



## THE DEATH OF SARAH IS A TEACHING FOR ALL THE GENERATIONS (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

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### GUARD YOUR TONGUE

#### Not Even From His Wife

A person must be very careful not to listen to gossip from anyone, not even from his wife. When a person thinks about this clearly, he will realize that by accepting gossip from his wife, by believing her words – that so-and-so has said something about him – other than the sin of having accepted gossip, he also brings upon himself a great deal of misfortune. This is because when a woman realizes that her husband has believed her words and sees her in a good light, she will continue to say such things to him. As such, she will push him to become angry, to get embroiled in disputes, and to become embittered. Hence it is preferable for a man to reprimand his wife when she says such things.

– Chafetz Chaim

**I**t is written, “The life of Sarah was a hundred and twenty seven years; the years of Sarah’s life. Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:1-2).

In the Aggadah our Sages have said, “From where did he come? ... In fact he came from Mount Moriah, Sarah having died of grief. Therefore the account of Isaac’s binding comes close to the passage, ‘The life of Sarah was’” (Bereshith Rabba 58:5). This is extremely surprising, for is this how the Holy One, blessed be He, rewards a tzaddik who overcomes a trial? Instead of returning to his wife Sarah and telling her that he was able to overcome this trial, and that their son Isaac raised himself to an extremely high level – to the point of being considered a burnt-offering before Hashem – he returned to find his wife dead! Is this the kind of reward that the Holy One, blessed be He, gives to the tzaddikim in this world?

To explain this passage, we must first say that wherever we find a mention of death, it is preceded by a mention of old age or illness. With regards to Abraham, we find a mention of old age: “Abraham was old, advanced in days” (Genesis 24:1), which is later followed by, “Abraham expired and died at a good old age” (ibid. 25:8). Old age and illness are mentioned with regards to Isaac: “It came to pass, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see” (ibid. 27:1), as well as death: “Isaac expired and died” (ibid. 35:29). Concerning Jacob it is said, “Israel’s eyes were heavy with age, and he was not able to see” (ibid. 48:10). We also read, “Behold, your father is sick” (ibid. 48:1), which is followed by his death: “Jacob...gathered his feet into the bed and expired, and he was gathered to his people” (ibid. 49:33).

Illness, old age, and death are also mentioned with regards to King David. Thus we read, “King David was old, advanced in years” (I Kings 1:1), as well as, “King David’s days drew near to die” (ibid. 2:1), and finally: “David lay with his forefathers” (ibid. 2:10). Yet with regards to Sarah, death is mentioned, but illness and old age are not. We must look into the reasons for this.

We cannot compare it to the death of Rachel, who also died suddenly and in the absence of illness or old age, as we read: “Rachel died and was buried on the road” (Genesis 35:19). This does not help solve our problem, for the Sages have looked into this and said that Rachel died on account of sin, having stolen the idols of her father Laban (Bereshith Rabba 74:9). When Laban came to look for them, Jacob told him: “With whomever you find your gods, he shall not live” (Genesis 31:32). Hence Rachel died. That being the case, why does the Torah not say that Sarah was sick or old, as it says with everyone else?

#### What Happened to the Oath?

From here we learn the extent of Abraham’s greatness, for he did not contest G-d’s decision. Our Sages state that

after having overcome the trial of the Akeidah, Abraham said: “I will not move from this place [Mount Moriah] until You swear to me that You will never again put me to any test! For had I, Heaven forbid, not obeyed You, You would have destroyed everything that I had worked for all my life” (Bamidbar Rabba 17:2). Hashem then swore an oath to never again put him to the test. However as soon as Abraham returned from the Akeidah, he endured another horrendous trial: His wife died before him on account of grief, without having been sick or old, and despite the fact that Hashem had promised to never test him again! Abraham could have protested, “What happened to the oath that You swore to me on Mount Moriah, the oath to never test me again?” However Abraham did not object, for he accepted this trial with love.

Furthermore, even when Abraham wept over the death of Sarah, he did not weep excessively. He restrained himself in order not to make it appear that he was protesting G-d’s decision. Hence the letter caph in the term *velivkotah* (“and to weep for her”) is smaller than usual, teaching us that he only wept a little. This is why the Torah mentions neither illness nor old age prior to mentioning Sarah’s death, showing us that the sudden death of Abraham’s wife was a trial sent to him by Hashem, despite His oath. Why? It is because Hashem wanted to tell future generations that a person must refrain from asking Him to never send trials, for a person was placed in this world only to be tried by Hashem, in order to receive a reward in the World to Come.

It is true that our Sages in the Gemara have said that a person should never put himself in a situation where he will be tried, as King David of Israel did and failed (Sanhedrin 107a). However these are trials that a person brings upon himself. When it is the Holy One, blessed be He, Who sends a person a trial, He does so in order to prepare him for life in the World to Come.

Every day we recite the prayer, “Do not bring us...into temptation or scorn.” In other words: “Do not send us a trial that is followed by shame.” Hashem understands the heart of man, and He knows whether he can overcome a trial or not. He therefore sends a trial upon a person only when He knows that he can overcome it.

Be that as it may, the Mishnah states: “With ten trials was our father Abraham tested, and he withstood them all” (Pirkei Avoth 5:3). Although the Holy One, blessed be He, sent Abraham still another trial (the sudden death of his wife Sarah), her death is not considered to be in the same category as the others trials, for Hashem had promised to never try Abraham again. He only sent him this trial in order to teach us that a person should refrain from asking G-d to not send him trials. The goal was not really to test Abraham.

## AT THE SOURCE

### Why Just a Little?

*It is written, “Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:2).*

The Baal HaTurim wrote that according to the Masorah, the term *velivkotah* (“and to weep for her”) is written with a small caph, which alludes to the fact that Abraham wept only a little. Yet why did he only weep a little for a righteous woman?

The book *Ma’assei Rokach* cites *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* as saying that the sacrifice of Isaac occurred during Yom Kippur, and the journey from Mount Moriah to Abraham’s home took three days (since in going there he saw the place on the third day).

Hence Abraham returned home on the eve of Sukkot. He was then told of Sarah’s death, and he had to bury her. There was therefore not much time to weep for her, since the festival interrupts mourning. Thus he only wept a little for her.

### Suddenly Generous

*It is written, “They ate and drank, him and the men with him” (Genesis 24:54).*

Before this, when Laban’s family still did not know who Eliezer was, nor why he had come, the Torah states (as the *Chatam Sofer Zatzal* points out): “Food was set before him” (Genesis 24:33). Eliezer alone was invited to eat. As for those who accompanied him, they were set aside, being given only water to wash their feet.

However when Laban’s family heard that Eliezer was the envoy of the wealthy Abraham, who wanted to conclude a marriage pact with them, they suddenly became generous and invited everyone to eat: “They ate and drank, him and the men with him.”

### Allusions

*It is written, “These are the names of the sons of Ishmael by their names, in order of their birth: Ishmael’s firstborn Navayot, and Kedar, and Adbe’el, and Mivsam” (Genesis 25:13).*

In his book *Ohel Yosef*, Rabbi Yosef Ben Harosh Zatzal expresses surprise here, for how could this information possibly interest us? Why would we want to know the names of Ishmael’s sons, and what is Scripture trying to tell us by this?

The Rav Zatzal understands these words as an allusion:

The name Ishmael is formed by the same letters that make up the expression *shama ayil*, meaning that when Jews recite *Shema*, the Holy One, blessed be He, will remember the offering of Isaac’s *ayil* (ram) in their favor.

The name *Navayot* is formed by the same letters as *vetavin* (“and you will understand”). This tells us that if a person understands what leaves his mouth, he will merit *Kedar*, which is formed by the same letters as *doker* (“pierce”). In other words, he will thereby pierce all accusations.

As for *Adbe’el*, the Divine Name E–L represents the attribute of justice and has a numerical value of 31. However if we remove *Ad* (which has a numerical value of 5), there remains 26, which represents the attribute of mercy. Thus we have *u’mivsam*, he delights in (*mitbasem*) and merits all the good reserved for the righteous.

### No Reason to Boast

*It is written, “These are the years of Ishmael’s life” (Genesis 25:17).*

From the description that Scripture gives of Ishmael’s life, the *Gemara* deduces that Jacob lived with Eber for 14 years, during which time he

studied Torah (*Megillah* 17a). This is quite surprising, for why is the fact that Jacob studied Torah for 14 years in Eber’s *Beit Midrash* not explicitly mentioned in the Torah? Why is it only mentioned indirectly, through the account of Ishmael’s years?

From here the *gaon* Rabbi Moshe Feinstein Zatzal explained a great principle in the service of Hashem: One who serves Hashem, even if he is at the highest level, has no reason to congratulate himself for his deeds and behavior. As *Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai* said, “If you have learned much Torah, do not claim special credit for yourself, since for that very purpose you were created” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:8). Now as we know, he wanted to speak about the Torah that he merited to learn! Nevertheless “do not claim special credit for yourself,” for if one has the strength to study Torah and serve Hashem at a high level, it was for this reason that he was created. Therefore why should he feel that he has done something special?

This is why Scripture concealed the fact that Jacob studied Torah for 14 years, thereby teaching us that we have no reason to boast over it.

### Proof of a Miracle

*It is written, “I came today to the spring” (Genesis 24:42).*

To explain the exceptional speed at which Abraham’s servant Eliezer traveled from one place to another, *Rashi* states: “Today I left, and today I arrived. From here we learn that the earth shrank for him.” We may question how Eliezer could have convinced Laban’s family that this miracle had actually taken place.

It is said that the *gaon* Rabbi Shabtai Cohen Zatzal, the author of *Siftei Cohen*, dealt with this question when he was still a young boy of four years old. As he was studying in the *Talmud Torah* of Vilna, his teacher came to *Parsha Chayei Sarah* and read the verse, “I came today to the spring,” followed by *Rashi*’s explanation. At that point one of the children leaped up and asked, “How could Eliezer not have been afraid of telling Rebecca’s parents that the earth had shrunk? Perhaps they wouldn’t believe him?”

The teacher did not know what to say, and he rubbed his forehead as he tried to find an answer for the child’s question. The young Shabtai then came to his teacher’s aid with a keen reply: “A few verses earlier we learn, ‘Sarah my master’s wife bore a son to my master after she had grown old, and he gave him all that he possesses’ [Genesis 24:36], and *Rashi* explains: ‘He showed them a gift deed.’ Because of the document that Eliezer had, and which had been written on the same day, he proved the truth of his words, that he had actually experienced a miracle.”

### Before the Merchant

*It is written, “Four hundred shekels of silver over la’socher [current with the merchant]” (Genesis 23:16).*

We note that each letter in the word *socher* appears right after, in the Hebrew alphabet, each letter in the word *nezek* (“damage”). The term *over* means “before,” as in the expression *over le-asiatan* (before doing). *Ephron*, who was greedy, believed that making this deal could harm him financially. Now as *King Solomon* said, “One overeager for wealth has an evil eye. He does not know that *cheser* [want] may befall him” (*Proverbs* 28:22). Thus rearranged, the letters of *socher* become *cheser*.

This is a moral lesson that applies to every merchant, for before a *socher* (merchant) lies *nezek* (damage) and *cheser* (want). If a merchant fulfills Hashem’s will by not transgressing several prohibitions (not to steal, not to oppress, do not deceive), he will succeed in business. However if he transgresses them, he will experience both damage and want.

We also have to mention a statement made by our Sages: “The salt of money is decrease” (*Ketubot* 66b). Since salt is a preservative, this alludes to the fact that by giving *tzeddakah*, a person can become a good and successful merchant.

# YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

## RABBI OHR SHRAGA

The Shraga family comes from holy and pure roots, from a dynasty that goes back to King David. This prestigious lineage was revealed to the gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Ohr Shraga as he studied Torah, when he merited (as he usually did) the appearance of Eliyahu HaNavi. From one subject to another, the Rav asked him from where his family descended, and Eliyahu told him that it came from King David.

Rabbi Ohr Shraga had a special and novel way of learning Torah with great diligence. During the long winter nights, whenever he felt his eyelids closing, he immediately placed a brass bowl over a clay oil lamp. When the bowl had been well-heated by the wick, the Rav could feel the heat radiating all around him, and he would wake up and continue studying.

Torah bonds were established between himself and Torah scholars of his generation around the world. These included our holy teacher Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, Rabbi Yaakov Hegiz, and also the holy Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, who once told his students: “I have a distant friend, Rav Ohr Shraga.”

### A Column of Fire from Heaven

Rabbi Ohr Shraga’s holiness and extreme piety were also famous among his non-Jewish neighbors, who marveled at the incredible miracles that he performed in their midst. A change in the laws of nature was a common occurrence with Rabbi Ohr Shraga, and many people were saved by him from various problems that they encountered.

A marvelous story is told concerning the Rav’s name (“Ohr Shraga”), a story that describes the special character traits and sanctity of the Rav, who spread spiritual light to all who saw him. It was only rare individuals who discovered this light, and one of them was the king of Yezd. The Persian city of Yezd had been under siege by rebels for two years, and it was about to fall into their hands. The king was so worried that whenever he went to bed, he would constantly turn back and forth, unable to sleep. One time, in the middle of the night, he left his room in order to take a breath of fresh air, when suddenly he saw a column of fire at a great distance. This column, which was coming down from heaven, illuminated the rooftop of a certain house. The king was stunned by what he saw, and he immediately harnessed his donkey and lit a torch. Accompanied by one of his soldiers, the king went out and arrived at this house, which belonged to none other than Rabbi Ohr Shraga.

Doubt was gnawing at the king: Was it worth it for him to enter this house, whose inhabitants he did not know? After all, he was afraid of this great fire.

Meanwhile, the door to the house opened, and Rabbi Ohr Shraga’s son appeared. He warmly welcomed the king inside.

This only increased the king’s amazement, who quickly asked the Rav’s son: “Why have you opened the door at such a late

hour?” The Rav’s son replied, “I did what my father told me. Come inside and enter my father’s room.” The king immediately went inside the house and entered the Rav’s room. The Rav asked him, “What is the king doing at my home at such a late hour?” The king replied that he had seen a column of fire descending from heaven to his rooftop. “Moreover,” the king added with amazement, “I now see the column of fire over your head.” At that favorable time, the king asked Rabbi Ohr Shraga to do all that he could to save the city. The Rav granted his request, but only if he could find two doves and a man who was ready to give his life for the city.

A few hours later, they found an old man who was willing to do this. When he was brought to the Rav, he asked the man to immerse himself in a mikveh seven times. When he returned from the mikveh, the Rav gave him a parchment on which sacred Names had been written, and this parchment was attached to the wing of a dove. He told the man to climb upon the roof and send out the dove from there. The Rav then told the man, “When you send out the dove, your soul will also fly away from your body.” The old man accepted and did what the Rav asked.

When the dove flew above the head of the rebels, tongues of fire appeared among them, and tremendous panic overtook them. Fear fell upon them and they fled from the city in order to save their lives.

When the king heard the news, he sent a royal delegation to escort the Rav to the palace. There, before all the nobles, he gave a gift to the Rav: A royal robe, like one worn by those close to the king. However Rav Ohr Shraga, in his tremendous modesty, could not wear such a distinguished and costly garment. Hence he ordered his family to cut off its sleeves.

A certain time later, one of the king’s ministers met the Rav. When he saw that his robe had no sleeves, he was greatly irritated and raised his hand with the intention of slapping the Rav. However his hand did not obey his wishes, for it froze in place. It was only after numerous supplications from the king that the Rav agreed to forgive this minister and let him regain the use of his hand. From then on, the Rav’s fame and holiness spread as the Molah Ohr (“master of light”), on account of the light that had descended from heaven upon his head. The Rav, however, was uncomfortable with the fact that the name “Ohr” had become so popular, and he asked that it not be used as much. He told the people of the city, “I am only Shraga,” meaning a small candle. It was for this reason that he became known as Ohr Shraga.

The great light of Rabbi Ohr Shraga Zatzal went out on Cheshvan 28, 5554. May his merit protect us all.

## CONCERNING THE PARSHA CHIEFS AND PRINCES

**It is written, “These are the chiefs of Edom by their settlements, in the land of their possession – he is Esau, father of Edom” (Genesis 36:43).**

As the year 5730 was approaching, Arab terrorists hijacked a plane whose passengers included Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner Zatzal and his family. The plane landed in the desert, and for several weeks the lives of the passengers was in danger. Thank G-d, the prayers of the Jewish people were heard, and the passengers were released after a few weeks of tremendous tension and anxiety.

A book released in honor of Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner recounts a brief incident that occurred during those anxious days:

“Every day, the terrorists brought Arab delegations and showed them around the plane, pointing out to them the spoils of their victory: The hostages. In most cases, the faces of the men in these delegations carried a confirmation of the blessing that their ancestor had received: Being a wild man. At one point, the leader of one delegation did not live up to that expectation. In passing between the seats of the plane, he felt the presence of our teacher. He leaned forward politely and stopped for a few minutes to exchange some words with him.

“After leaving, Rabbi Yitzchak noted: ‘His face expressed the nobility of Ishmael. We do not find such faces among the descendants of Esau. His had all the characteristics of an Ishmaelite face.’ When he was asked what he meant by this, he answered that the Torah does not mention *alufim* [chiefs] with regards to Ishmael. This was not completely clear to us, but the Rav responded with a gesture signifying that this was not the time....”

During Chol HaMoed Sukkot following their release, with Yitzchak as the *ushpizin* on the second night, the Rav noted that in the account of the descendants of Ishmael, we find the expression “*nessi'im* [princes] according to their nations” (Genesis 25:16), whereas the term *alufim* is used with regards to Esau. The difference between these two descriptions extends over their entire history, and it is the main reason for the different relationships that the descendants of the Patriarchs have had with Ishmael on one hand and Esau on the other. The explanation follows the definition given by the Sages on the term *aluf*, which is “a kingdom without a

crown.” Esau truly merited a kingdom, such that “one people shall be stronger than the other people” (Genesis 25:23). However his kingdom is limited, extending only to the time when “saviors shall ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mount of Esau” (Obadiah 1:21). In reality, the crown belongs to Jacob.

As for Ishmael, he only has princes, which designates honor and greatness, albeit without the power of a kingdom. This is the difference between Ishmael and Esau. Esau truly inherited a kingdom, as we read: “I have given Mount Seir to Esau for a possession” (Deuteronomy 2:5). For Ishmael, however, the opposite is said: “Cast out this slave and her son, for the son of this slave shall not inherit with my son” (Genesis 21:10). As an heir, Esau received a certain degree of the power of the Patriarchs’ inheritance, while Ishmael did not.

One who is sensitive to the subtleties of Scripture can see a clear difference between the account of the dynasties of the chiefs of Edom: “These are the chiefs of Edom by their settlements, in the land of their possession,” and the account of the princes of Ishmael: “These are their names, by their towns and by their encampments” (Genesis 25:16). What does this expression mean with regards to the princes of Ishmael?

It is that Esau inherited and possessed a land for himself, a place of his own. Ishmael, however, did not inherit a land and has no place of his own. Hence it is written, “By their towns and by their encampments,” which represents instability as opposed to a fixed place that is inherited. Esau, who was an heir and received his inheritance, has no need to come and reclaim a part of the inheritance. Ishmael, however, comes with all his jealousy for Eretz Israel and says: “It is mine!” This explains the rage of one who does not have an inheritance, of one who comes to take a part of the inheritance belonging to his family. This is the basis of the rage and killing that we see with our own eyes in our time among the descendants of Ishmael over the inheritance of Eretz Israel.

On the face of this Arab, it was possible to see honor in its pure state, honor that was not accompanied by force. He possessed honor, but he did not possess royalty. As for Esau, honor is accompanied by force.