

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter IV: Vaveira (Gen. 18:1–22:24)

### Essay 7. Sarah's pregnancy

**פסוק** "ואברהם ושרה זקנים באים בימים חדל להיות" וכו' "נתצחק שרה" וכו'. קשה מה ענין להזכיר כאן שאברהם הנה זקן, הנה לו לומר "ושרה היתה זקנה חדל להיות" וכו', ומהו "באים בימים". ועוד למה שרה אמרה "ואדני זקן" והקב"ה אמר ושרה אמרה "ואדני זקנתי".

#### **Verse[s] state:**

[The angels] said to him, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. **And Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age;** Sarah had **stopped having** the way of women. **And Sarah laughed** to herself, saying, “Now that I’m worn out, am I to have enjoyment—and my husband is old?” Then the L-rd said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ ”

- Gen. 18:9–13

**A question is what is the relevance to mention here that Abraham was old? It could have simply said, “And Sarah was old; Sarah had stopped having the way of women.”**

**Also, what is the reason for adding “advanced in years”?**

**Also, why did Sarah say, “and my husband is old,” and the Holy One, Blessed be He, said that Sarah said, “and I am old.”**

וגרסינו בגמרא דגדה (דף ט) היכי דמי סמוך לזקנתה וכו' כל שקורין לה אימא אימא ואינה בוששה. ופירשו בתוספות, שראייה לקרות אימא וכו', והסוגיא ארוכה. ופסק הלכה הוא כרבי אליעזר שארבע נשים דיין שעתו, בתולה וכו' וזקנה. ואין הלכה כרבי אליעזר במה שאמר שכל הנשים שעברו עליהן שלוש עונות דיין שעתו, אלא אם לא היו זקנות אף אם עברו עליהן יותר משלוש עונות לעולם מטמאות מעת לעת, אמנם הזקנות אם עברו עליהן שלוש עונות סמוך לזקנתן אז דיין שעתו. ובגמרא מבעיניי היכא דמי סמוך לזקנתה כל שראייה לקרות אימא.

The Mishnah in Niddah explains that for women with a fixed menstrual cycle, they begin transmitting ritual impurity from when they see blood. For most women who do not have a fixed menstrual cycle, if they suddenly discover blood, they transmit ritual impurity retroactively for 24

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hours.<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Eliezer then teaches an exception, that there are four types of women whom would not transmit ritual impurity retroactively: a virgin, a pregnant woman, a nursing mother, and an elderly woman.<sup>2</sup> The Mishnah then asks:

Who is an elderly woman? One for whom three cycles passed [during which she saw no menstrual blood, at a stage of her life] close to her old age.

Rabbi Eliezer says: A woman for whom three cycles passed [during which she saw no menstrual blood, if she then experiences bleeding], her time is sufficient [i.e., there is no retroactive transmission of ritual impurity].

- Niddah 1:5

This last statement of Rabbi Eliezer does not appear to be limited to elderly women, but as will be discussed below, the Rabbis determine that this halacha applies only to an older woman or to a woman after childbirth, for whom it is natural to stop menstruating, but not to a normal young woman for whom three periods have passed without bleeding.

**And it is taught in the Gemara of Niddah (page 9a):**

[The Mishnah teaches:] **Who is** [the woman characterized as] **an elderly woman?** [It is] any [woman for] whom three [typical menstrual] cycles [of thirty days] passed [at a stage of her life] close to her old age, [during which she saw no menstrual blood].

[The Gemara asks]: What is considered close to old age? Rav Yehuda says: Any [woman] about whom her friends say that she is an elderly woman. And Rabbi Shimon says: It is any woman who is old enough **that people call her: Mother, Mother, and she is not embarrassed.**

- Niddah 9a-b

**The Tosafot explain there that it is someone for whom it is proper to call her “Mother,” and the sugya<sup>3</sup> is long.**

**The ruling of law is like Rabbi Eliezer, who taught in the Mishnah cited above that, “Four women [who discern menstrual blood and] their time is sufficient, [i.e., they transmit impurity only from the moment that they saw the blood]: A virgin, a pregnant woman, a nursing woman, and an elderly woman.”<sup>4</sup>**

**However, the law does not follow Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion that even for a young “woman for whom three cycles passed [during which she saw no menstrual blood, if she then experiences bleeding], her time is sufficient [i.e., there is no retroactive transmission of ritual impurity].” Rather, if they are not elderly, even if they have passed more than three cycles, they always transmit impurity retroactively for 24 hours. However, elderly women who have passed three cycles close to old age, their time is sufficient [i.e., there is no retroactive transmission of ritual impurity].**

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Niddah 1:2.

<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Niddah 1:3.

<sup>3</sup> A series of questions and hypotheses that elaborate on the Mishnah.

<sup>4</sup> Mishnah Niddah 1:3; Niddah 7a.

And in the Gemara, there is a question: “What is considered ‘close to old age’? It is anyone worthy of being called ‘Mother.’ ”

ואמר הכתוב "נתצחק שרה בקרבה לאמר אחרי בלתי" וכו' איך אפשר שאחרי בלתי, אחרי שזקנתי, יסורו לי הזמנים ואהיה כשאר הנשים. וקשה הואיל שעדיין באותו הזמן לא היתה זקנה בעולם כדאמרין בפרק ז' דמציעא, מאן דהנה בעי למשתעי בהדי אברהם, משתעי בהדי צחק. ואז דוקא נתחדשה הזקנה, ממילא לא היתה עדיין בעולם הדין של שלשה עונות סמוך לזקנתה, ועדיין היא כשאר הנשים. וצריך לומר [בתירוץ מהרש"א התם, דנדאי הזקנה על שם רוב שנים היתה כבר בעולם, אלא שלא היתה בעולם הנקרת בליבון שער וכו', ושפיר קאמרה שרה "אחרי בלתי" וכו', שהזקנה היתה בעולם.

The Scripture states, “And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘Now that I’m worn out,’ how is it possible that after I’m worn out, now that I have grown old, that the periods will return to me and I will be like the other women? This is difficult, since at that time there was no old age in the world, as it is said in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of tractate Bava Metzia, “Until Abraham, there was no aging [i.e., old age was not physically recognizable]. One who wanted to speak to Abraham [would mistakenly] speak to Isaac [and vice versa]. . . . Abraham came and prayed for mercy, and aging was [at last noticeable].”<sup>5</sup> Then aging was created, and therefore the rule of “three [typical menstrual] cycles [of thirty days] passed [at a stage of her life] close to her old age” did not yet exist in the world, and she was still like other women. It’s necessary to say according to the solution of the Maharsha there, that indeed, old age in terms of someone having lived many years existed in the world, but old age wasn’t recognizable, such as whitening of the hair, etc. Therefore, it’s fine that Sarah said, “After I’m worn out,” etc., as old age was present in the world.

וכדי שלא תאמר שאם היא הזקינה דילמא אברהם לא הזקין, שכן דרש האנשים שאינם מזקינים כל כך מהר כמו הנשים, ואינו כל כך רחוק מן הטבע שתוליד האשה כשבבעלה ראוי להוליד, לכן הוסיפה "ואדני זקן", ואמרו במדרש טוהן ואינו פולט, אף לא היתה פנונתה לומר שאברהם היה זקן בלשון ביזוי לאברהם. וכדי שאברהם לא יטעה בלשונה, אמרה לו בפשוטו, "האף אמנם אלד ואני זקנתי", כלומר שאבדתי טבע ההולדה. ומשום הכי אמר "ואברהם ושרה זקנים באים בימים", אף על פי שלא היתה הזקנה ממש, מפל מקום שרה היתה זקנה לפי שבאה בימים, כמו שפירשו התוספות שראוייה לקרות אימא, ובשביל כך חדל להיות לשרה אורח פגשים להיות מטמאה מעת לעת וכו' אלא היא כזקנה שרייה שעמה.

So that one might not say that perhaps only she had aged, while Abraham had not aged—for it is common for men not to age as quickly as women, and it is not so far from nature for a woman to conceive if her husband is capable of fathering—she added, “and my master is old.” The Midrash interprets this as meaning that he was “grinding but not emitting,” i.e., trying to impregnate her, without success.<sup>6</sup> However, her intention was not to refer to Abraham as old in a derogatory manner. To prevent Abraham from misunderstanding her words, she expressed it plainly to him, saying, “Shall I in truth bear a

<sup>5</sup> Bava Metzia 87a.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. Rabbah 48:17.

child, old as I am,” as if to say that “I have lost the natural ability to conceive.” That is why it is written, “And Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age.” Even though old age did not fully exist yet, nevertheless, Sarah was considered old because she was advanced in years, as Tosafot explained, she was worthy of being called “Mother.” Because of this, Sarah no longer had a woman’s cycle and was therefore not subject to the usual state of impurity retroactively for 24 hours. Instead, she was as an elderly woman, and her time was sufficient [i.e., in the event of seeing blood, there was no retroactive transmission of ritual impurity].

ובזנה יצא לנו טעם לשוב למה המתין לה שנה אחת, לפי שפירש רש"י ע"ה על פסוק "כעת חיה", ופסח היה, ולפסח הבא נולד יצחק, והלא היה די לה תשעה חודשים להריון ולמה הוצרכו שאר השלשה חודשים. מפני שסתם הנסת הוא מחדש לחדש, והנקה צריכה שתראה שלוש פעמים עד שתקבע לה נסת, וכדי שתהיה כשאר הנשים רצה שתקבע לה נסת לשלשה פעמים ואחר כך תתעבר.

With this, we find a praiseworthy reason why [the angel] waited a full year for her before he returned, for Rashi, of blessed memory, explained on the verse, “Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son,’ that it was Passover, and the following Passover, Isaac was born. Weren’t nine months enough for pregnancy? Why were the remaining three months required? Because a typical menstrual cycle is from month to month, and an elderly woman must experience her cycle three times for it to be established as regular. In order for her to be like other women, [G-d] wished her cycle to be established three times before she would conceive.

ויצדק לפי זה מה שפירשו המפרשים "ויאמר הנה באהל" וכי' שהם היו נוהגים שכל אשה שהיתה רואה נדה היתה יושבת בקדר מיוחד לה לנדה, והשיב להם "הנה באהל" כלומר פירסה נדה ולכן היא יושבת באהל עכ"ל. ואפשר נמי שנהו הפל של "ויאמר שוב אשוב אליך כעת חיה", שעמיד לחזור לה הנסת שתי פעמים אחרות פדוגמת שאר הנשים, ואחר כך "והנה בו לשרה אשתך".

This supports what the commentators explained about the phrase, “And he replied, ‘There, in the tent,’ ” that it was customary for any woman who became menstruating to sit in a separate room designated for a menstruating woman. Thus, he answered them, “There, in the tent,” meaning that she had her period and therefore was sitting in the tent.

It’s also possible that this is the reason for the duplication of the root “return,” [שוב אשוב] [shov ashuv], rendered in translation as “I will surely return,” in the text, “Then one said, “I will surely return to you next year.” That is, that in the future her period would return two more times, similar to other women, and then “and your wife Sarah shall have a son!”

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