



Class #10

In the Footsteps

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

WHAT IS THE ELUSIVE POWER OF THE GREAT JEWISH WOMAN?

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Each of the great Jewish women in the Bible possess unique character traits, strengths and abilities. Yet there is also a common thread, a special tapestry of recurring themes, woven into these illustrious figures of Jewish history.

Sarah, the first Jewish woman, was a true partner with Avraham in their mission to spread ethical monotheism throughout the pagan world. After many years of childlessness, she takes in Hagar, her maidservant, as a surrogate mother for the son whom she hopes will lead the Jewish nation. Yet Yishmael didn't turn out as Sarah planned; he is a "wild man." Eventually, when Yitzhak is born and reaches childhood, Sarah approaches Avraham and demands that he get rid of Yishmael and Hagar. This seemingly harsh approach is met with resistance from Avraham, the man of loving kindness. But God agrees with Sarah, and the Midrash confirms her pure intentions:

Sarah saw Yishmael building altars and sacrificing animals for idol worship. She said, "What if Yitzhak, my son, will learn from him? There will be a desecration of God's Name!"



Avraham said, "...How can we get rid of her? What will people say of us? There will be a desecration of God's Name!"

Sarah said, "If we're both talking about a desecration of God's Name, so let God decide between my words and yours."

God agreed with Sarah, as it says (Genesis 21:12), "Everything Sarah says to you, listen to her voice." (Tosefta - Sotah 5:7)

By analyzing the difference of opinion between Avraham and Sarah in this encounter, key features of the first matriarch emerge:

Big Picture Perspective

Sarah saw the far-reaching effects of Yishmael's influence on Yitzhak. If Yitzhak didn't develop the stature and behavior necessary for a forefather of the Jewish nation, there would be no Jewish nation. What a great desecration of God's Name it would be for the entire message of Godliness in this world to be stunted or aborted.

Avraham, on the other hand, saw the here and now: Our neighbors know we have an Egyptian maidservant, and will think ill of us when she is kicked out with her son. They might interpret it to mean that Godly people are cruel; this is also a desecration of God's Name.

When viewed in comparison, Sarah is incredibly long-sighted, with a vision that encompassed the "big picture" of Jewish destiny and global repair.

Insight into Human Nature

Interestingly, as harsh as Sarah appears in her confrontation with Avraham, the Midrash also accentuates her diplomatic ability to have a "good," peaceful argument. She doesn't lash out at Avraham's opinion, nor does she try to prove that she is right. Rather, she points out the similarities in their thinking: "We're both concerned about a desecration of God's Name." She then leaves it up to God to make the decision, ostensibly not knowing who will "win." God then agrees with Sarah, as it says, "Everything Sarah says to you, listen to her voice."

Sarah had more insight than Avraham regarding what type of environment was necessary for Yitzhak's education. She also had the good sense to diplomatically influence her husband toward her point of view.

Rivka's Insight into Children's Personalities

Rivka is another woman with a clear-sighted view of her children, their natures, needs and future destinies.

Rivka's husband Yitzhak favored Esav as the next link in the Jewish chain:

Yitzhak loved Esav, for hunting was in his mouth. (Genesis 25:28).

Esav would trick his father with words by asking, "How do you take a tithe from salt and straw?" Therefore Yitzhak thought that he was stringent in the performance of mitzvot. (Rashi)

Yitzhak saw how certain aspects of Jewish law interested Esav and, based on this, built a conception of him as righteous. Rivka, however, saw the totality of her children's personalities: "And Rivka loved Yaakov," due to her understanding of his inherent essence, through her ability to see the whole person and not get caught up in external factors.

Rivka realized, as did her predecessor, Sarah, that in order to carry out Jewish destiny in the long term, some immediate action must be taken. She also knew how to influence her husband and convince him to do as she knew best. Her rather devious plan to dress up Yaakov and "steal" the blessings was meant to show Yitzhak that just as he was "deceived" when delivering the blessings, Esav had in fact all along been deceiving him.

Rivka's insight into human nature -- combined with her long-term, big picture thinking -- made a lasting impact on Jewish destiny.

Miriam's Convincing Argument

Miriam is another example of a Jewish woman who, in confronting the greatest sage of the generation, displayed these unique traits.

As a young girl, Miriam witnessed the terrible tragedies of Egyptian slavery and the deaths of many Jewish infants through Pharaoh's decree. Her father, Amram,

despaired of any hope to build a nation during this tragic time, and to ensure that no more Jewish children would suffer in the world, he separated from his wife, Yocheved. As a result, all the Jewish men followed his example.

Miriam said to him, "Father, your decree is worse than Pharaoh's. He only decreed against the males, while you have decreed against both males and females. He only decreed in this world, while your decree is in this world and the next. He is evil and his decree may not be carried out, but you are righteous and God will surely allow your decree to come about!"

Amram then remarried his wife, and all the other men remarried their wives as well. (Talmud - Sotah 12b)

To her credit, from here the great Moses was born. We see Miriam's foresight and confidence in confronting her father, and convincing him to abandon what would be tantamount to national suicide. Miriam is able to look beyond the facts and figures, at the big picture: We have a nation to build, a future, a mission! She doesn't get caught up in the despair of the here and now, but rather clings to her vision and responsibility to maintain the nation in whatever way possible.

Miriam also displayed keen insight into her father's personality. She wisely approaches him with a list of three rational reasons, rather than with some emotional plea to return to faith and hope. And she succeeds.

Calves and Spies

Is it only unique individuals who have these qualities of insight into personality, long-term vision, and the ability to look beyond facts and figures to a deeper, more spiritual reality?

These lofty traits exist on a national level as well. The Torah tells us of entire groups of women who rose above the fray and refrained from two major sins which befell the Jewish men during the journey in the desert.

- The Golden Calf

After the giving of the Torah, when Moses was a few hours late coming back from his 40-day stay on Mount Sinai, the Jewish people asked Aaron for a substitute, tangible leader to take Moses' place; they assumed, based on logic and faulty calculations, that he must have died. For the project of forging a

substitute leader, Aaron tells them to obtain jewelry from their wives; he hoped that the women (who like jewelry!) would hesitate to give it over, during which time Moses would return. The men, however, hurried back with their own gold jewelry, and the tragic sin of the Golden Calf ensued.

The Midrash tells us that the women absolutely refused to give of their jewelry, not because of a materialistic need, but because of the meaningless purpose involved:

Aaron said: "Take the earrings from your wives, sons and daughters, and bring them to me" (Exodus 32:2). The women heard and refused to give the jewelry to their husbands, saying, "You want to make a calf with no power to save? We will not listen to you."

God gave them reward in this world that they keep Rosh Chodesh, and in the next world they merit to renew themselves like the New Moon. (Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer 45)

For this great insight and ability to look beyond the "logic" which tripped up the men, Jewish women were rewarded with the mini-holiday of Rosh Chodesh -- the celebration of the new moon. This is perhaps due to their ability to look beyond the immediate darkness of the present to a brighter tomorrow, like the moon which after its darkest moment reveals a sliver of light and continues to grow and brighten until it reaches full visibility.

- Sin of the Spies

Soon after this episode, twelve spies were sent to explore the Land of Israel, and they came back with a very discouraging report: The land was filled with giants and fortresses, strongholds that seem unconquerable. They reckoned it would be logically impossible to conquer the land. And so the Jewish people cried that night, the ninth of the Jewish month of Av. The result: 40 years of wandering in the desert, the death of all males between the ages of 20 and 60, and the ninth of Av becoming catastrophic throughout Jewish history.

From a slight hint in the text -- "Our wives and children will be violated" (Numbers 14:3) -- the commentaries deduce that it was only the men who despaired, not the women. Here again, the natural inclination of men to see the surface evidence and reach "logical" conclusions turned out to be misguided and ultimately untrue. The women, meanwhile, resisted the temptation to give into

despair. They saw beyond the surface, to the reality of Divine assistance, and the vision of a future where God's grand plan would be carried through.

Where's the Credit?

When it comes to the women's lack of participation in these major mistakes of Jewish history, however, something is missing in the Midrashic and textual references. No direct credit is given to these women for their insight and vision. Only through roundabout textual hints do we even realize that they were not among the sinners.

One might think that individuals deserve credit and thrive on it, but a group as a whole do not. In fact, the Jewish women as a whole *were* credited for continuing to bring children into the world during the harsh Egyptian slavery, and in the case of Tzelofchad's daughters, for wanting to settle the Land of Israel and have a portion within it (see Numbers ch. 27). So why not likewise credit all the Jewish women for standing firm and avoiding the two well-known sins of the Calf and the Spies?

It seems that the Torah is following the well-known Jewish dictum of *Lefum tza'ara agra* -- according to the effort is the reward. In other words, no credit is given for something that is natural and doesn't involve much choice or action. In the cases of the Calf and the Spies, the Jewish women were exhibiting natural traits and abilities of insight, long-term vision, and seeing beyond the surface to a deeper reality. But they did not stretch beyond those natural limits; they failed to influence and impact those around them, to convince them not to be short-sighted and not to lose faith. The pans of the Calf and the Spies, in the end, came to a tragic fruition.

By contrast, Sarah confronted her husband and diplomatically asked to bring their disagreement before God; Rivka subtly implemented a plan to bless the right son; Miriam outlined three concise, rational reasons why her father was wrong. Yet the women in the desert were mute. No indignation is heard, no dissent from the public complaints and hysteria. Although they did not actually partake in the problem, neither were they part of the solution.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 19:9) tells of a righteous couple who were married and unable to have children. They eventually decided to divorce and try again with other spouses. As the story goes, the righteous man and woman each remarried an "evil" spouse. In the end, the righteous man became evil, and the

evil man became righteous. From here we learn, says the Midrash, "that it all depends upon the woman."

A woman, with her gifts from God, and especially the extra measure of insight (*bina*), has a tremendous capacity to impact her environment in a positive way. To the extent that she uses this insight to influence others, is the extent to which she is fulfilling her potential and deserves credit and reward. However, if she merely uses this God-given insight to stay on the right track -- without thinking of creative, effective ways to influence those around her -- what has she really done to deserve credit?

If only the women in the desert had staged a full-blown rebellion -- protesting the complaining and the meaningless crying. Or if only they had taken the time, each in her own insightful way, to explain to the men in their family why they were misguided. If only!

The Power Within Us All

The Jewish women explored in this series all made an enormous difference, influencing their environment and the Jewish nation in a powerful way.

- Rachel and Leah each used their respective traits of compassion, selflessness and the transformative power of prayer to affect their husbands' and children's destinies.
- Dinah was able to impact and overtly influence an evil man, without so much as saying a word!
- Devorah used her subtle wisdom to influence her husband, and she guided the Jewish nation back to God and Torah with that same insight.
- Ruth brought her character traits of modesty and kindness into the nation of Israel from a foreign culture, using a special form of brazenness to proactively influence Boaz to marry her.
- Esther used her insight into human character to influence Achashverosh to remove his decree, and to demand of Mordechai an implementation of a plan to bring back the Jewish nation to God.

This, then, is what distinguishes the “great” Jewish woman from the common, everyday one. All these women possessed tremendous strength and virtues, and used these abilities to impact their and future generations (either by direct confrontation or by subtle determination). And they had the wherewithal to carry out what they knew to be right.

In this lies the true power of the Jewish woman: first, to possess the innate feminine qualities of deep insight, long-term vision, and seeing beyond the surface to a deeper reality. And second, to have the wisdom and courage to act upon it. In this way, each and every Jewish woman, in large and small ways, can truly change Jewish destiny.