

Woman Power

By Chaya Shuchat

After high school, I went to New York to study at Beth Rivka Seminary in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y. I arrived on a perfectly ordinary day in September. One thing that sticks out in my mind is that there was also a funeral that day.

I happened to be nearby and, as it is a mitzvah to accompany the dead on their final journey, even if you didn't know them personally, I joined the funeral procession. I heard that the woman was a mother of eight children, and she had passed away after a long illness. I later learned that the name of the woman was Mrs. Lifsha Shuchat.

Five years later, I married her son.

This story has special poignancy for the two of us, especially during the week when we read Parshat Chayei Sarah, the Torah portion which describes Isaac's marriage to Rebecca after the passing of his mother.

The verse states: "And Isaac brought her to 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."¹

On this verse, Rashi comments: "It is the way of the world that, as long as a person's mother is alive, he is attached to her, but as soon as she dies, he finds comfort in his wife."

On the day my future husband lost his mother, G-d had already set events into motion that would lead to our marriage five years later.

When Isaac brought Rebecca into his tent, though, it was more than just finding comfort for the loss of his mother. Rashi states, "He brought her to the tent, and behold, she was Sarah his mother; i.e., she became the likeness of Sarah his mother, for as long as Sarah was alive, a candle burned from one Sabbath eve to the next, a blessing was found in the dough, and a cloud was attached to the tent. When she died, these things ceased, and when Rebecca arrived, they resumed."²

As soon as Rebecca entered the tent, Isaac observed that she emulated his mother. Sarah excelled in fulfilling the three mitzvahs of a woman: lighting candles on Friday night, baking challah and separating a portion for G-d, and family purity (the laws governing a couple's intimate relationship). For this, she merited the three aforementioned miracles—her candles burned from week to week, her dough never spoiled, and a Heavenly cloud hovered over her tent.

There was a funeral that day, the day I arrived in Crown Heights

Why was it not sufficient for Rashi to merely point out that Rebecca's deeds were like Sarah's? Why did he stress that she also merited the same miracles as her mother-in-law?

Furthermore, after Sarah's passing, surely her husband, Abraham, continued to light the Shabbat candles in her absence. Why did he not merit to have his candles miraculously burn throughout the week?

According to our sages, when a man and woman marry, they enter into a partnership. The role of the man is to "bring home the wheat" while the woman prepares it for eating³ His job is to "conquer,"⁴ to scour the world for the necessary raw materials, and her job is to take the materiality and transform it, to use it to create a noble, G-dly home. This task is reflected in the three *mitzvot* of a Jewish woman. By lighting Shabbat candles, she brings the holiness of Shabbat into her home. By separating challah before baking bread, she brings holiness into the food. And by keeping the laws of *taharat hamishpachah*, family purity, she brings holiness into the body itself.

The miracles that both Sarah and Rebecca experienced represent the power they had to draw holiness into this world and to extend that holiness beyond the boundaries of their own homes. Abraham, great as he was, did not have that function. His candles shone with an ordinary light. When Sarah and Rebecca lit candles, the holiness in those lights illuminated the world "from Shabbat to Shabbat"—and continue to shine for eternity. This is the power they bequeathed to their daughters, all Jewish women for all time. Even if we do not literally see our flames miraculously burning for an entire week, their spiritual power, their warmth and illumination remains.

Five years later, I married her son

According to tradition, Rebecca married Isaac at an early age, yet her candles already had this miraculous power. As Jewish women, it is our privilege to continue this chain and transmit to our daughters their mission—to light up the world with the "candle of mitzvah and the light of Torah." Ultimately, the Midrash teaches: "If you will keep the lights of Shabbat, I will show you the lights of Zion,"⁵ with the true and complete redemption.

(Based on a talk of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 163-173.)

FOOTNOTES

1. Genesis 24:67.
2. Bereishit Rabbah 60:16.
3. Yevamot 63a.
4. Ibid 65b.
5. Yalkut Shimoni, beginning of Parshat Behaalotcha.

By Chaya Shuchat

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