

Parsha Chayei Sarah

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1. Transforming the Mundane to Holiness

We learn in this week's *parsha* that after Avraham purchased *Ephron's* field to bury Sarah that "Ephron's field, which was in *Machpelah* facing *Mamre* --the field and the cave within it and all the trees in the field, with all its surrounding boundaries -- rose up..." Rashi cites the Chazal in his explanation of *vayakum* ("rose up") by stating that the field achieved an elevated status because it was transferred from the ownership of a commoner to a king. The fact is that the field owned by Avraham was the exact same field comprised of the same trees, caves etc. as that of *Ephron*; yet, we see from the Midrash that it had an increased status because in some way its intrinsic value changed as a result of Avraham's ownership. How are we to understand this?

We find in the Torah that when Avimelech drove Yitzchak out of Gerar he was extremely wealthy and that despite the famine that existed in the land, Yitzchak's crops yielded a hundred times their normal quantity. The Torah states that Yitzchak became "very great" and Rashi explains that residents of *Gerar* would prefer the "dung" of Yitzchak's donkeys than the gold of *Avimelech*. They believed that the "dung" provided a greater value than the gold. *Avimelech*, of course, could not tolerate such a level of competition and he subsequently expelled Yitzchak. How is it possible that the "dung" was more valuable or brought about a higher level of blessing and than gold?

The answer is that it was the "dung" of Yitzchak's donkeys and not just that of a commoner just as the case of Avraham's field. The *Ramchal* writes that every creation, including human beings, is finite. How can a finite creature have any relevance to an infinite system? The *Ramchal* gives the example of a branch being grafted onto a tree. We see from this that after the branch, which was detached from the tree, is grafted and remains attached for a length of time it eventually becomes part of the tree and the tree's entire eco-system. The *Ramchal* explains that a person who attaches himself to Hashem--as the Torah states, "you should cleave to him"-- becomes part of an infinite system. We gain relevance to Hashem and His infinite world. We cease to have the limitations of our finite nature and we have relevance to the infinite.

The *Ramchal* continues by explaining that an average person may have a limited level of achievements in life; however, if that person attaches himself to a *tzadik* it is possible to go beyond these limitations. By involving oneself with the *tzadik's* needs and accommodating him in every possible manner, a person may be able to have relevance to that *tzadik's* level. And become part of his system. Through this intense involvement, a person may even be able to cleave to the *tzadik* in such a way that he may have a share of the *tzadik's* reward in the world to come. The person rises to a new level of merit and can become part of Hashem's infinite system through his relationship with the *tzadik*.

What is the purpose of existence? Hashem created the world to accommodate the *tzadik*. *Ephron's* field only has value in accommodating Avraham so that he may perform the will of Hashem. The dirt and the trees have negligible value in the hands of *Ephron*. In the hands of Avraham the field becomes consecrated and holy since it is being utilized to fulfill the will of Hashem that in turn fulfills the purpose of existence. This is why the Torah states that the field *vayakum* ("rose up"). "Dung" is normally considered to be

waste; however, the “dung” of Yitzchak’s donkeys attained value not through monetary means but rather through it being a possession of a *tzadik* whose entire existence is fulfilling the will of Hashem. Its value is attached to an unlimited source of holiness and results unlike *Avimelech*’s gold that only had monetary value. *Avimelech*’s gold was limited through its finite limitations while the “dung” was attached to a source of unlimited results and brought about immeasurable blessing. This is what is meant by “Yitzchak became very great”. He became very great because we see that even the “dung” of his donkey unleashed tremendous blessing and had a greater value than gold.

Therefore if a person has the opportunity to be involved with a *tzadik* at a level of accommodating his growth and attending to his needs, then one can become part of his infinite system. The mundane can become sanctified through its relevance to the *tzadik*. In fact this is what we see regarding offerings. An ordinary animal can be consecrated to fulfill a holy purpose. This is why the Gemara states that anyone who derives benefit from this world without saying a *bracha* (“*blessing*”) is as if they are incorrectly benefiting from a consecrated item. The world was created to be sanctified and used to achieve higher spiritual connection to Hashem; therefore, we should utilize this world in a manner for which it was intended.

2. The Value of Commitment

We read about the passing of Sarah our matriarch in this week’s *parsha*. The first pasuk of Chayei Sarah begins by relating to us that the years of Sarah were 127 years. The pasuk ends with *shnei chaye Sarah* “...the years of Sarah’s life”. Rashi explains that the end of this pasuk means that the years of Sarah’s life were all for the good. The Ohr Ha’Chaim asks why did the Torah say, “...the years of Sarah were...” it could have stated “and Sarah lived 127 years”? Chazal tell us that whenever the Torah uses the word *vayeheyu* it is to express anguish, suffering or pain. The Ohr Ha’Chaim points out that the *parsha* starts with the word *vayeheyu* and that it is an indication that perhaps Sarah was meant to live longer than 127 years since the Torah expresses her passing with a word of pain. If she had lived her full life for the good than why use *vayeheyu*?

One understanding may come from the Chazal who explain that the manner in which Sarah lost her life was one of pain and suffering. She was informed by the satan that her only child was being slaughtered and as a result of tremendous anguish she passed away. This is perhaps why the Torah uses the word *vayeheyu*. Therefore according to this explanation, Sarah did live out her full life but the manner in which she passed was painful. One may also say differently, that really Sarah should have lived longer than 127 years but because of the satan’s painful information she passed prematurely.

The Ohr Ha’Chaim learns from *shnei chaye Sarah* “...the years of Sarah’s life” a phenomenal principle. He learns that even though Sarah did not live the full length of her life, she would be rewarded for all the potential mitzvos that she would have performed had she lived to the proper end of her days. This is the meaning of *shnei chaye Sarah*. Hashem knows that every moment of a *tzaddik*’s life is dedicated to performing mitzvos and that even if the *tzaddik*’s life is ended prematurely, G-d knows that the *tzaddik* would have definitely performed the mitzvos during those additional years and therefore rewards him regardless.

The Rabbanu Yona explains in two locations in the *Shaarei Teshuva* and in his commentary on *Pirkei Avos* based on *avos d’ Reb Nosson* that if a person is committed to a certain way of life he receives the full credit for attaining the goals of that life even if it were cut short. For example, if one were to commit to learning the entire Torah and he

were to pass away prior to completing this task, he would receive full credit for the commitment as if he completed it. Why is this the case? The answer is that we can only take the initiative to achieve certain goals. Hashem decides if we actually fulfill these goals. Hashem needs to provide the necessary time, the means and situational assistance to actuate the goals; however, the person needs to be dedicated. All Hashem wants is our commitment. This is what is meant by *shnei chayei Sarah*. She was committed to a certain life and, while it was cut short, Hashem acknowledged her devotion. Rabbanu Yona actually goes even further than this by stating that a person receives the full credit for his commitments from the moment he assumes the responsibility.

Every day we pray for the coming of Moshiach. What happens when Moshiach comes? According to one opinion in Chazal, that is based on a pasuk from Koheles, the years of Moshiach will have no mitzvah value. There is one opinion in the Gemara that explains that we will no longer have free choice and another opinion states that there will be no context for mitzvahs during this time. Today the level of confusion is tremendous. There are endless challenges to our observance at every turn; therefore, any mitzvah achievement in this environment has immeasurable value. When Moshiach arrives we will have such a level of clarity that there will be no challenge in performing mitzvot and therefore these actions will have limited value. So why are we praying for Moshiach? All of our accomplishments would be minimized. The answer is that we are willing to forego our sense of accomplishment for the sake of honoring Hashem and that there should be an end to *chilul* Hashem in the world.

According to what we have learned from the Ohr Ha'Chaim and Rabbanu Yona, we are actually not foregoing a thing. If we are able to live currently during a time of confusion and be committed to Torah and mitzvot, then we will receive full credit for our actions immediately. During the time of Moshiach, when our world will have revealed G-dliness and limited choice, we would have already received our full credit for mitzvot performed in the pre-Moshiach world. Hashem will value our mitzvah actions during the era of Moshiach in the same way that he values them currently only if we are committed presently. This could be no worse than passing away prematurely and receiving credit for mitzvot that would have been performed during the remaining years.

We are still left with the question of why the Torah uses the expression *vayeheyu*? In fact the question is even stronger than before. According to the Ohr Ha'Chaim and Rabbanu Yona Sarah received the credit for an entire life's worth of mitzvot from the time she committed to performing them. Where is the anguish and pain in her passing? What we need to say perhaps is that the world was deprived of having Sarah alive those extra years. The entire world suffered from not being able to be influenced by her presence. Therefore *vayeheyu* is coming to explain the anguish and pain of the world being deprived of Sarah and not from Sarah being deprived of mitzvah value.

3. Our Role in the Inevitable

We read in this week's parsha that Avraham was concerned that Eliezer should find an appropriate wife for Yitzhak. In fact, amongst other criteria, Avraham insisted that Eliezer take an oath that he would not take a wife for Yitzhak from the daughters of the Canaanites. Before Eliezer left on his mission, Avraham informed him that Hashem will send an angel before him and that with the help of the angel, he would be able to find a wife for Yitzhak.

We find that the Torah tells us that when Eliezer arrived at the location where he expected to find Yitzhak's mate, he began to pray. He prayed, "Hashem, G-d of my master Avraham, may You so arrange it for me this day that You do kindness with my master Avraham". We notice that Eliezer refers to Avraham as "master" even though he is not in his presence. Eliezer exhibited complete humility as he negated himself before Hashem while pleading for His help to find a wife for Yitzhak. The Ohr Ha'Chaim asks a question – If Avraham had already informed Eliezer that an angel would follow him and that he would be assisted in successfully completing his mission then why is Eliezer praying for help? Apparently even though Avraham was not concerned, Eliezer had concern.

The Ohr Ha'Chaim answers that Avraham knew that he would definitely be able to secure the appropriate wife for his son; however, Eliezer was praying because he did not know if he was worthy enough to be Avraham's agent in completing his mission.

We see in life that there are many wonderful events that are destined to take place without question. The issue rests on if we are worthy enough to be part of these events. If a person is worthy he will participate in these events and if not then these events will happen in his absence. Every day we say in *ubah l'Tzion* ("A redeemer shall come to Zion") after the amidah, that Hashem guarantees us that the Torah will never be forgotten from the Jewish people – "My words that I have placed in your mouth shall not be withdrawn from your mouth, nor the mouth of your offspring..." It is true that Torah will never be forgotten, but we must ask ourselves if we will be part of that Torah that will not be forgotten.

The Chofetz Chaim states in the Mishna Brurah that when one says "... mouth of your offspring..." one should have in mind his own children. One should have the intent that his children should be part of this guarantee. If a person has this intent then Hashem will provide divine assistance in order to fulfill the intent. It is certain that Torah will not be forgotten; however, we must pray that we and our children should merit being included. However, this depends on what we do and this is why Eliezer was praying to Hashem.

The Rambam states that regarding three crowns given to the Jews: the crown of the Kahuna (The Priests), the crown of kingship, and the crown of Torah. The first two crowns are specifically designated for certain people. The crown of the Kahuna is reserved for Aaron and his descendents, while the crown of the king is reserved for David and his descendents. The crown of Torah is different in that it is available for everyone. What must we do to achieve the crown of Torah? We need to take definite actions to acquire this crown through Torah learning.

Hashem assured Avraham that Yitzhak was going to find the appropriate wife. In fact in last week's parsha, Hashem informs Avraham exactly who it was going to be. The question remains as to how will it come about. The Gemara in Sanhedrin speaks about the "birth pangs of Moshiach". If one appreciates who Moshiach is and wishes that he would come, then Hashem does not create the "birth pangs"; however, if one does not appreciate Moshiach then He will create tremendous pain until the appropriate level of desire for Moshiach is aroused. These are the "birth pangs of Moshiach". It is completely in our hands whether or not there will be pain. We have the ability to control the situation through our involvement. Eliezer understood the value of the reality that Yitzhak would indeed find a wife. He prayed to merit being part of that mission. We too should appreciate the value of Hashem's promises and pray to be able to fulfill our part in bringing about the realization of Torah and Moshiach without the need for pain.

4. Ultimate Dedication to Hashem

The Torah juxtaposes the passing of Sarah in this week's parsha with the *Akeidah* (the binding of Yitzhak) that took place towards the end of last week's parsha. Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Sarah passed away as a direct result of the *Akeidah*. The Midrash states that when Avraham returned from Mount Moriah in peace, having accomplished his test, the satan was enraged that he was unsuccessful in his attempt to interfere with the *Akeidah*. The satan decided to retaliate against Avraham by informing Sarah that her only son was slaughtered as a burnt offering on the alter by Avraham. The Midrash continues by stating that after hearing this news, Sarah cried and whimpered in a manner that is reminiscent of the sounds of the shofar. The Gemara in Rosh Hashona says that the proper sounds that are blown from the shofar should resemble the sound and staccato of a person's whimpering or sobbing. What does Sarah's crying have to do with the *tekihs* of the shofar?

We know that in the merit of the *Akeidah* the satan is silenced when we blow the shofar. This apparently does in fact relate to Sarah's crying. What is the connection? The Rambam teaches us in *Hilchos Teshuvah* that if a person is a tzaddik for their entire life and regrets all their good deeds at the end of his life, they will be erased and not remembered by the Heavenly Court- G-d forbid. We also learn that if a person was evil for their entire life and does a complete teshuva at the last moment; his evil deeds would also be forgotten and not be mentioned. The Chazal teach us that a person cannot believe in themselves until the last moment of their lives because at the last moment he can become evil. With the Rambam we can understand this to a greater degree. That not only may he become evil at the end of his life but by regretting the good deeds they too will be erased. We see that in the final moments of life that a whole life's worth of achievements or failings could vanish in an instant if we chose to behave in a particular manner.

What did the satan wish to accomplish by telling Sarah the false story about Yitzhak's death? He wished that Avraham return from the *Akeidah* and find that his wife had passed away. The satan wished that Avraham would realize that Sarah passed away as a direct result of the *Akeidah* and that, G-d forbid, he may regret having taking Yitzhak to be brought as an offering. If Avraham had reacted in the manner that the satan wished, the accomplishment of the *Akeidah* would have been nullified. The satan would have achieved his goal of undermining the *Akeidah*.

The Midrash explains that Sarah cried painfully and did not pass away instantly. She died while sobbing, crying, and whimpering which is similar to the sounds of the shofar. When we blow that shofar with the *tekiya and shevarim* it represents the following: that despite Avraham's realization of the agonized and tearful passing of Sarah, he was not shaken from his accomplishment. He did not regret for a moment the *Akeidah*. As a result of this, the satan was silenced not only because of the *Akeidah* but also because Sarah's tearful passing, which is emulated through the sounds of the shofar, did not cause Avraham to regret the *Akeidah*. The fact that Avraham did not have remorse over the painful death of Sarah solidified the accomplishment of the *Akeidah* because until this moment, the satan still had the chance to overturn its value.

For example, the Gemara quotes a pasuk that states that the world was not considered a permanent creation until the receiving of the Torah. Until the receiving of the Torah, existence was considered temporary and subject to elimination, had the Torah not been received. So too it is with the *Akeidah*. Avraham's accomplishment was not considered permanent until he discovered Sarah's passing and remained steadfast in his commitment. We can understand even deeper the statement of the Chazal that a person

cannot believe in themselves until the last moment of their lives. We see that in an instant all the good deeds one performs in their life could be uprooted and nullified, G-d forbid. We therefore need to pray that despite any challenges we may face in our lives that we should never come to the point of regretting our mitzvos. We must solidify our dedication to Hashem regardless of what life brings. Because it is only at the end of our lives that we can truly judge our accomplishments.

5. Understanding our Role in Blessing

We read in this week's parsha that Avraham's wife Sarah was unable to have children for many years. The Torah teaches us that Sarah asked Avraham to take Hagar, her maidservant, as a wife in order to procreate. Sarah said to Avraham *ooliey yebanei mimena* "I will build from her" and Avraham heeded the "voice of Sarah". Rashi cites the Midrash explaining that "the voice" means that Sarah was an even greater prophet than Avraham and Hashem wanted Avraham to heed her prophecy - "I will build from her". Eventually Sarah bore her own child; however, the fact is that Hagar's child does not belong to her. What did Sarah mean, "I will build from her"? We find similar situations with Rachel and Leah who also say that they will "build from" their maidservants. How will Sarah "build" a home through Hagar's child?

The Chazal teach us that the reason why the Matriarchs were barren is that Hashem desires the prayers of Tzaddikim. We know that regardless of the level of the Tzaddik, if he is in pain or in extreme need, his prayers will be at a much stronger level. This is the reason why Hashem made it difficult for the Patriarchs and Matriarchs to have children – he wanted to put them into a situation where their anguish would elevate their level of prayer.

Gemara in Yevamos tells us that Sarah actually had no reproductive system. The fact that she was able to conceive later in life was a great miracle. Sarah knew that she did not possess reproductive organs and she therefore prayed for a miracle; however, Hashem did not respond to her prayers for many years. Since she realized that she would be able to conceive and that Hashem was not going to perform a miracle for her, she said to Avraham that she would "build from" Hagar. Whenever a person prays to Hashem and He does not respond the question is why does Hashem withhold the blessing? Is it because we person praying is not worthy? This was the question that Sarah asked herself. Sarah questioned if she was worthy or was it that it was just not meant to be for her to bare children. There was no way for Sarah to determine the answer. We cannot know G-d's reasons; however, by trying and through a process of elimination Sarah wanted to arrive at the correct path.

We read in Megillas Ester that she did not reveal her identity to her husband the king Achushvarosh. Her origins, her people, and her true identity remained a secret. This concerned Achushvarosh and decided to ask Mordechi's advice. Achushvarosh told him that he wished to know Ester's true identity. Mordechi advised Achushvarosh to make Ester jealous by entertaining another woman and by making Ester jealous Achushvarosh would be able to force her to reveal her identity.

We understand that the relationship between a husband and a wife is an exclusive and intimate relationship. Can we understand how humiliating and humbling it must have been for Sarah to give her maidservant to her husband? To make Hagar her equal was a humbling and denigrating experience. Sarah believed that maybe Hashem was not answering her prayers because she was not humble enough. Sarah believed she needed to be more humble, and by giving Hagar to Avraham she would be put into a humbling

position. Now we can understand “I will build from her” because it is through the humbling experience provided by Hagar’s relationship with Avraham that Sarah could reach a higher level of humility and have her prayers answered by Hashem. Sarah believed that through the humility she would be able to conceive and “build” her home. Sarah however did not know with certainty that her lack of humility was the cause of Hashem’s not answering her prayers. She wanted through a process of elimination determine the cause.

We see that even though Sarah gave Hagar to Avraham, her prayers remained unanswered and that she did not conceive. Sarah then concluded that it was not an issue of humility why she was barren. She concluded that evidently that it was not her destiny. We see that we pray for many blessings. Hashem on occasion does not answer these prayers. We need to ask ourselves, as Sarah did, if we are truly worthy of Hashem’s blessing? In some cases it may be that the object of our prayers is simply not in our destiny and not an issue of spiritual failure. We must however go through the process of introspection and teshuvah in order to do our part in bringing about Hashem’s blessing