

# Communication in Relationships in Tanach: A Paradigm for Others

Mrs. Mindy Eisenman, MA<sup>1</sup>

Speech is the medium through which G-d created the world. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:1) states “*b’asarah maamarot nivra haolam*, the world was created through ten utterances.” The resounding message of this statement of Chazal is the importance of the spoken word. The Mishna is hinting to us that the way particles are comprised in our universe are through words. Additionally, Bereishit (2:7) states that the defining factor of man is *nefesh chaya*, which according to Onkelos means “*ruach mimalelah*,” the ability to speak. Speech is G-dly. Hashem gave us this quality to differentiate between man and other species. This ability to express ourselves through words is with the intent of using it to not only behave in a G-dlike fashion but to bring Hashem into this world.

Communication is a key element in any relationship. It is especially critical in the marital relationship. The Gemara in *Eruvin* (18a) comments on the second chapter of Bereishit noting that Adam and Chava came into being as a single creature with two sides, one male and the other female. Woman was created from Adam’s “*tzela*,” his side, usually understood to mean “rib.” This could be taken in the sense of “side” as seen in the phrase (Shemot 26:20) “*tzela Hamishkan*,” the side of the Sanctuary (Rashi). Rav Adin Steinsaltz (*Biblical Images*, Ch. 1) explains the significance of Rashi’s statement. They are created as one unit and then man and woman split and became two distinct people. We can therefore understand that the relationship between man and woman in all times is a search for something lost, because man and woman are essentially two parts of one whole. This tie is therefore even stronger than the tie to one’s parents.

According to Rav Adin Steinsaltz, in this first generation of mankind, Adam was commanded directly by G-d while Chava received the commandment only through Adam. In Bereishit, (2:16-17) G-d commanded Adam, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad you must not eat thereof.” When Chava recounts the prohibition to

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<sup>1</sup> Mindy Eisenman (SCW ’83, Azrieli ’02) is the full-time staff Connector at YUCnects and teaches various courses at Stern in Tanach, *taharat hamishpacha* (family purity) and relationships. She is also a certified SHALOM Workshop presenter.

the snake she states (3:3), "You shall not eat of it and you shall not touch it lest you die." *Bereishit Rabba* asks the question, why did Adam add a prohibition? R. Yissachar B. Berman in the *Matnot Kehunah*, a commentary on the midrash, states that Adam didn't trust Chava to uphold the commandment and therefore added that she may not touch it lest she die.

The blatant lack of communication is glaring. When a spouse speaks we must truly listen attentively. We must not hear what we want to hear, but what is actually said. This is done by verifying the information and discussing the idea. There is no account of dialogue taking place between Adam and Chava in this story, which leaves us to wonder about the trust and closeness that they experienced. This is also seen so clearly when G-d tries to get Adam to admit his guilt. Rather than shielding his wife he blames her for his actions. This lack of clear communication, trust, and respect contributed to the tragic events in the beginning of Sefer Bereishit.

Avraham and Sarah, the first family of Judaism, are the rectification of Adam and Chava. Through many examples in the Torah we see their ability to communicate effectively. In Bereishit (12:11), when Avraham asked Sarah "na," "please," say you are my sister, he gives his reasons. He is afraid for his life because she is beautiful. It is a discussion, a request, not a command. Avraham and Sarah were not just a couple, but a unit. We do not see a man who makes the decisions for the family single-handedly with a subservient wife. Sarah worked alongside Avraham. Avraham respected Sarah and at times turned to her for guidance and deferred to her. In Bereishit (21:12) G-d tells Avraham, "Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice."

There is a recurrent mention of Avraham and Sarah as a unit. They are depicted as a team. Even the midrash picked up on this and interprets the phrase in (12:5) "The souls that they had gotten in Haran" as Avraham converting the men and Sarah the women. They work together with the same goals and a shared ideal. Because they were able to communicate so well with each other, they were able to use those communication skills to teach others about ethical monotheism.

When Sarah experienced fertility challenges, it may have been socially acceptable at that time for Avraham to abandon Sarah (literally or figuratively) and find another wife to bear his children. Yet the Ramban (16:2) notes that Avraham and Sarah worked together through this challenge, with Sarah taking the leading role in the entire process. While Avraham showed his dedication to Sarah by allowing her to take the lead, the Ramban notes that Sarah showed her dedication to Avraham by ensuring that Avraham's dignity would be protected throughout the process. The Ramban notes that it was in the merit of these efforts that they eventually were able to bear their son, Yitzchak.

Communication and miscommunication seem to make the difference between a relationship like Adam and Chava and a relationship like Avraham and Sarah. Active listening and hearing what the other person is saying is key to proper communication. Speaking effectively and positively without blame increases the bond that a couple establishes at the beginning of the relationship. It is important to set the proper tone to develop emotional openness. This is the difference between a deep emotional connection and a relationship that develops over time, versus a couple who are solely connected by raising a family together. It is about taking the relationship to the level where you feel you are truly an *ezer kenegdo*, "*etzem meatzamai*," and "*basar mebesari*," — a physical and spiritual bond.