

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)

Girl Talk?

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Ethical conduct is an essential component in religious life. It is not good enough to follow the rituals of the Torah; Kosher food and kosher Mezuzahs must be accompanied by kosher behavior.

Therefore, our Sages didn't leave anything to chance. As they compiled the legal section of the Talmud known as the Mishnah, they included, along with all of the ritual laws, a separate tractate called "Avos", commonly known as "Ethics of the Fathers". This book extols the virtues of Torah study, charity, honesty, and humility.

In the first chapter of Avos, Yose ben Yoezer and Yose ben Yochanan offer some advice as to how a Jewish home should be maintained:

Mishnah 4 -- Yose ben Yoezer ... says: "Let your house be a meeting place for the wise; sit at their feet, and drink in their words."

There is much we can learn from Torah scholars. By insuring that our homes are the types of places where the wise choose to gather, we have gained much before they even speak. Once they do speak, we should thirstily take in the uplifting messages that they choose to share with us.

Mishnah 5 -- Yose ben Yochanan says: "Let your house be open wide, (some of the Commentaries explain this to mean your home should be accessible to anyone who requires assistance) treat the poor as members of your household, (when you give charity to the poor, treat them like family, not like "shnorrers") and don't engage in too much conversation with the woman." This was said about one's own wife; all the more so does it apply to another's wife.... the Sages said: "anyone who engages in too much conversation with women causes evil to himself, neglects Torah study, and will eventually inherit Gehinnom. (The Hebrew term for ... a very hot place!!)"

Not very politically correct!

This is, to say the very least, very difficult to understand. The part about overdoing conversation with someone else's wife is understandable. Human nature being what it is, it is certainly wise for men and women who are not married to each other to set parameters as to how much friendly conversation is appropriate. But what's wrong with talking to your wife??!! Is Yose ben Yochanan telling us to relegate

one's wife to serving in the kitchen, and not to engage in conversation with her? This idea seems to resonate with the old stereotype of keeping your wife barefoot and pregnant, serving as little more than a domestic! Could this be what Yose ben Yochanan means??!!

We certainly don't get that impression from this week's Torah Portion.

Abraham was distraught. He had two sons; Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian maid, and Isaac, the son of Sarah. Sarah saw that her stepson Ishmael was pursuing a life of idolatry and promiscuity. She was afraid that he would exert a negative influence over her son Isaac, whom G-d had designated as Abraham's successor. (See "Under the Influence of Dregs".) Ishmael had to go!

"Send this maid and her son away, because this maid's son will NOT share the inheritance with my son Isaac!" (Genesis 21:10)

Understandably, Abraham was not happy with the turn of events. How could he banish his own flesh and blood?

G-d gave Abraham his answer:

"...Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice..." (Ibid, 21:12)

The Talmud tells us that *"her voice"* was divinely inspired; that Sarah's level of prophecy was greater than that of her husband.

Rabbinic literature is replete with references to the importance of husbands relying upon the sage advice of their wives. Women, we are told, enjoy a *"Binah Yesierah"*, an extra level of understanding that we Philistines, i.e., men, lack.

Rabbi Akiva Eiger wrote a letter to his children while mourning his wife's death. In it, he declared, "... the little bit of Torah in me is only due to her help ... who will pasture our young sheep (children); with whom shall I share my worries and find some respite? ... Which human being knows better than I of her righteousness and modesty? Many times we held deep discussions on topics related to the fear of Heaven until the middle of the night..." (Igros Soferim p. 65, quoted in Artscroll Pirkei Avos Treasury, p. 23)

It doesn't quite sound like Rabbi Eiger avoided speaking to his wife!

So what was Yose ben Yochanan talking about? What's wrong with talking to your wife?

Rabbi Akiva Eiger certainly appreciated his wife's wise counsel. So did Abraham. Sarah was Abraham's partner in teaching Torah to the masses. He taught the men and she taught the women. They certainly had much to discuss. Abraham would never have been willing to give up the opportunity to be encouraged and uplifted by the judicious advice of his wife.

Yose ben Yochanan is not saying not to talk to your wife! He is saying not to speak INAPPROPRIATELY to your wife. Don't waste your and her time with idle prattle. Don't gossip with her about the office scuttlebutt. Don't dump on her with complaints.

Don't take liberties in divulging confidences.

A newlywed I know got some advice from a famous rabbi, who made it clear that he wasn't to repeat it to anyone. He went home and told his wife that Rabbi ____ had told him something that he didn't want to be quoted on, but that it surely didn't apply to her. She stopped him right there. "Unless you have his permission to tell me, I don't want to hear it."

He went back to the rabbi to get permission to repeat the story to his wife. The rabbi smiled and said, "You're a very lucky man!"

If someone confides in me, he has a right to assume that his secret will go no further. I don't have a right to turn around and tell it to anyone, including my wife. If I have an argument with you, that is MY fight with you; I don't have a right to make it my wife's fight with you.

As we read above, "anyone who engages in too much conversation with women causes evil to himself..."

Anyone who fails to utilize the precious asset he has available puts himself at great spiritual risk. To be sure, conversation is very important. "Small talk" between a husband and wife is also important. But the man who realizes how much his wife can teach him and inspire him will make sure that his conversations are always of a positive and constructive nature.

We've been discussing the words of Rabbi Yose ben Yochanan, in Mishnah 5. But let's not forget that his comments come right after the other Rabbi Yose -- Yoezer's son, in Mishnah 4: Yose ben Yoezer ... says: "Let your house be a meeting place for the wise; sit at their feet, and drink in their words."

If you value the guidance of your wife, your home is provided with an in-house resource; a repository of keen perception and insight. She is the one who will help to insure that your home is worthy of a visit from wise and righteous people.

Let's read that quote from Yose ben Yochanan once more: "...don't engage in too much conversation with the woman."

Perhaps he means: too much conversation; too much dialogue; too much MONOlogue! Hey, Mister! Don't talk so much! Why don't you try closing your mouth and opening your ears? Maybe if you'll stop talking long enough to listen you'll learn something!!

Good advice. Advice that all of us married guys need to learn to follow.

Have a great Shabbos.

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