



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Chayei Sarah

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November 26, 2016
Chayei Sarah

**The Mother-in-Law as
Supreme Model**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

In the first documented courting process in history, we read that Isaac compared Rebecca to his mother, Sarah. Indeed, we are told that only when Isaac was sure that Rebecca emulated his mother was he certain that she was the one.

Now that flies in the face of modern conventional wisdom. Husbands of the world know to never, ever, compare their wives to their mothers, nor their mothers to their wives. Indeed, such comparisons between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law can produce more friction than a nuclear reactor.

So where did Isaac go wrong – or should we say, where did he go right?

The answer has to do with the three qualities one should be looking for in a potential spouse, to ensure an eternal bond: 1) the quality of light, 2) the quality of transformation, and 3) the quality of purity.

Look for someone who: 1) will fill your home with light; 2) has the ability to transform raw material into an elevated blessing; 3) is committed to building a pure and sacred relationship with you, as per G-d’s instructions.

Mazal Tov – may your, or your children’s marriage, be an everlasting edifice!

THE MOTHER-IN-LAW AS SUPREME MODEL 3 QUALITIES TO LOOK FOR IN A SPOUSE

1. No One is Perfect (Joke)

A *shadchan* (matchmaker) goes over to a yeshiva *bachur* and announces, "Do I have a girl for you!"

"Not interested," replies the *bachur*.

"She's very beautiful," says the *shadchan*.

"Really?" says the *bachur*.

"Yes, and she's rich too."

"Really?"

"And she has great *yichus*. She's from a very fine family."

"Sounds great," says the *bachur*. "But why would a girl like that want to marry me? She'd have to be crazy!"

"Well..." replies the *shadchan*. "You can't have everything."

2. Love Is...Deaf? (Joke)

A *shadchan*, having sung the praises of a female client, brought his excited male prospect to see her.

Yankel took one look at the girl to whom the *shadchan* elaborately introduced him and recoiled.

"What's the matter?" asked the *shadchan*.

"You said she was young," whispered Yankel, "but she's forty if she's a day! You said she was beautiful, but she looks like the back of a bus!"

You said she was trim and fit, but she's wider than I am – and I'm no anorexic! You said – ”

“You don't have to whisper,” says the *shadchan*. “She's also hard of hearing.”

3. Desirable Traits

What qualities should we look for in a spouse? What qualities should we look for when searching for a suitable match for our children? What qualities should we educate our children to look for when dating?

Is beauty number-one on the list? Or perhaps money? Is good lineage a desirable requirement? How about kindness? Is intelligence important? What about religion and faith? Does she have to cook? Does he have to clean? Does he have to take out the garbage? Does she have to be funny?

Perhaps the qualities one should be looking for have less to do with the expected (and ephemeral) and more with the unexpected (and ethereal).

We can find the answer to this vital question in this week's *parsha*/Torah chapter.

4. Parshat Chayei Sarah

Our Torah reading this week – *Parshat Chayei Sarah* – begins with the passing of our Matriarch Sarah, the mother of every single Jew on this planet and every single Jew in history. We then learn that, after Abraham (her husband and our Patriarch) buried Sarah in Hebron, he dispatched his trusted servant, Eliezer, on history's first documented diplomatic mission – to find a *shidduch*, a suitable match for his (40-year-old) son, Isaac.

Remember, this was the Middle East of nearly 4,000 years ago. Suitable matches were harder to come by than in New York today. And this was before speed-dating, JDate, and all the other tech-enabled dating services of the modern era. Eliezer was entrusted with a monumental task, one that would influence the entire Jewish people for all eternity, as well as the future shape of the world.

The Torah relates what happened:

At a water well somewhere in the vicinity of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers,¹ which would be today someplace in Iraq, Eliezer stops to pray for a sign. He asks G-d that the right girl for Isaac be the one who comes to draw water from the well and brings a drink to him and his camels. Rebecca appears and does exactly that. And she turns out to be Abraham's niece (the daughter of Betuel, who was the son of Abraham's brother Nahor). Certain he has struck gold (metaphorically speaking), Eliezer negotiates with the future in-laws for Rebecca's hand, saddles up his camels, and takes her back to the Holy Land – to Isaac.

Returning home, Eliezer recounts to Isaac all that transpired – from his meeting Rebecca until now. As the Torah states:

*And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done.*²

Like any good *shadchan*, Eliezer knew that he needed to convince the prospective groom that this girl was the right one – the right one to be Isaac's wife, but also, and even more importantly, the right one to be the next Matriarch of the Jewish people.

Isaac listened to it all. The story of how Eliezer met Rebecca, and the kindness with which she acted, enticed him. But what sealed the deal for Isaac was when he took Rebecca into the tent of his mother, Sarah.

*Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother, and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted for [the loss of] his mother.*³

¹ Rashi's commentary to Genesis 24:10.

² Genesis 24:66.

³ Genesis 24:67.

Let me repeat that sequence:

First *Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother. And only then, he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her. And finally: Isaac was comforted for [the loss of] his mother.*

5. In Modern Terms

Let us transpose this to the modern-day.

Imagine a guy hears all about the beauty and perfection of a certain girl. The person who wants to set them up recounts all her virtues and sterling qualities. The guy thinks it's all very nice, but he's not sure. He first has to take the girl to the home of his recently-deceased mother, and only then will he be convinced that she's the one.

Don't you think the girl would be offended? Would she not say, "Are you marrying me or are you marrying your mother?" Would she not be justified in suggesting that perhaps the boy is not looking for a wife, but rather for a mother-substitute and perhaps have some kind of psychological complex? At the very least, would not a new bride be intimidated by her mother-in-law's home; would she not desire a home of her own?

Indeed, Isaac's behavior flies in the face of modern conventional wisdom. Husbands of the world know to never, ever, compare their wives to their mothers. Stereotypes abound, justified or not, about mothers-in-law, and the conflicts they pose in marriages...

Now let me ask you: Why would the Torah set up all these questions in our minds? Why mention Sarah here at all? Isaac is marrying Rebecca – why is his mother part of the picture?

The verse could have simply read: *Isaac brought her into the tent, and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her.* Why mention that it was Sarah's tent, and that his marriage to Rebecca comforted Isaac for the loss of his mother?

The answer to this is both beautiful and touching. And demonstrates for us the ideal model of a mother.

6. Three Convincing Traits

Even after everything Eliezer related about Rebecca, Isaac was still not one-hundred percent certain that she was the one for him. Until... he saw that Rebecca glowed with the aura of his mother Sarah.

Isaac was not being picky. Isaac was not being selfish. On the contrary, Isaac was being completely reasonable and selfless. This Isaac was not just a man looking for one woman to marry. More than a spouse for himself, he was also looking for a woman who would meet the criteria to become the next Matriarch of the Jewish people. Like his mother, Sarah, Isaac's wife would have to fulfill G-d's promise. So Isaac had to be one-hundred percent certain, without any shred of reasonable or unreasonable doubt, that Rebecca was the one.⁴

How could he know for sure if Rebecca – or any spouse – was the right woman for the job?

The Torah tells us. And this is why it mentions Sarah.

Only when Isaac saw that Rebecca emulated – indeed, perpetuated – his mother's traits, did Isaac know without a doubt that Rebecca was the one.

Why was Isaac using Sarah as the prototype by which to measure Rebecca? What qualities did Isaac see when Rebecca entered Sarah's tent? And what, therefore, should we look for in our spouses?

The Midrash answers:

He brought her to the tent, and behold, she became Sarah his mother – that is, she became the likeness of Sarah, his mother. As long as Sarah was alive, a candle burned from one Shabbat eve to the next, a blessing was found in the dough, and a cloud was attached to the tent. When Sarah died, these things ceased, but when Rebecca arrived, they resumed.⁵

⁴ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 15, pp. 163-173 and sources there at length.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 6-:15.

Three things – light, transformation, purity – candles of endless light, the ability to turn raw ingredients into delicacies, and an aura of holiness.

7. The Three Traits in Practical Terms

When looking for a spouse, a wife or a husband, how may you translate these three traits into modern-day terms, to help you find the suitable match to marry, and, more generally, to perpetuate your purpose for being?

Light, life, spirit.

You are looking for someone that brings light to the world – and not just any light, but light that begins on Shabbat and lasts all week long.

You are looking for someone that takes raw materials, raw ingredients, and transforms them into kosher and refined products.

And you are looking for someone that has a pure spirit.

As the commentaries⁶ explain, these three traits play out in the three essential mitzvot which are particularly gifted to the feminine – the foundation of every Jewish home – kindling Shabbat lights, blessing challah dough, and keeping family purity (*tahrat ha'mishpacha*).

When Isaac saw that Rebecca returned these three staples to his mother's tent, Isaac knew that Rebecca was the one.

Is there any greater tribute to honor one's mother and wife?

⁶ Chizkuni, Gut Aryeh, Bartenura, Be'er Mayim Chayim et al. to Genesis 24:67.

8. Quality Over Quantity

From this week's Torah reading we learn the three essential qualities we should be seeking in a spouse to ensure a lasting and eternal bond and edifice: 1) light, 2) transformation, and 3) purity.

These play out in the spouse 1) lighting Shabbat candles and her commitment to keeping Shabbat in general; 2) in her blessing on her challah dough and her commitment to keeping kosher in general; and 3) in her commitment to the laws of family purity, that is, sacred intimacy.

And, we may say, that seeking a husband, a woman should be looking for these same essential qualities, so that he may partner with her in fulfilling their divine purpose together here on earth.

Thus a potential husband 1) must be committed a family home filled with light; 2) must have the ability to transform raw material into an elevated blessing; 3) must be committed to building a pure and holy relationship with his wife, as per G-d's specific instructions.

Everything else will certainly then fall – or shall we say, rise – into place. How can we be so sure? Simply look at the proof. Isaac and Rebecca's marriage, based on these three foolproof principles, produced an eternal union that in turn produced the Jewish people – including you and me – an eternal people who have endured till this very day!

How many things can we point at that have lasted over 3800 years?! Is there any greater success than that?!

This week when we honor and celebrate this everlasting marriage between Isaac and Rebecca, let us all commit our relationships to these three pillars and principles – light, transformation and purity.

Our fruits and results will then likewise be everlasting.

And we will all say: Mazal Tov!

May your, or your children's marriage, be an everlasting edifice! Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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