



Parashah Insights
by
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Parashat Hayye Sarah
Turning Days into Diamonds

Inner Beauty

“And the life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of Sarah’s life” (*Bereshit* 23:1).

Rashi, citing our Sages (*Bereshit Rabbah* 58:1), explains this unusual wording. “This is why it says ‘years’ after every number, to tell you that each number is interpreted on its own. The age of one hundred was like the age of twenty concerning sin: just as at age twenty she was free of sin because she was not liable for punishment [by the Heavenly Court],¹ so too at one hundred, she was free of sin. And the age of twenty was like the age of seven for beauty.”

Rashi concludes, “The years of Sarah’s life: they were all equally good.” Without exception, all the days of Sarah’s life were full of *mitzvot* and good deeds.

Why do our Sages tell us that Sarah was as beautiful at twenty as a seven year old child? Clearly they are not speaking about external appearances. Sarah was graced with an inner beauty born of purity and innocence. This is the beauty of a tender infant who has never sinned, and the glowing aura of sanctity illuminating the faces of *tzaddikim*, even in their old age. It is the special beauty of a soul untainted by sin.

The Torah uses similar wording in describing our Forefather Avraham’s death: “These are the days of Avraham’s life that he lived, one hundred years and seventy

¹ In the earthly courts, one is liable for punishment from the age of thirteen. In the Heavenly Court, one is liable from age twenty.



years and five years” (*Bereshit* 25:7). Here too, Rashi comments, “The age of one hundred was like the age of seventy and the age of seventy was like the age of five, without sin.” Like Sarah, Avraham was free of sin throughout his life. Our Sages only call Sarah’s purity and perfection “beauty,” not Avraham’s, because “a woman was created for beauty” (*Taanit* 30a), making it a term appropriate for describing a woman, but not a man.²

Daily Diamonds

Rashi’s words teach us an important lesson. Our life is composed of individual units of time: years, months, weeks, and days. Every one of them should be as perfect and flawless as we can possibly make it. He tells us that all of Sarah’s days were “equally good,” utilized in full for *mitzvot* – not a single day was missing.

The same was true of Avraham: “And Avraham was old, advanced in days (literally, “coming in days”), and Hashem blessed Avraham with everything” (*Bereshit* 24:1). At first glance, the wording of the verse appears to be repetitious. If Avraham was old, then of course he was “advanced in days.” One who is old obviously has many, many days behind him. But the Torah is never repetitious, and this verse teaches us something much more profound about Avraham’s life.

Unfortunately, not every elderly person “comes with his days.” He may have lived a long life, full of days and full of years. Yet when his soul departs from his body and ascends to Heaven, most of those days are left behind. They were wasted and empty, and they do not accompany their owner to the World to Come; they are lost forever.

Avraham was different. Not only was he old, he was “coming in days”: his every day was growth and his every day had worth. We can understand this by picturing a magnificent pavé diamond necklace. The chain is solidly set, with no gaps or holes, and every stone is beautifully shaped and polished. This was Avraham’s life. Every stone – every day – was a jewel, shined and refined to maximum beauty, a valuable asset brought along to the Heavenly Court (see *Ohr HaHayyim* on *Bereshit* 47:29).

Everyone brings their own “necklace” of days to the Heavenly Court. Some will have a beautiful, perfect chain, with no gaps and flaws, gleaming with the finest of polished diamonds. Others will have a sorry, skimpy string, marred by the empty spaces of futile, wasted days. There will be stones which are chipped and broken,

² The Torah describes Yosef as being “of handsome form and handsome appearance” (*Bereshit* 39:6). The explanation for the use of this terminology in relation to a man is based on Kabbalistic sources, and is beyond the scope of this essay.



marking days which were not properly dedicated to Torah and *mitzvot*. Some will be blemished or dirty, stained by the filth of sins and worldly lusts.

Every day we live presents a new challenge. Each new day of life should equal an ascent to a new level of spirituality. Avraham purified himself and his deeds every day he lived. His days were perfected by service of Hashem, so that when he was old, he was also “advanced in days.” He brought them all with him to Heaven, in perfect condition.

The *Zohar* (vol. I, p.129a) gives a similar description of Avraham’s life. Avraham spent his entire life working to come closer to the Al-mighty; this was his sole interest and his sole desire. It was a lifelong goal, not one achieved all at once or in a single day. Every day, Avraham’s dedicated service of Hashem continued to carry him to progressively higher levels. With each succeeding day, he ascended to a higher plane.

When Avraham reached old age, the accumulation of his many, many days of spiritual growth added up, until he attained the ultimate level he was intended to achieve. At this point, “Hashem blessed Avraham with everything,” and his spiritual achievements caused an abundance of blessing.

This is why the Torah first says that “Avraham was old,” and then that he was “coming in days.” Avraham continually ascended and achieved his “days.” These “days” are the elevated spiritual levels which exist in the Higher Worlds. The trials and intense service of Hashem that made up Avraham’s days brought him to increasingly greater spiritual heights. These are the days he took with him to Heaven. They were already spiritual, because Avraham transformed every day of physical life into a spiritual accomplishment.

Precious Minutes

Every last moment of our lives, down to the days, hours, and minutes, is important, and we will be called upon to account for them all. This principle is expressed in a prayer composed by the Rashash.³ We ask “to redeem, rectify, and refine all the *Yovel* (Jubilee) and *Shemittah* (Sabbatical year) cycles, and years, months, weeks, days, nights, hours, minutes and seconds of our lives that were damaged and invalidated, and are deficient or missing altogether from the days of the years of our lives... whether in this life or in other lives that have passed, from the day the world was created and until this day” (*Takanat HaShavim, Helek Podeh U'Matzil, Ot Kaf-het*).

³ Founder and *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivat Bet El for the study of *Kabbalah* in Jerusalem some two hundred and fifty years ago



As we see, we are judged for literally every single minute of our lives. Our Sages cite the verse, “‘And You examine him in the mornings, You observe him every minute’ (*Iyov* 7:18). “Rabbi Yosse says, man is judged every day: ‘and You examine him in the mornings.’ Rabbi Natan says, man is judged at every moment, as it says, ‘You observe him every minute’” (*Rosh Hashanah* 16a). The judgment is exacting in the extreme. Even wasting the briefest moment taken away from Torah study is reckoned in Heaven, as we learn from the continuation of the verse: “You do not leave me for as long as it takes to swallow my saliva” (7:19). This – the time it takes for a quick swallow – is considered *bitul Torah*!

Can there be anything more precious than time? And yet, we let it slip away and disappear, squandering it on nothing. The world says that “time is money,” but it is actually much more. It is life – it is eternal life (see the Hafetz Hayyim’s *Shem Olam*, Part 1, Chapter 11).

The story is told of a town which invited a distinguished rabbi to lead their community. The rabbi came for a visit, and was given the grand tour. He viewed the synagogue, the schools, and the other public institutions, until he finally came to the cemetery. He studied the headstones and was shocked to see that without exception, everyone in town had died frighteningly young. A disproportionate number had passed away as children, as young as ten or twelve years old! The rabbi politely told his hosts that he had changed his mind about accepting the position, and prepared to leave the deadly district as soon as possible.

The community leaders immediately realized what was bothering him

“Please, wait a minute, Rabbi,” they said. “We should have explained before we came to the graveyard. People here live as long as they do anywhere else – that’s not what the inscriptions are about. We have a special custom in our town. Everyone keeps a notebook in which he records the time he devoted to serving Hashem. The Torah study, the prayers, and all the other *mitzvot* he did are recorded in that book. When one of us passes away, we total the figures. A lifetime of hours adds up to years – ten, twelve, twenty-four or more. Those are the years which were truly lived, and that is what we record on our headstones.”

It is said that the Vilna Gaon kept a minute-by-minute record of any time he wasted from Torah study over the course of a year. He would review the figures on *erev Yom Kippur*, and the total never exceeded two hours, out of an entire year! He would weep bitterly over the precious lost time which could never be recovered.

What can we say about the hours of time we may be wasting every single day?

There is a familiar traditional blessing, “may you merit long days and years.” This blessing is based on the verse, “For length of days and years of life and peace will be



added to you” (*Mishle* 3:2). When we wish someone “long years,” we refer to a long life. But what are “long days?”

We can answer this question by studying our Forefather Avraham’s life. We have been granted years, and we have been granted days. If we fill our days with Torah and *mitzvot*, then our years will be perfect and whole. Every minute can be a treasure, adding up to long, full days which become long, full years. Not a moment is considered wasted if we use it with the right intention; the Arizal teaches that even during the time spent sleeping, one fulfills a *mitzvah* and serves the Creator (see *Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 53d). Every day of Avraham’s life was full length, replete with *mitzvot* and eternal achievement.

Time, World, and Soul

“And Avraham was *zaken*, old” (*Bereshit* 24:1).

We can understand this verse on a more profound level as well. The letters of the word *zaken*, *zayin*, *kuf*, and *nun*, are the first letters of the words *zeman* (time), *komah* (stature), *nefesh* (soul). The *Sefer Yetzirah* (3:7) discusses the concept of *olam* (world), *shanah* (year), *nefesh* (soul), encompassing all levels of Creation. It is man’s task during his life to bring these elements to perfection.

Every single minute of our lives can be rectified by our deeds here in this world. This is the element of *zeman*, also called *shanah*. As we learn from the prayer of the Rashash, through *mitzvot* man rectifies “all the *Yovel* and *Shemittah* cycles, and years, months, weeks, days, nights, hours, minutes and seconds.” If we fail to take advantage of the opportunity to perfect them, G-d forbid, it is “a distortion which cannot be straightened and a lack which cannot be assessed” (*Kohelet* 1:15). However, rectification can still be achieved through repentance, whether in this lifetime or in another, for repentance also has the power to work retroactively, restoring days and years found lacking in the past.

Komah, man’s spiritual stature, corresponds to *olam*, “world.” The world was created with a structure of ten levels, subdivided into two hundred and forty-eight and three hundred and sixty-five sub-levels, totaling six hundred and thirteen (*Nehar Shalom*, from page 9). So too, man’s physical being is composed of ten primary limbs, consisting of two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five sinews.⁴

Through his deeds, man also rectifies the Higher Worlds; it is for this purpose that he was created in G-d’s image. In the physical world man fulfills the positive and negative commandments, which correspond to specific limbs and sinews. At the

⁴ See *Parashah Insights on Lech Lecha* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



same time, he rectifies the corresponding spiritual aspects of the Higher Worlds. This is expressed in the *l'shem yihud* prayer recited before fulfilling a *mitzvah*. We declare that we are doing the *mitzvah* “to rectify its root in the Higher Worlds, and in the human form as is symbolized in the spiritual realms.” This is the rectification of the worlds alluded to in the terms “*olam*” and “*komah*.”

Man must also rectify his soul (*nefesh*). Every Jew's G-dly soul is composed of two hundred and forty-eight spiritual limbs and three hundred and sixty-five spiritual sinews. These correspond to the physical body, which clothes the soul in two hundred and forty-eight physical limbs and three hundred and sixty-five physical sinews.⁵ The various commandments rectify the respective aspects of man's G-dly soul. Rectification of the *nefesh* also includes rectifying man's base soul. *Middot* reside in the base soul, also known as the animalistic soul, and not in the G-dly soul. Man's G-dly soul is rectified by fulfilling *mitzvot*. The base soul or animalistic soul is rectified by refining *middot*.

Avraham was a *zaken* not merely in the sense of years on a calendar. He achieved the true essence of old age: in his many years of life, he perfected the levels of *zeman*, *komah*, and *nefesh*.

Weaving a Cloak for Eternity

Every person is born with exactly what he needs to accomplish his mission in this world; he is given the precise complement of spiritual and physical capacities to achieve his own personal rectification.

When we use our time properly – all our years and days, down to the last minute – bringing our talents and capabilities to fruition through *mitzvot* and good deeds, we rectify and elevate all those G-d-given capacities. They become the garb which clothes our soul for eternity, what our Sages call a *haluka d'rabbanan*, literally a “rabbi's cloak” (see *Ruah Hayyim*, beginning of Chapter 1, and *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 6, note. For a lengthier explanation, see the commentary of *Shaare HaKodesh* on *Moreh B'etzba*, *Siman Yud*, note 15). After death, the soul transcends to a higher plane of existence. Separated from the body, it now requires a different “garment.” It is clothed in a *haluka d'rabbanan*, a spiritual garment woven of the *mitzvot* fulfilled by the individual during his lifetime. If we do not utilize our G-d-given energies and gifts properly, investing them instead in worldly desires and other nonsense, all the many blessings Hashem has granted us go to waste, and our “cloak” will be scanty and frayed.

The *Arve Nahal* (*Parashat Vayakhel*) explains this profound concept. Souls are sent to this world in order to labor in Torah and *mitzvot*, earning their reward in the

⁵ See Rabbi Hayyim Vital's *Shaare Kedushah*, Chapter 1, for a fuller explanation of this topic.



World to Come. If their eternal reward is justly earned, it will not be what our Sages call *nahama d'kisufa*, literally bread of shame.⁶

The soul has four levels: *nefesh*, *ruah*, *neshamah*, and the *neshamah* of the *neshamah*, also known as *hayah*. Our early Sages write that these four levels of the soul are instilled in man as his potential capacities. It is up to him bring that potential to fruition.

Nefesh is man's capacity for action. An inanimate being is incapable of movement and action, while man has a *nefesh hayah*, a living soul. *Ruah* is the power of speech instilled in man by the Al-mighty. We find this concept in the words "and man became a living soul" (*Bereshit* 2:7), translated by Onkelos as *ruah memalela*, a soul which speaks. *Neshamah* is the capacity for thought. *Neshamah la'neshamah*, literally "the soul of the soul," is man's intellect and ability to comprehend even spiritual concepts.

These gifts elevate man above all lower forms of life, and they were given to us for a very distinct purpose: Torah and *mitzvot*. We can move and talk and think profoundly, in order for our deeds, speech, and thoughts to serve Hashem. If we utilize our blessings in the right way, we elevate them and send them ahead to wait for us in the World to Come. Otherwise, they are wasted, and lost forever.

The *Arve Nahal* explains that we do not die all at once, at the final moment of death. Every deed, word, and thought, is the "death" of a part of a limb and a part of our soul. Our every action dispatches forces that are part of ourselves. If we did good, our deed becomes part of the *haluka d'rabbanan* that will clothe our soul in the World to Come. If we did wrong, that part of us falls away and is lost forever.

We have been given so much: limbs and brains, talents and energies. If we invest them in fulfilling G-d's Will, these gifts become our share in the World to Come. This awareness will protect us from sin, and encourage us to dedicate our energies to Torah and *mitzvot*. These forces will go directly to the Al-mighty, and they will be part of us for all eternity. It is with this in mind that we ask for "long days and years of life," so that we can serve Hashem with all we have, perfecting our soul and weaving a cloak for the World to Come.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.

⁶A free handout which the recipient cannot fully enjoy, because of the element of embarrassment involved. See *Parashah Insights on Bereshit* for a fuller discussion of this topic.