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PASSION—THE MISSING LINK

*Let the good in me connect with the good in others
until all the world is transformed through
the compelling power of love.*

Rebbi Nachman of Breslov

TO LIVE YOUR VALUES TAKES PASSION

Value-based living is a totally different ballgame than value-based believing. It doesn't take much to resonate with an idea and hold it sacred in your mind. But transitioning from the abstract to the concrete is another thing altogether. Value-based living demands commitment—the commitment to embody your vision through action. It involves feeling that without these values my life is worthless. They are not simply aspirational messages but rather they reflect my core, and hence I am willing to pursue them even if it involves discomfort.

The moment of initial inspiration quickly dissipates long before we can translate values into habituated behaviors. Neither can we resort to sheer will and determination. Fatigue quickly sets in. If we are going to take the leap from merely believing in values into the realm of actually living them, we need passion. Passion is the engine that gives depth, inspiration, and continuity. Habit may get me to repeat my good values, but only passion can humanize them. Intimacy can only be achieved

with passion. If we want to really connect to our Judaism—and to our God—we have to find the fire within ourselves.

SARAH—THE JEWISH LEADER OF PASSION

While Sarah's husband Abraham was the scientist finding God behind the veils of nature, she provided passion and desire for the holy—the heartbeat of conviction.¹ Abraham passed onto the Jewish People the inheritance of straight and clear thinking. Sarah, the first Jewess, provided the inner soul, the warmth, and the flavor of belief.²

Make no mistake—Sarah had a towering intellect. Sarah was the first and greatest of the seven prophetesses.³ We are taught that she was an even greater prophet than Abraham!⁴ This is not surprising. Prophecy per se comes to us with what Kabbalists call our female side.⁵ Certainly, female prophets seemed to have achieved their prophecy more naturally than males. Miriam, the sister of Moses, was a prophetess while still a child, and Chana's heart-felt prayer reached the level of prophecy.⁶ When prophecy will return in the Messianic Era, women will outdo men in prophecy.⁷

Yet these staggering levels of holiness were not her gift to the Jewish People. Sarah's legacy is her passion. She became the heart of the Jewish People. That is why not only her merits, but Abraham's merits as well, are attributed to her.⁸

1 *Shem MiShmuel*, Genesis, *Chayei Sarah* 5681, p. 259.

2 See Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik's eulogy for the Tolna Rebbetzin, Rebecca Twersky, delivered on Jan. 30, 1977.

3 Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 14a and Tractate *Sotah* 7a. The seven prophetesses were Sarah, Miriam (the sister of Moses), Deborah, Chanah, Abigail, Chuldah, and Esther.

4 Genesis 21:12 and *Rashi* ad loc.

5 *Maharal*, *Derech Chaim on Ethics of Our Fathers* 1:1 (end).

6 Chanah lived at the time of Samuel the Prophet (see the opening to the Book of Samuel). For the nature of prophecy, see Chapter 35.

7 *Ohr Hachaim*, Exodus 15:20–21.

8 *Shem MiShmuel*, Genesis, *Chayei Sarah* 5681, p. 259, in the name of the *Zohar*.

GOD TESTS SARAH'S PASSION

Sarah used her passion to achieve spiritual greatness. She was a genius of the soul. Just because of that, God tested her.⁹

Sarah was extraordinarily beautiful.¹⁰ In fact, the Sages say she was one of the four most beautiful women ever!¹¹ Pharaoh of Egypt and Avimelech, king of Gerar, noticed her beauty and took her against her will.¹² If not for the fact that Abraham claimed to be her brother and not her husband, they would have simply disposed of him.¹³

Sarah had passion. Because of this, she became the heart of the Jewish People.

On these occasions, Sarah was tested as to whether she would cleave to the wrong parties, i.e., to Pharaoh and Avimelech, instead of to her husband Abraham.¹⁴ Of course, Sarah would not have agreed to such an arrangement at the outset, but being forced into this, perhaps she could come to terms with being the illustrious wife of a wealthy and powerful ruler. After all, here was Sarah, a person of intense passion, capable of embracing her new situation and the people who went with it.

Here was Sarah's big test. Would her intense passion be attached to the wrong people and to the wrong cause? To properly employ passion, one must avoid moral confusion and have absolute clarity and moral resolve. Passion can so easily drive purpose—leading us to explain to ourselves why what we are doing is really good after all.¹⁵

Sarah withstood this test. She remained faithful to Abraham. She made sure that her passion was driven by her values. It was this that allowed her to remain authentic to herself and to not allow her passion to cloud her vision.

9 In general, God tests the foremothers and the forefathers on what they excelled in. See Chapter 43.

10 Genesis 12:11, 14.

11 Talmud, Tractate *Megillah* 15a. The other three were Esther, Abigail, and Rachav.

12 Genesis 12:15, 20:2.

13 Ibid. 12:13; 20:2.

14 *Shem MiShmuel* ad loc.

15 Hence the Sages say, "The sons of Israel only served idolatry to permit public licentiousness." The idolatry was simply a justificatory ideology for illicit behavior; Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 63b.

Sarah was a master of moral clarity. In his eulogy for Sarah, Abraham says, “She seeks out wool and linen.”¹⁶ Jewish law prohibits the use of *shaatnez*,¹⁷ garments that are made of wool and linen together. This retains our sensitivity to the order and balance of the creation.¹⁸ The Sages interpret Abraham’s reference to these materials as Sarah’s ability to have moral clarity—to separate what was good from what was bad.¹⁹ Sarah’s passion made her great because she combined it with absolute moral clarity. She never fooled herself, and she never got sucked in.

SARAH’S DECISIVENESS DEFINES THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Moral clarity operates hand-in-hand with distinct boundary setting. Sarah’s moral clarity challenged her numerous times to draw a line in the sand. When Ishmael, the child of Abraham and Hagar,²⁰ began to drift toward sinful behavior, Sarah drew a clear line and demanded his expulsion from her home.²¹ Abraham still wanted to keep Ishmael close and make him a part of the future of the Jewish People,²² but Sarah, with her moral clarity, made the difficult decision to oppose this, realizing that Ishmael’s behavior contradicted everything that she and Abraham lived for.²³

Sarah’s disagreement with Abraham was hardly some local domestic disagreement. It was about the very borders and parameters of the Jewish People with mind-boggling ramifications. Would Ishmael and

16 Proverbs 31:13. This is known as the *Eishet Chayil* (“Woman of Valor”) song, which we sing every Friday night around the Shabbat table. The *Yalkut Shimoni* tells us that the song is about Sarah. *Midrash Tanchuma, Chayei Sarah*, chap. 4, tells us that it was first composed by Abraham and was later included by Solomon at the end of his book of Proverbs.

17 Deuteronomy 22:11.

18 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, *ibid*.

19 *Tanchuma* ad loc.

20 Hagar was Sarah’s maidservant whom she gave to Abraham to produce a child when she seemed not able to; see Genesis 16:1–4.

21 Genesis 21:10.

22 *Ibid.* 21:11.

23 *Ibid.* 21:9. See *Rashi* ad loc., who states that the words used by the Torah, *metzachek*, refers to the three cardinal sins. However, at the end of his life, Ishmael repented. We learn this from Genesis 25:17, where it uses the term *va’yigva* for the death of Ishmael. *Rashi* there tells us that this word is only used with reference to the death of the righteous.

his descendants contribute their enormous civilization-energy as a part of the Jewish People? Or would they develop a civilization of their own?²⁴

God clearly came out on the side of Sarah. He tells Abraham to listen to his wife—and history was forever changed.²⁵ God gives Ishmael his own blessing, and hence he became the forefather of the Arab nations and, ultimately, Islam.²⁶

With this action, Sarah set up a pattern of history.²⁷ From then onwards, Jewish lineage is determined by the mother and not the father.²⁸ This was part of Sarah's ability to create parameters and define the borders of expression of human behavior. Sarah's very name was given by God and came from the Hebrew word meaning "to rule over."²⁹ As the matriarch of all Jewish women, Sarah bequeathed these qualities to all future generations of Jewish women. This is part of the Jewish conception of female power.³⁰

FEMALE POWER

Female power is not just engaged in creating life-environments; it is that which creates life to begin with. The male contribution to the fertilization of an egg cell is infinitely small. It contains no effort and no pain. Not so the female. She has the ability to absorb this minute speck within herself and build from it a completely new life. The child is formed physically within the mother over a considerable time; effort and pain are involved, and finally a child is born.

The female is the one who nurtures. During pregnancy, the womb provides a total environment for the fetus—its food, oxygen, warmth, and blood supply. This has to do with creating environments and providing

24 *Tanchuma, Chayei Sarah*, chap. 4.

25 Genesis 21:12.

26 *Ibid.* 21:18.

27 This is based on a principle that "the actions of the fathers are a sign to the children," and is used extensively by the commentators throughout their commentaries on Genesis. See, for example, *Ramban* 26:1; the *Netziv, Haamek Davar* 18:15 and 30:40; *Meshech Chochmah* 15:15; *Taz* 45:14. This is based on the Talmud, Tractate *Sotah* 34a.

28 Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin* 68b (chap. 3, mishnah 12), based on Deuteronomy 7:3–4.

29 See *Rashi* on Genesis 17:16, where God himself changes her name from Sarai to Sarah.

30 See Chapter 30 for more on this.

boundaries. But there is an extra element: the element of mercy. Mercy is a fine-tuning of the environment, allowing general principles to be applied according to the specific needs of each individual situation. Hence the Hebrew word for womb, *rechem* (רחם), is related to mercy, *rachamim* (רחמים).³¹

PASSION FOR THE WEEK

We begin every week by making the blessing of Havdalah at the end of the Shabbat. Included is the blessing *Borei Meorei Ha'aish*—“He who created the lights of fire.” What we are really saying is, “May we have the right passion for the week.” When we are passionate about our beliefs, we are truly alive, seeing even ordinary moments as enchanted. Our spiritual future is dependent on female nurturance—“the Torah of your Mother”³²—to direct our passion toward our value-based goals.

31 Talmud, Tractate *Chullin* 63a, discusses a non-kosher bird called *racham* (Leviticus 11:18) and relates that to the word *rachamim*.

32 Proverbs 1:8.