

# פרשת וירא

## LEARNING FROM OUR PATRIARCHS AND MATRIARCHS

It is naive to think that men and women communicate in a similar fashion. It is even more naive to think that we can explain the conduct of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs in terms of our own perspective on life. Allow me to expound on these two common misconceptions, and how they overlap in this week's *perashah*.

The Torah and the Midrash tell us that Sarah noticed the immoral actions of Yishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. Among them was his new sport of shooting arrows over the head of Sarah's son, Yitzchak. The teenaged Yishmael claimed that he was only playing, and that no harm would come of it. Yishmael would also mock Yitzchak by pointing out that he himself was the first-born, and therefore entitled to a double share of the inheritance. Sarah could not sit idly by, and requested that Abraham "*send away this maidservant and her son, for this maidservant's son will not inherit with my son Yitzchak.*"

Many people misinterpret the ensuing disagreement between Abraham and Sarah about whether or not to send Yishmael and Hagar away. They see it as something personal. But the Tosefta (*Sota 5*) makes it quite clear that this was not the case at all. Both Sarah and Abraham were concerned about possible damage to G-d's honor and "reputation" – what we call *chillul HaShem*. Sarah meant to communicate: "If my son Yitzchak learns from Yishmael's behavior and habits, *wouldn't the name of Heaven be desecrated?*" Sarah was concerned that the Name of G-d would be disgraced if her son, a future Patriarch of the Jewish Nation, would pick up any Yishmael-like traits. Abraham responded that he had great difficulty fulfilling this request: "After we upgraded Hagar from maidservant to housewife, *what would people say* if we drive her from our home? Abraham was concerned about their stature as Patriarchs and about possible desecration of Heaven's Name as well. Sarah answered that since there are differences between us, Heaven should arbitrate. And, indeed, G-d ruled in her favor. He said to Abraham: "Whatever Sarah says to you, heed her voice." Now, this terminology is a bit surprising, as Rashi notes. Why did G-d say "heed *her voice*," and

not "heed *her words*"? Isn't a voice without words just incomprehensible sound?

G-d was hinting to Abraham that Sarah was a greater prophet than he. *Her voice* was her prophetic voice, her power of prophecy. However, there is a further peculiarity in this verse which actually speaks volumes if we can just tune in to the Hebrew. Abraham is told to "*heed/listen to her voice*" – שמע בקולה wouldn't it be more grammatically correct to say שמע לקולה? By using the letter (actually a preposition here) ב, G-d seems to be suggesting more than just *heeding/listening*.

A deeper meaning is something along the following lines: When a husband or son hears his wife or mother saying something, he may tend to listen mainly to what is specifically verbalized, but be less tuned in to the emotions being communicated. He forgets that women tend to use non-verbal cues such as tone, emotion, and empathy when conveying what is on their mind. This is what G-d was telling Abraham. When listening to Sarah, *listen not only to what she says, but to the way in which she says it.*

Now let's take a closer look at Sarah's request that Abraham send away Yishmael and Hagar: "Send away this maid servant and her son, for this maidservant's son will not inherit with my son with Yitzchak." At first glance, it may seem that Sarah was being over-protective of her son Yitzchak and jealous of Hagar's relationship with her husband Abraham. From the Midrashim, however, it is obvious that this is not the case at all. Sarah felt that Hagar had to be sent away as well for if she did not know how to raise Yishmael properly, she could not be a mother in the house of Abraham – a house where people were trained to serve G-d. Sarah was focused on values and morals, not personal considerations. To sanctify G-d's Name was her highest priority. These inner feelings and sense of judgment were actually a result of her high level of prophecy. Out of respect to her husband, she still was careful not to say to Abraham that she knew she was right as a result of her higher level of prophecy. So she found a way of saying it as if it were something personal.

Going one step further, it is a fact of life that most women do not answer "Yes" or "No" to questions that men routinely handle with short answers. Women in general, and modest women in particular, tend not to state their feelings explicitly. They need a chance to express themselves. If not given this chance, they might well avoid committing themselves. And even after they do express themselves, they might still say: "I don't know; do whatever you feel." A man must therefore listen perceptively to a woman's voice, and feel her feelings, and figure out exactly what she wants on his own. This is essentially what G-d said to Abraham שמע בקולה and not שמע לקולה – "listen into" her voice, not just to what her voice is explicitly saying.

The *Chatam Sofer* brings evidence for this concept from Lavan's remark to Eliezer concerning giving Rivkah's hand in marriage to Yitzchak: נקרא פיה לנערה ונשאלה את פיה – "We will call the girl and ask her *mouth*" (*Bereishit* 24:57). On the surface the word פיה (*her mouth*) seems superfluous. The *Chatam Sofer* explains: Lavan was willing to do whatever possible to prevent his sister from marrying Yitzchak and building the Jewish Nation. Lavan figured that if they put Rivkah on the spot and asked: Do you want to marry him, Yes or No? – she would not be willing or able to give a direct response. Lavan would then explain that she does not want to go. Instead, *a miracle happened*, and Rivkah gave a clear "Yes!" to the question.  
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