mate is the fourth compatibility factor, which is not physical, emotional, or intellectual, but spiritual.

How do we find it? By following the example of the first search for a soul-mate recorded in the Torah (in this week's reading) – that of Isaac and Rebecca, as explained in this two-part sermon:

Part I: The Fourth Factor

Part II: The Example of Isaac and Rebecca

FINDING YOUR SOUL-MATE IN THE DATING WORLD; DISCOVERING YOUR SOUL-MATE IN YOUR SPOUSE

PART I: THE FOURTH FACTOR

1. Meant for Each Other?

A married couple sought counseling from a colleague of mine. Let's call them Sam and Ruth. Sam and Ruth had been married for three years, and they were fighting with each other all the time. Domestic tranquility was non-existent. They were questioning whether they were meant for each other in the first place, and whether a divorce was in order.

My colleague spent some time getting to know their problems and saw that, despite everything, they did love each other. He concluded that they were truly, sincerely looking for a better way to relate to each other but lacked the proper tools.

After some counseling, an interesting thing happened – Sam and Ruth began a new journey with each other, and today they are happily married with teenage children. In fact, they serve as a model for other young couples, who are shocked to hear – be-

cause Sam and Ruth are open about this – that these two ever had doubts about their relationship. But Sam and Ruth maintain that only because of their struggles did they discover that they truly were soul-mates.

How does a person who is not married find his or her soul-mate? How does a couple who is already married discover if they were truly meant for each other in the first place?

The Torah provides advice – in the form of the story of Isaac and Rebecca, whose union and marriage is documented in this week’s Torah reading. And even though it is an ancient story, set in a different culture and in a different set of circumstances than ours, the blueprint is there. Because the Torah is timeless and that means it is timely – its guidelines work for any time and any place. It is always relevant.

The story of Isaac and Rebecca is the first search for a soul-mate recorded in the Torah. Of course, we’ve had previous references to couples, but Adam and Eve did not have a large field to pick from; God matched them up and that was that. Abraham and Sarah were already married by the time the Torah begins to relate their story, so we are not told how they found each other exactly, though we do know their families were related. But then we get Isaac and Rebecca. Let us see what we can learn from it.

2. Impermanence of Love

No one on earth does not need love – we all need to love and be loved. It’s definitely a part of how we were created. A child from birth needs love. Inherent to being human is the need for affection and validation. And it seems to be an elusive quest. Look at the thousands of books in the subject – they would not be written and selling so well if people were not searching for a solution to the problem of finding someone to love, someone to love them.

A group of about fifty students was asked how many believe in love forever after. And only one person, a young woman, responded positively. When asked why nobody else agreed, one of the students volunteered, “Everything in this world is constantly changing. We live in a

transient world. Everything erodes and ages and disappears. So why should love be any different?" And others commented that once upon a time, when they were idealistic and naïve, before they were hurt and disappointed, they did believe in love forever after, but now they know better.

It is true that people change and their interests change. And after being married for a while, they find that they have less in common with their spouse, and that there are others out there who are more attuned to their current state of being and for that reason more stimulating to be with. Simultaneously, the passion of the relationship disappears, because pleasure, by definition, has to have a certain novelty to it.

As a consequence of a failed relationship or relationships, people's confidence is shaken. Once hurt, they start questioning themselves, doubting their judgment, or worse still, start blaming others – God, their parents, their ex-partner.

You know the four basic needs of every human being don't you?
Food, shelter, clothing and somebody else to blame.

It is no wonder that people lose faith in love forever after. And it is a logical argument – if life is transient, love must be too.

But I suggest that the Torah holds otherwise. Love *is* forever after ... if you find your soul-mate. But the question is how do you know who it is? And if you are married, how do you know if it is your spouse? Remember the story of Sam and Ruth – they were married for three years, and they did not know. They only discovered it through struggle. So how do you tell?

3. Compatibility Factors

What do we look for in a partner? In today's world we decide we are compatible based on several key factors.

David, a divorcé who was looking to remarry, compiled a list of what he wanted in a perfect woman for him. She had to have a certain look – a lithe body, olive complexion, brown eyes – she

had to have a certain level of education and career accomplishment, she had to love hiking, enjoy travel and fine dining, have a knowledge of fine wines, be kind and patient, love the sea and sailing, want children (two at least). She had to like dogs. She could not smoke, and she could not be a vegetarian – as David relished being a carnivore.

After several years of dating many women, most of whom satisfied only a few of his criteria, he finally found the perfect woman. She fit the bill in every way. Each item on his list was checked off as he set out for their first date, certain this was the woman he was destined to marry – she had to be his soul-mate. Dinner went very well, to be followed by a movie. For this David chose the latest installment in his all-time favorite series “Shrek” – the animated movie featuring a big green ogre (if you haven’t seen it). As David guffawed his way through the movie, he suddenly noticed that his date was sitting there not even chuckling. And David realized that he had left off one essential item from his list – a sense of humor...

Needless to say, not his soul-mate.

Actually, for most of us, the decision is based on only three compatibility factors:

- The first is physical. We must be attracted to the other person. (No one will choose to spend time with a person who is repulsive to him or her.) We must be drawn to the other person – whether because of their appearance, body language or sensuality – we must find the other strongly appealing.
- The second is emotional. This is very important because sometimes we find someone very attractive but when we talk to him or her, we don’t feel anything and we lose interest.
- The third is intellectual. We must respect each other’s intelligence and be stimulated by sharing ideas.

People say that it is hard to find even two out of three. If you are lucky enough to find all three compatibility factors in your date, you should be thanking your lucky stars.

I submit that despite the importance of the three compatibility factors – physical, emotional and intellectual – there is one more component, which is the single most critical one to create an eternal relationship. I am not diminishing or dismissing them, for all are vital elements of a relationship, but they are not what will create an eternal relationship – they will not guarantee love forever after.

Age erodes beauty, and physical attraction wanes. Emotional and intellectual connection weakens as people’s interests change. This is the normal part of the ever-changing lives we lead.

Of course, people may not split up because the compatibility factors that brought them together in the first place disappear. People stay together for many reasons. You’ve heard of the three C’s: 1) children 2) convenience, and 3) consumer credit.

The divorce rate in America is 50% but how many more couples are emotionally divorced but have never formalized it?

A couple, both over 100 years old, come to their rabbi and demand an immediate divorce. He is naturally astonished:

-“How long have you been married?”

-“Eighty years.”

-“Well, you’ve made it this long, don’t you want to stay together a little longer?”

-“No! Enough is enough! We have a bright future ahead of us, and we intend to make the most of it.”

-“Why did you wait this long? Why now?”

-“Well ... we couldn’t do it while the children were alive.”

All those people leading lives of quiet desperation – to borrow the words of Henry David Thoreau – no doubt initially were attracted to each other physically, emotionally and/or intellectually. Because what else is there?

4. The Fourth Factor

There is a fourth factor, and I submit that it is the only basis for love forever after. Indeed, it is the *very foundation* of it.

A foundation is rarely seen. If you have ever watched a building going up, you may have noticed a concrete pit with metal rods sticking out of it, but by the time the building is finished, you cannot see it. Yet, without it, the building will not stand for long.

The traditional blessing (said when a Jewish couple is engaged) calls for their union to be a *binyan adei ad* – literally, “a building forever after” or “an eternal edifice.” And this edifice of marriage must have a foundation without which it will not stand for long, certainly will not be an eternal edifice.

By definition a foundation is unwavering, unchanging. The structure itself can change – it can be remodeled and refurbished, repainted and redecorated. Floors, wings and rooms can be added. But the foundation stays put.

So what is a foundation of a marriage?

I submit it is spiritual compatibility – an unconscious force which is made conscious by a shared vision.

This vision transcends all other aspects of the relationship. It is a vision of how you want to build a home together, of how you want to raise your children, of how you as a couple want to impact the world, of what legacy you want to leave behind.

When two people forge a partnership *on that level*, it will not waver – the only thing that will change in that relationship will be how it plays itself out. The partners may find new ways to manifest their shared vision, but the foundational element will not change.

And because of that, they will raise healthy, secure, confident children who will have something significant to contribute to the world. For as the rhyme goes: “a tree with healthy roots will bear healthy fruits.”

5. The Long Short Road

Now, what if you realize that you do not have this healthy foundation? Well, the sages say, “knowing the illness is half the cure.” Even if you have not developed your spiritual foundation, knowing that this is what is needed is half way to the solution.

Because the biggest challenge is awareness. When you have reached that awareness you have come a long way toward an understanding of what it takes to get there. The rest takes patience and hard work, and there are no short-cuts.

The Talmud¹ tells a story of man travelling on the road to Jerusalem. He came to a fork in the road and asked a Jerusalem youth, “Which way to the city?” Now, this youth was a wit and he said, “There are two ways – this way is short and long, and that way is long and short.” The traveler decided to take the “short and long road” – somehow it sounded shorter to him. And indeed, he quickly reached a sight of the city but found his approach obstructed by gardens and orchards with no way to circumvent them. In the end he had to turn back, return to the fork in the road, where he again encountered the witty youth. He asked him, “My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?” The boy answered, “Did I not tell you that it is also long?” This time, the traveler took the alternative route – “the long and short road.” Though this road was quite circuitous, and it was a long time before the sight of the city materialized, but because it was smooth, he made better time than he did previously.

In life we have short long solutions, called short-term solutions – a band-aid on a cut, an aspirin to alleviate a headache, a tranquilizer to calm the nerves – but they cannot fix the underlying or foundational problems. They can buy time but that is all.

Still, our tendency is to want a quick fix without much effort. But the fourth factor takes patience, as does the ability to see past the externals. And just because it is a spiritual component, it is not necessarily a reli-

¹ Talmud, *Eruvin* 53b.

gious component. It does not necessarily translate into the same attitude to, or level of, religious observance. The key element is *a shared path, a shared vision*. And this does not mean sameness. In fact, the desire for sameness suggests a certain insecurity. Diversity is healthy. Then one partner can teach the other, as they journey together to a shared destination. And, helping each other, they are that much more likely to realize their goal.

PART II: THE EXAMPLE OF ISAAC AND REBECCA

6. Definition of Soul-Mates

Soul-mates implies two souls. Two people – each with their individual characteristics – who choose to embark together on an expedition on an adventure called life. Now, they don't have to be totally self-aware, since no one really is, but they both have to be on the same journey, and if they are, then they can help each other get in touch with their inner self.

But if you have no relationship with your soul, how can you find your soul-mate? Unfortunately, some people are seeking to fill that void through another person. And if it is a one-way street, the effort is bound to fail.

If you want to discover your soul, you have to break the social programming – with all its materialism and distraction – that you are a prisoner of. And that takes effort. You don't have to completely detach from the material world. You don't have to become a hermit. On the contrary – you are meant to live in the world, interact with it, improve it and elevate it. But you can't be a slave to it. And if you are, it takes some effort to break free.

Ayshet Hayil – “Woman of Valor” – the ending chapter of the Book of Proverbs attributed to King Solomon, reads: “False is grace, and empty is beauty. But a woman who reveres God, she is praise-worthy.”²

²Proverbs 31:30.

If you read this literally, it seems a put-down of grace and beauty. But that cannot be because both are used favorably in the Torah. We read, for example, “Noah found grace in the eyes of God.”³ Similarly, many holy people – like Sarah, or Rachel or Joseph are described as beautiful. Further, in Jewish law, many objects of religious ritual are *supposed* to be beautiful⁴ – the mezuzah, the kiddush cup, the Shabbat candelabra. And when the Temple in Jerusalem was standing it was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

So what does this mean? If the *only* thing you have is beauty or charm, then you are false and empty. If beauty is solely driven by the externals – if it is only skin deep – then it is false.

Picasso said that “art is a lie that reveals a deeper truth.” Art does not depict reality. Reality is dynamic while a piece of art is static. But art depicts a state of being, and in so doing captures something beneath the surface.

As the joke goes: “A passer-by stops to admire a baby boy being wheeled in a carriage. And the mother positively beams, as he oos and aahs at how cute the baby is: “Aww that’s nothing. You should see his picture.”

Yes, this is a superficial world, but just as you don’t want to be judged by your appearance alone, neither does anyone else.

So to discover your soul-mate, you have to try a different approach.

If you think what you thought and you say what you said, and you do what you did, what are you going to have? You going to have what you had. So where is change going to come from?

7. The Torah Approach

The Torah recommends a different approach through the example of Isaac and Rebecca.

³Genesis 6:8.

⁴Talmud, *Shabbat* 133b.

When Rebecca finally met Isaac, he took her into his mother's tent. His mother, Sarah, had died a short time before. And while the Torah does not tell us what transpired there, we are told that after Isaac saw Rebecca in his mother's place, he married her.⁵

The great 12th century biblical commentator, Rashi, explains that when Rebecca entered Sarah's tent, Isaac saw that she was just like his mother. And what did he see? He saw three virtues – he saw a flame, a blessing, and an enveloping cloud.

And these three things he had experienced as the son of Sarah. And then he knew that she was the one he needed to fulfill his life's mission, which was continuing the work of his father Abraham (of which his mother Sarah was such an essential part). And that's how Isaac knew that Rebecca was his soul-mate.

What do we learn from that? Some translate this into the three essential traits of a good Jewish home: 1) the flame ("burning from Shabbat to Shabbat") stands for the lighting of Shabbat candles, an act which symbolizes domestic tranquility; 2) the blessing ("in her dough") refers to keeping kosher; and 3) the enveloping cloud hints at family purity, the immersion in the *mikveh* which ensures purity in intimate relations.

These three elements have a deeper meaning:

8. The Flame

The flame is symbolic of the soul, as the Book of Proverbs puts it: "The human soul is a flame of God."⁶ The flame is the closest approximation we have in this physical world to the spiritual soul. So, if you want to find your soul-mate look for a flame.

When you look at the flame what do you see? It is the only visible physical object that defies gravity. It is always reaching upward. It is something that is not drawn by the tug of this material earth. If we were to translate this quality into a human being, it would be a person who has

⁵ Genesis 24:67.

⁶ Proverbs 20:27.

his or her feet on the ground, but who – at the same time – is not trapped by earthly things. It is someone who is looking for transcendence, someone who is always looking up – aspiring, dreaming, imagining.

A flame is also constantly flickering. In a human being this would translate into a dynamic quality – a flexible person who is not stuck in his or her ways.

A flame gives off light and it warms. There are people who drain energy from others, and there are people who energize and empower others. They illuminate and warm others.

Isaac saw that Rebecca was a flame that always burned, illuminating and warming her surroundings. And when she lit a flame on Shabbat it stayed lit – literally and metaphorically – all week.

Now, there is another feature of a flame. It is attracted to other flames. When two flames come together, they do not repel each other like magnets do for example, they meld literally into one. In other physical objects there is repulsion or at least not complete fusion like you see in a flame.

9. The Blessing

The blessing in the dough, which symbolizes keeping kosher, refers to sensitivity to the environment. To live we deprive other living beings of life – be they animal or vegetable or mineral. What right do we have to do that? What right do we have to kill a cow, or tear off an apple from a tree, or mine the earth for salt? From a Torah perspective we have no right; the only right we have was given to us by God who created the universe, stating unequivocally that we can touch any part of the universe only if we elevate it to a higher plane.

So if we tear an apple of the tree and use its energy to do a good deed, the apple has been elevated. But when we use its energy to hurt someone, the apple has been degraded.

You can eat kosher but not be kosher. To be kosher – whether literally or metaphorically – takes constant sensitivity, which Rebecca possessed.

(We, of course, knew that because earlier in the story we saw her running herself ragged to water the camels at the well – the very deed which convinced the matchmaker Eliezer that she was the right one for Isaac.)

10. The Enveloping Cloud

Finally, there was the enveloping cloud which is symbolic of an aura. We say a person gives off an aura, or an energy, or a vibe. It is an intangible, but we can sense it. Children definitely sense it and react to it. The Talmudic sages associate it with family purity or the sanctity of sexuality.

In the Torah there is no word for sexuality – it is called intimacy or literally knowledge. “Adam knew Eve.”⁷ Now the Torah is not being prudish or afraid of using a more graphic word. The Torah chooses its words carefully to convey their exact meaning. (And it is no accident that current cruder ways of referring to sexual intercourse are synonymous with “taking advantage of.” Think about it.)

Today, sexuality has become mechanical or technique oriented, though courtship is a very important element of our social interaction and our very culture. Anthropologists posit that bars, restaurants, clubs, museums all exist because they play a part in the dating, mating and relating rituals of the modern couple.

Bacteria don’t need this mating process. But humans require a restaurant, wine and candlelight just to accomplish what bacteria do naturally to perpetuate their species. Some theorists even maintain that romance is a flaw of evolution.

But the Torah does not allow sexuality to get divorced from intimacy. Sexuality is not just about two people giving each other pleasure but *knowing* each other, and through knowing each other knowing God.

The first human being was an androgynous creature – both male and female – and God split them into two. And for the rest of humanity, they

⁷Genesis 4:1.

are searching for each other to recapture that unity. Not just their personal unity but the unity within the cosmos and the unity with God.

So the sexual attraction – though it manifests in physical ways – is based on a soul attraction. At its root, it is a search for unity, for wholeness. The purpose is not to get together and procreate the species, but to achieve unity.

So Isaac saw Rebecca surrounded by an aura of healthy intimacy.

11. Our Model

The meeting of Isaac and Rebecca is the first time the Torah documents how two people met and were able to achieve spiritual compatibility. Their secret? They mastered the three critical elements that spiritually bond two people eternally: 1) They understood the nature of the soul, which is the flame with all its qualities, 2) they shared sensitivity to the material universe, and finally 3) they appreciated the true meaning and purpose of intimacy.

They are our model. Following their direction we can learn to incorporate these elements into our own relationships. And even if we might not be able to reach their heights, we can use their example to guide us in the right direction.

Isaac and Rebecca were extraordinary human beings and not so simple to emulate. But even if we never reach their standard, knowing that we want it in our lives brings us closer to that goal. Knowledge is half the cure. It is the long short road. But it is well worth the effort, because therein lies the secret of building and maintaining healthy, secure, and yes, eternal relationships. Therein lays the power to finding our soul-mate, or discovering the soul-mate within our spouse.

May we be blessed to travel that long short road without obstacles. Amen.

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Bereishit > Chayei Sarah > Yiddishe Mamme

October 30, 2010

ABSTRACT

Stereotypes abound about the “Jewish Mother.” She is a nag, a yenta, overprotective and overbearing ... a woman who is always sticking her nose in her children’s lives long after they have grown up ... intensely loving but controlling to the point of smothering ... engendering enormous guilt in her children through the endless suffering she professes to undertake for their sakes. The cause of all our problems.

This stereotype is based on myth and is as far as it gets from the truth. If you want an accurate description of a true Jewish mother – *emese Yiddishe Mamme* – read the story of Sarah, the first matriarch.

Many indispensable lessons can be gleaned from her life. Among those lessons perhaps the most important one is how to live.

Why this above others? Because it is the lesson that the Torah itself emphasizes. The very story of Sarah’s death is provocatively called *Chayei Sarah*, the “life of Sarah” – challenging us to revisit the very definition and meaning of life.

What really makes us alive – is it the immediate and visible impact that we have on those around us, or is there something more?

The Torah tells us that life – true life – can really be recognized after the person passes on. When do we know that someone is truly alive – an eternal life that never dies – when we see the effects and influence that have remained after they are physically

gone. Paradoxically, we learn more about true life after death than before it.

The fact that we are discussing Sarah's life some 3700 years after she has physically died – and are gleaning lessons from her life as to the meaning of true, eternal life today – is the greatest tribute to her own eternity!

YIDDISHE MAMME: LESSONS FROM THE FIRST JEWISH MOTHER

1. Jewish Mother Stereotypes

Stereotypes abound about the “Jewish Mother:” A nag, a yenta, over-protective and overbearing ... a woman who is always sticking her nose in her children's lives long after they have grown up ... intensely loving but controlling to the point of smothering ... engendering enormous guilt in her children through the endless suffering she professes to undertake for their sakes. The cause of all our problems.

Remember the joke about the three Jewish mothers in Miami Beach comparing notes how their sons celebrated their respective 80th birthdays. Jewish mother #1 says: “My Barry'le. He flew down the entire family for a week to Miami just to spend time with his dear mother for her birthday. Tell me is that not a boy for you?” Mother # 2: “Ahh, that's nuting. My Wolfie, you know what he did? He took us all for a safari in Africa. That's what he did for my 80th birthday.” Mother #3 looks at the other two, and waves dismissingly with her hand: “You both have nice boys. But you want to hear what a son is, look at my Sidney. My little boy is a high-powered lawyer in New York, who makes who knows how much money. My Sidney goes to therapy three times a week, pays *ich veis vifel* – top dollar they say – and he talks about nothing else but me! Now, that's a ziskeit [sweetheart] for you.”

And then of course there is the Jewish mother-in-law...

A *shetl* in Eastern Europe was short on guys. Mothers with marriageable daughters were despairing. Two of the more aggressive ones sent a letter to a matchmaker in the big city who responded that two eligible young men would be on the next train. But when the train pulled into the station, only one young man got off. Each of the two mothers sought to take possession of him. After a tug of war, they went to the *shetl rebbe* to resolve the issue. In true Solomon fashion, he said, "I will cut him in half. That way each one of you can have a piece." The two mothers had the two predictable reactions. One said, "Oh no don't do it. Give him to her." The other said, "Cut him in two." The rabbi said of the latter, "She is the true mother-in-law."

Where all these negative images come from I don't know. Some attribute the demonizing of the Jewish mother to feminist anthropologist Margaret Mead, who persuaded the American Jewish Committee to fund research of the European *shtetl*. Interviews with 128 European-born Jews who had immigrated to the United States demonstrated a range of family experiences. But the anthropologists' report, published in the 1950s though frequently cited books and articles since then, placed a "nagging, whining and malingering" mother at the center of the *shtetl* family. They reported that these mothers gave their children unshakable love but anchored it in "boundless suffering."

They retold this folktale: "A young man begs his mother for her heart, which his betrothed has demanded as a gift. Having torn it out of his mother's proffered breast, he races away with it, and as he stumbles, the heart falls to the ground. And then he hears it question protectively, 'Did you hurt yourself, my son?'"

Regardless of its root, this stereotype is based on myth and is as far as it gets from the true nature of the quintessential Jewish mother.

If you want an accurate description of a true Jewish mother, an *emese Yiddishe Mamme*, read the story of Sarah – the first Jewish mother.

2. Sarah, the First Matriarch

The Talmud¹ makes it clear that only four women can be called “matriarchs,” and Sarah is the first of them.

Many virtuous attributes are identified with her: purity piety, beauty, modesty, wisdom, courage, inspiration, spirituality, vision.

Above all, she was seamless. The opening verse of this week’s Torah reading captures the consistency of Sarah’s life: “And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years.”²

Why is the word “years” repeated three times? To teach us, says the biblical commentator Rashi, “that every digit is to be expounded upon individually: when she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old in piety. And when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old in beauty.”³

3. What Made Sarah Tick?

What made this first Jewish matriarch tick? How did she maintain her integrity through all the ups and downs of her and Abraham’s life – and there were many:

- the journey to the Promised Land which proved unlivable at the time
- the abduction by Pharaoh and Avimelech
- the anguish of so many years of childlessness
- the challenges at home from her servant, Hagar and her step-son Ishmael
- the formidable battle, together with her husband Abraham, against a pagan world

¹ Talmud *Berachot* 16b

² Genesis 23:1.

³ Rashi quoting Midrash *Bereishit Rabba* 58:1.

Through all that Sarah never wavered from her innocence, piety and commitment.

She did so, because she knew her role – which was to build a foundation for her family.

4. Building a Foundation

A mother builds life's foundation. A foundation holds up the entire structure, but is undetectable to the eye. At the time, a mother's counsel may not always be appreciated. (Perhaps this is why she has to repeat herself so many times.)

When trouble was brewing at home – threatening that foundation – Sarah insisted on a course of action that distressed her devout husband. He was reluctant to agree with her, until God intervened and told him, "Whatever Sarah your wife says you shall listen."⁴

Sarah understood, with the intuitive knowledge that comes from the innermost depths of the soul as only a mother can understand, what is right for the future. Sarah was able to transcend the momentary discomfort of the present and build an everlasting future, which can be appreciated only over the years.

What is most remarkable is the fact that, the more times passes the greater is our appreciation of Sarah's contributions.

The Jewish people today exist due to Sarah's selfless dedication and wisdom in ensuring Isaac's physical and spiritual welfare. Had she not insisted or had Abraham prevailed, all of history would have changed!

How many people can claim the same?

⁴ Genesis 21:12.

5. Woman of Valor (Optional)

The secret of the Jewish mother can be found in *Aishet Chayil* (“Woman of Valor”) – the hymn that ends the Book of Proverbs,⁵ and which is sung by many on Friday night. This hymn, which corresponds to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet is a tribute to Sarah.⁶ And its underlying theme is transcendence – true virtue and dedication is invisible at the moment, but its impact becomes obvious with time.

Let us look at some of the verses:

Her candle does not go out at night. Even when the sun sets and hope may seem lost, even when no one can see through the darkness, the mother’s flame is never extinguished. She watches over her child and her family. Who can ever measure the countless hours a mother spends silently caring and praying for her family; the innumerable little messages she gives her child through life? *She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.*

Strength and honor are her clothing, she smiles at the future. Things are not always, or perhaps never, clear in the present. But the mother’s strength and honor look ahead and beyond, and then return to infuse the life today with the wisdom and smile of tomorrow. *She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the lesson of kindness is on her tongue.*

Charm is deceptive and beauty is vain, but a woman who reveres God shall be praised. We identify beauty today with externals. The cosmetic and garment industry. Inner beauty is not quite as appreciated. The true mother is beautiful within and without. She is beautiful and she transcends beauty.

These are the attributes of the first Jewish matriarch, Sarah, and those of every true Jewish mother. You may know that beautiful song, *A Yiddishe Mamme*, with its heartwarming tune, evoking the feeling of the soft

⁵ Proverbs 31:10-31.

⁶ Midrash *Tehillim* 112:1.

Jewish mother's nurturing hearth, with her unwavering strength, making us feel that everything will be fine.

A true Jewish mother – *Yiddishe Mamme* – is one of the most powerful and complex figures in life. She serves as a pillar of unwavering strength, while remaining mostly invisible. Think of the love and confidence that a mother instills in her newborn child as she cradles him. As a mother's loving eyes meets the eyes of her child, what message is being conveyed? Is there a more powerful image of nurturing, yet one that is so understated?

The Jewish Mother: she smiles at the future.

6. How To Live

Many indispensable lessons can be gleaned from Sarah the first Jewish mother. Especially today – in our dysfunctional age, with families in crisis, marriages in disarray, and so many of us in search of a mother – it would be wise to study Sarah's life and dedication. She was, after all, a success story...

I would suggest that among those lessons perhaps the most important one is how to live.

Why this above others? Because it is the lesson that the Torah itself emphasizes. The very story of Sarah's death is provocatively called *Chayei Sarah*, the "life of Sarah" – challenging us to revisit the very definition and meaning of life.

What really makes us alive – is it the immediate and visible impact that we have on those around us, or is there something more? Some people are so full of bitterness and anger, they numb themselves and everyone they come in contact with. Others brim with adventure and excitement, and as a result, inspire others. Why are some very powerful people so lifeless, and some very simple, humble people so alive?

Look into a person's eyes. Sadly, one may be young and fit and have dead eyes. Another may be old and ailing but have eyes that sparkle. So what is the secret to being alive in the fullest sense of the word, and how can we ensure that our lives have perpetual impact?

The Talmudic sages teach:⁷ "The good – even in their deaths they are considered alive. The evil – even in their lives they are considered dead." And: The body ages, but the soul only gets more vibrant.

The "life of Sarah" conveys the deeper meaning of "being alive." Let us mine it for some key lessons – how to live a richer, deeper life, one that actualizes our fullest potential – and above all, how we can use our unique qualities to make a specific mark on the universe, now and forever.

7. Alive with Pleasure

A colleague of mine says he came to ponder these very questions when, a few years back, he saw a huge billboard sporting an advertisement for Newport Cigarettes. It screamed: ALIVE WITH PLEASURE!

"I never saw such white teeth," he recalls. "I never saw more beautiful smiling faces." Of course at the bottom of the ad was the prerequisite warning box: "Smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease and may complicate pregnancy." But no matter, the smile of this young couple was seductive enough to make one ignore the warning.

Of course, he had seen that billboard before, but this time it jumped out at him because of the word ALIVE – he was on his way to a funeral, where he was expected to deliver an inspirational sermon which he had yet to compose.

And then it suddenly hit him where the inspiration would come from – from *Chayei Sarah*, the Torah section which recounts the death of Sarah but actually says more about what it means to be alive.

⁷Talmud *Berachot* 18a-b. Rashi end of *Parshat Noah*.

Advertisers would have us believe that being alive means having a fresh young face, white teeth and blue eyes. They don't show the true color of smokers' teeth. Neither do they show us an x-ray of their lungs. And this image, they call life. Not just life, but "alive with pleasure!"

Indeed, this is what modern material life has imposed upon us. It has inundated us with a flurry of subliminal or overt images that are meant to shape our subconscious responses. It's called the world of projection. "Who are you?" has been replaced with "What do you want to look like?" As Madison Avenue cynics declare: It's not important what actually happened, but what people *think* happened.

Projection. Spin. Buzz. Hype. Brainwashing. Call it whatever you like. But one thing it is not – it is not reality; it is not life.

Advertising executives are constantly analyzing what we value in our world, what images we are most drawn to. Their object is to manipulate human emotions in order to peddle their products by projecting subliminal association with images of youth, good looks, virility, and other pictures that seduce our senses.

A therapist friend decided to change jobs and move into the advertising industry. He was unusually blunt with his reason: "Hey, therapists and advertising people are both in the same line of work," he said. "They both have a profound understanding of human emotions. The therapist tries to nurture and heal the emotions; the advertiser tries to manipulate the emotions, and the pay is triple!" I guess after years of manipulating people's emotions, he can then return to therapy and help those people heal...

I assure you that I'm not getting hysterical over the state of modern advertising. Advertising has great benefits and can serve a very powerful role in communicating a message. Much can be learned from advertising. I surely don't want to offend anyone who may be in this industry. I am simply using it as an example to demonstrate how images shape our lives, much more than we may ever imagine.

Cigarette companies have not been spending millions of dollars on their billboards as a public service. Their beautiful faces are clearly selling cigarettes. So that image of life – though superficial and false – is definitely resonating and permeating our distorted view of ourselves and our lives.

8. Being Truly Alive

So what does it mean to be truly alive? On the surface it can be to look like that unrealistic couple adorning the billboard. Even if you get beyond billboards and TV, it may mean to be biologically alive: to breathe, walk and talk. To survive. For others alive may mean emotionally alive, in love, in a relationship, or to be intellectually alive.

Is there more to life than all the above? *Chayei Sarah*, the life of Sarah, reveals for us a completely new definition and dimension of life.

The Torah tells us that life – true life – is our spiritual vitality, which can really be recognized after the person passes on and the physical is no longer distracting us. One could argue that as long as we are biologically alive our appeal and our influence are based on our physical presence and the power we wield. When do we know that someone is truly alive – an eternal life that never dies – when we see the effects and influence that have remained after they are physically no longer there.

Paradoxically, we learn more about true life after death than before it.

The fact that we are discussing Sarah's life some 3700 years after she has physically died – and are gleaning lessons from her life as to the meaning of true, eternal life today – is the greatest tribute to her own eternity!

How many people do we remember even a few years after their death, let alone three and a half millennia later?! Many people were very powerful while they were physically around, while they exercised power and control. But once they died, many of them were quickly forgotten, and the power they once so mercilessly wielded dissipated as quickly as it came.

Indeed, as the Talmud tells us, corrupt people are considered dead even in their lifetimes. By contrast, righteous people are considered alive even in their deaths.

This is an awesome thought. Today, in the midst of the ultra-modern 21st century, we actually know and can retrace the exact steps, the exact location and activities that Sarah took thousands of years ago.

If you want to be acquainted with real life, look at the life of Sarah – a woman, a wife and mother whose life, love and inspiration influenced and motivated not only her husband Abraham and her son Isaac but has continued and continues to influence and motivate all the generations since her passing.

The life of Sarah (*after* her death) teaches us more about life than we learn from our own experiences of life. It teaches us that true life is spiritual life – the eternal things we do today are the ones that never die. It bids us remember this with every breath we take, we every word we speak, and every action we engage in. It compels us to live our physical lives today imbued and saturated with spirit and soul.

This is the heritage of Sarah, the first Jewish mother, our mother. May we do her proud.

Had Abraham remained with God and ignored the strangers, he would have embraced God in a selfish way – only for himself. By greeting the guests he greeted God in a more powerful way – through greeting God’s own beloved creations.

In a cold room you can warm yourself by donning a fur coat, which warms you but no one else. Or you can light a furnace, and then warm everyone in the room. Faith is not about you alone, it is about everyone around you as well.

8. Temper Your Passion

Abraham was the epitome of love and faith.

Precisely because faith is so passionate and potent a force, it can be very destructive when not driven – and tempered – by love.

Ishmael, his son, was “wild” – that is, he inherited the wild and powerful passion of faith. And that’s exactly why, of all people, Ishmael was in such critical need of humility and suspension of self – to ensure that his passion was channeled in a Godly and not in a destructive way.

Secure faith in God does not require you to destroy anyone that does not believe as you do. Secure faith in God is the absolute dedication to inspire.

God did not tell Abraham to destroy his son Ishmael. On the contrary, He promised him that he will be a great nation. Indeed, Ishmael’s journeys are documented in the Torah – how God was with him, protected him and blessed him.

However, this happened only after Abraham listened to his wife Sarah and sent Ishmael away from their home. Ishmael would become a great nation under God, but only when he clearly recognized his boundaries.

Love is distorted when there are no boundaries. Love requires discipline – and only then is it true love, for only then does it foster humility instead of arrogance.⁹

Sending Ishmael away from Isaac’s home was Abraham’s ultimate act of love, and one that would allow Ishmael to become a great nation.

Faith is absolute, but that does not preclude diversity – different people, different nations, serving God each in their own way. Abraham taught faith and love, but he also taught that we all must serve God in our unique way, and that we should inspire others to do so with compassion.

9. Kabbalistic Insight

In a way, the need to separate between Isaac and Ishmael reflects the struggle between two approaches to faith and co-existence, as explained by Kabbalah.

Kabbalah (and Hassidic literature derived from it) teaches that Ishmael represents wild passion (*chesed*), while Isaac represents its opposite, strict discipline (*gevurah*). The discipline is necessary to balance and channel the passion.

Each of us – both the Jews and Muslims – would do well to ask ourselves today: How would our forefather Abraham react to our attitudes and beliefs? Would he be proud of our behavior?

10. Call to Action

So when faced with the troubling questions brought up by today's realities, what can you do? I suggest the following:

- Examine your attitudes to people of different faith – where do they need adjusting?
- Ask yourself – would Abraham be applaud or question your attitudes and actions?
- Reach out to people with different backgrounds than your own, and have a discussion about faith.
- Emulate Abraham by inviting guests to your home.
- Review whether your faith helps you to inspire others or to criticize others.