



BEREISHIT

Chayei Sarah
Yiddishe Mamme
November 11, 2017

YIDDISHE MAMME: LESSONS FROM THE FIRST JEWISH MOTHER

ABSTRACT

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

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, our first matriarch.

Indeed, an entire chapter in Torah – the one we read this week – is called *Chayei Sarah*, the “life of Sarah,” emphasizing that we can glean many indispensable lessons from her life. Among those lessons perhaps the most important one is how to live.

But wait. When we begin reading this week’s chapter it talks all about Sarah’s death and the events that happened subsequent to her passing! Why then would we provocatively call the portion *Chayei Sarah*?! This challenges 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?

1. Jewish Mother Stereotypes

Stereotypes abound about the “Jewish Mother:” 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.

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 *shetl*. 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 *shetl* 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 Sar-

¹ Talmud *Berachot* 16b.

ah's life: "And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years²."

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

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.

² Genesis 23:1.

³ Rashi quoting Midrash Bereishit Rabba 58:1.

⁴ Genesis 21:12.

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?

5. Woman of Valor (Optional)

The secret of the Jewish mother can be found in *Aisbet 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 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,

⁵ Proverbs 31:10-31.

⁶ Midrash *Tehillim* 112:1.

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. The Mother How To Live

The power of a mother and the confidence she instills in her children – as personified by Sarah – is beautifully captured in a question little girl once asked her pregnant mother:

Staring at her mother’s bulging belly, her little daughter looked at up her and innocently asked: “Mommy, how do you have room inside of you for a baby?”

From the mouths of babes. This young child’s simple question made me think: Some of us – especially men – don’t even have room for other people *outside* of us. Let alone inside. How often do you hear people say “I need my space.” Our own needs so consume us that it crowds out anyone else. Our worries and concerns so preoccupy us, that we often don’t have space or time for others. Even outside of us; *outside* of our beings. Let alone making room *inside* of us for another person.

Can you imagine: A woman carries a child not for a day, not for a month, but for nine consecutive months. And the child doesn’t occupy one small unnoticeable corner of her body; it inhabits her entire being. Everything in her body – and in her life – changes while she carries her child.

That type of selfless humility – to allow space inside of you to sustain and nurture another life – is the ultimate beauty and power of a mother, as reflected in Sarah.

From the mouths of babes we can learn profound truths indeed.

7. 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.

8. 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.

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!”

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

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.

9. 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 gleaned 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, 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.

May we learn from her how to be true nurturing mothers, and how to cherish the mothers of our world.

A mother is a person we can depend upon and entrust our children to. When we are lost in the way, a mother is someone we can ask for directions, and trust that she will direct us to safety.

With our mothers at the helm, let us create a world where no child is ever left crying in the dark. Where no child is ever hurt by a narcissistic adult.

Just imagine if our society was run by mothers, how different our world would look.

© Copyright 2017 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.