

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Vayeira

“AND SHE SAID, ‘WHO IS THE ONE WHO SPOKE (מלל) TO AVRAHAM SAYING, “SARAH WILL NURSE SONS”?’” (BEREISHIS 21:7)

WHEN SARAH PRAISED HASHEM for the magnificent blessing of a son in her old age, she used the unusual word מלל – spoke – which occurs only once in the five books of the Torah. Rashi (ibid.) explains why Sarah used מלל, instead of the more common, דבר, to refer to speaking: The *gematria* – numerical value – of מלל is one hundred. Sarah was praising Hashem by making an oblique reference to the fact that Avraham had a child at the very advanced age of one hundred.

**Sarah's purpose was to publicize Hashem's miracle**

Evidently, Sarah's purpose was to publicize Hashem's miracle, as if to say, “Look how Hashem has kept his promise! (Rashi ibid.) See the incredible *chesed* and wonder of a child born to a father at age 100 and a mother at 90!” In fact, the *pasuk* continues Sarah's words, “...for I have borne a son in his old age.” If so, why did she only hint at the number 100 through a *gematria*? Why didn't she explicitly state that Avraham was one hundred years old? Surely the additional detail of his exact age would have created a greater appreciation of Hashem's *chesed* and a more spectacular *kiddush Hashem*!

**Avraham's age was not a secret**

We must answer that Sarah felt it would be inappropriate to spell out that her husband was clearly beyond childbearing age. “His old age” is a relative term which can be interpreted very broadly; perhaps to mean 60 or 70 years old, at which fatherhood may have been improbable, but still possible in those days. At one hundred it was already inconceivable. Avraham's age was not a secret and Sarah would have only been stating the truth, but she felt it was “*nit shain*” – not nice – to proclaim openly that her husband could no longer father children, and therefore limited herself to hinting through *gematria*.

**Do we appreciate the value and power of our words?**

Avraham and Sarah had been married for many, many years. We can be sure that Avraham, the eternal paradigm of *chesed*, practiced the most loving and caring kindness with his wife Sarah, and vice versa. Their *shalom bayis* was beyond our comprehension. They had an honest, open relationship and partnered together in their life's work, performing *chesed* and using it to bring humanity closer to belief in Hashem. Certainly, Avraham – a great *tzaddik* – would not have protested or even felt hurt by Sarah explicitly stating the obvious facts. Nevertheless, Sarah felt that she must forego the additional *kiddush Hashem* rather than use her power of speech in an even slightly inappropriate manner.

Do we appreciate the value and power of our words? Do we weigh each expression, as Sarah did, not only on the scales of outright good and evil, but also on the finely calibrated gauges of what may be *nit shain*? Certain expressions may not be forbidden, but they may be inappropriate, or simply not nice. Reb Dovid Leibowitz, zt"l, pointed out that the first three page-sides of the *gemara Kiddushin* discuss the fine nuances of the terminology of *kiddushin*. Our sages understood that the power of speech is our crowning glory and distinguishes man from all other creatures.

If we realize our greatness, as human beings created in the *tzelem Elokim* – image of Hashem – and as the chosen people, children of our holy Patriarchs and Matriarchs, we will hold ourselves to the highest standards of behavior and our refined speech will reflect the radiance of lives illuminated by Torah.