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הגה

שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש

Friday 9 November 2012 - 24 Cheshvan 5773  
Sedra Chayei Sarah

### FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL

**T**O WHAT EXTENT IS A PERSON REALLY FREE? TO A GREAT EXTENT, ONE MIGHT FEEL, WE ARE simply a product of our backgrounds and environment: our parents, upbringing and education, not to mention any trauma we may have experienced in early life. Indeed, for this reason Jewish teaching lays great stress on the significance of education at every stage of life, beginning with the very young.

However, this perspective is balanced by a contrary principle which never loses its importance: the total freedom of the individual, whatever his or her situation.

The Sedra<sup>1</sup> gives an example of this. We read about the quest for a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac. The search is successful and the beautiful and youthful Rebecca is found. She is kind and generous, with deep spiritual qualities, suitable for the wife of the leading religious teacher of the generation: for that is what Isaac was destined to be. Further, Jewish spiritual leaders have generally functioned as a husband and wife team. This was the case with Abraham and Sarah, and it was to be especially true of Isaac and Rebecca.

The interesting thing is that unlike her husband, Rebecca was born



In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin  
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Dedicated by her Son Dr Roger Gewolb ז"ל

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into a family of idolaters, and lived in a society of idolatry and other kinds of negative behaviour. However, despite her surroundings, she had been able to maintain her purity and individuality. When Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, came with the suggestion that she should marry Isaac, she was delighted at the idea that she would be joining the family which famously worshipped the One G-d, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Evidence for her feelings is seen in the fact that when her parents asked her if she really wanted to leave home immediately to marry Isaac, rather than stay at home another year, as was the custom, her answer was a swift affirmative. Yes, she wants to go immediately<sup>2</sup>.

Rebecca was so emphatic in this statement that the Sages take it as a cue for all future women that a man may not marry a woman against her will. Her independent consent is necessary<sup>3</sup>.

The Midrash<sup>4</sup> terms Rebecca “a rose among the thorns”. This also characterises the life of each individual. Each Jew has a Divine Soul, which seeks holiness and goodness, like Rebecca. But this beautiful ‘rose’ is also surrounded by the ‘thorns’ of the Animal Soul, the sometimes unruly desires of physicality, and the possible negative influences of the environment in which one lives.

Each one of us has the challenge to stand up for our own individuality, that of the Divine Soul within, in a positive and wholesome way. The Sedra tells us that, like Rebecca, we are able to do so. G-d grants each one of us moral and spiritual freedom.

Very similar are the life stories of Abraham and Sarah, who themselves came from an idolatrous environment, and, a little later in the Torah, Rachel and Leah, who were brought up in the same family as Rebecca and were her nieces.

Each one of us, man and woman, inherits from the Patriarchs and, especially, from the Matriarchs, the power to be free and to choose our own path<sup>5</sup>. As the Jewish people as a whole we have the power to be ourselves, whatever the prevailing environment, and our goal is to bring true spiritual freedom to all humanity.

1. Genesis 23:1-25:18. 2. Gen.24:57-8. 3. See Rashi to 24:57. 4. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:2. 5. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 35 p.273.

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*SEDRA CHAYEI SARAH*

**SAY A LITTLE AND DO A LOT**

The bell rang loudly. Classroom doors opened and streams of girls filled the corridors of the school building. Everyone was hurrying outside to make the most of their fifteen minute break-time before lessons continued. However, in the Year 4 classroom there was still a crowd of girls standing together in a deeply animated discussion. The girls were preparing for a surprise farewell party for their teacher who was moving to America.

Miriam, one of the louder girls in the class, announced "Girls, I really don't mind bringing the things we need. I can bring lots of crisps, biscuits, sweets, lollies, drinks and cups..." and she rattled on and on.

Daniella spoke up. "But, Miriam, are you sure that you will be able to bring in all of that? That's a lot of things to bring in by yourself."

"Oooh yes, don't worry, Daniella!" Miriam exclaimed. "I really don't mind, and besides how hard can it be already to bring in enough food for everyone in the class? I will keep my word." The girls shrugged, but they believed Miriam. If she said she would bring in the food, then hopefully she would.

Later that week, the big day arrived. As soon as the bell rang, the girls ran over to Miriam to get the food so they could start laying it out. Miriam was sitting at her desk, looking very uncomfortable.

“Where’s the food, Miriam?” the girls demanded. Miriam was quiet for a few moments, blushing furiously. The girls waited impatiently until Miriam finally blurted “I’m sorry! I thought I would be able to bring everything in! But I forgot about it till this morning so I just had to take whatever we had in the pantry. I’m extremely sorry...”

She pulled out three bags of crisps and two bars of chocolate and placed them on her desk. She felt terrible. Some of the girls got very angry but other girls felt bad for her because she really looked regretful. In the end, they still managed to surprise their teacher and had a fun, lively party. But some girls were still very upset that Miriam didn’t keep her word.

That afternoon, during Sedra class, Miriam was thinking about how much she regretted what she had done, when she was suddenly jolted out of her pitiful reverie to hear the teacher’s enthusiastic words.

“Say a little, and do a lot! That is exactly the opposite of what Ephron did in this week’s Sedra. When Abraham wanted to buy from him the Machpelah Cave to bury his wife Sarah, Ephron promised Abraham he could have it free. Abraham knew that he was just saying this. Then, when Abraham said he would pay for it, Ephron charged him an exorbitant price. Ephron said a lot, appearing to be generous but then he did very little. In other words, instead of being generous he took as much money as he could. This is a very important lesson for us, girls! We must always make sure to keep our word and not make promises that we are not able to keep!”

Miriam realized that this was exactly what she had done today. She told herself that as soon as the lesson was over she would make an apology to all the girls for not keeping her word. And more to the point, she thought, next time she will try to keep her mouth shut...

“In future, say a little, and do a lot” she said to herself. This was a promise she was going to try to keep!

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