

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

Well, There's Bad News and There's Good News...

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

The story is told about the cardiac patient who won the lottery. His family members were afraid to tell him that he had just hit the jackpot, because they were concerned as to how he would react to the shock. They called the cardiologist for advice. "Doctor," they asked, "how do we tell Dad that he just won 10 million dollars without putting a strain on his heart?"

The cardiologist put their minds at ease. "Don't worry," he told them. "I have been in practice for many years, and I know how to deal with people with weak hearts. I'll break the news to him gently."

The next time the patient came in for a checkup, the cardiologist had a "theoretical" question for him.

"Mr. Goldstein," he asked, "what you do if you won 10 million dollars?"

"Doc," said Mr. Goldstein, "if I won 10 million dollars, I would give half of it to you."

The doctor dropped dead!

It's important to know how and when to give someone information.

Sarah lived until the age of 127. Clearly not young, even by biblical standards. Yet, we find that many people in her time lived longer. Her husband Abraham lived till 175. Isaac lived until 180, and Jacob lived a "mere" 147 years.

Sarah died shortly after the almost-death of her son Isaac. Isaac, the carrier of Abraham's legacy, had been bound to an Altar to serve as a burnt offering to G-d. Just as Abraham was about to fulfill G-d's command to sacrifice his son, G-d informed him that he was not to harm Isaac at all. This had been a test of Abraham's (and Isaac's!) faith, and he had passed the test.

Rashi tells us that when Sarah heard about her son's near-death experience, the shock killed her.

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz observed that Sarah died too early. She could have, and should have, lived longer.

How did Sarah hear about what almost happened to Isaac? The Sifsei Chachomim, a commentary on Rashi's commentary, explains that a messenger came back to Sarah to report on the events that had transpired on Mount Moriah.

He told her how Abraham had arranged the wood pile under the altar, and how he had secured Isaac's hands and feet onto the altar. He described how Abraham had lifted the knife over Isaac for the coup de grâce.

The messenger was just about to tell her the rest of the story. He was about to tell her about the Divine reprieve. Unfortunately, he was too late.

Isaac was the beloved only son of Sarah. He represented the entire future of the Abrahamic dynasty. Isaac was supposedly destined to carry on his father's teachings to the rest of the world. Isaac had no children; he had never married. Who would carry on the legacy?!

Sarah was distraught. She was beside herself with distress and grief over the about-to-be-reported demise of her son. She died from the shock.

Rabbi Levovitz points out that Sarah needn't have died. The reporter messed up his report! Had he told the story a little differently, the results could have been different.

Consider this approach:

Sarah – "What happened? Where are my husband and my son?"

Messenger – "I have some wonderful news! First of all, I want you to know that everyone is alive and well. Everybody's fine. Now, let me tell you what happened. It seems that your husband Abraham received a command from G-d..."

It would have made all the difference in the world. Sarah, listening calmly, would have heard the ENTIRE story, including the fact that Isaac was saved. She would have rejoiced in hearing that how righteous and self-sacrificing her son and husband were, without any loss to her and to our future.

Rabbi Levovitz points out that sometimes we think we're doing someone a favor by telling them good news. The problem is that if we don't do it right, we're not doing them any favors.

People have feelings; people have fears. Sometimes simply talking to someone improperly can have devastating effects. In Sarah's case, information given over improperly caused a woman to die.

Know who you're talking to. Know their backgrounds and their sensitivities. If you don't know how to say something correctly, don't just blurt it out. When in doubt, say nothing.

Remember, the mouth bone is connected to the think bone... At least it SHOULD be.

Have a great Shabbos.

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