

Parashat Chayeh Sarah, 5774, 2013:

Appreciating Sarah's Greatness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah. (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) comments upon our *pasuk* (verse) in the following manner:

And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years: The reason that the word “years” was written after every digit is to tell you that every digit is to be expounded upon individually: when she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin. Just as a twenty-year-old has not sinned, because she is not liable to punishment, so too when she was one hundred years old, she was without sin. And when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old as regards to beauty. — from *Bereishit Rabbah* 58:1]. **the years of the life of Sarah:** All of them [i.e. the years] equally good.

Rashi's well-known Midrashically-based comment focuses upon an explanation of the word “years,” both in regards to its seemingly superfluous repetition and in recognition that “all of them [were] equally good.” He does not, however, address the dual recurrence of the phrase “the life of Sarah,” (*chayeh Sarah*) that serves as the name of our *parasha*. We must, therefore, ask why the Torah employs this expression, not once, but twice in the course of a 12-word *pasuk* (verse). In other words, what does “*chayeh Sarah*” connote?

Midrash Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna) 58:1 explains the repetition of our term in the following manner: “Why did the Torah have to repeat the expression “*chayeh Sarah*” at

the end of our verse [i.e. a second time]? This comes to teach us that the lives of the *Tzadikim* (Righteous Ones) are beloved before the Omnipresent One both in this World (*Olam Haze*) and in the World to Come (*Olam Habah*)." In other words, the duplication is interpreted in classical exegetical terms as in *Tosefta Berachot* (Lieberman) 1:14, wherein the reiteration of the names Avraham, Yaakov, Shemuel, and Moshe is consistently viewed as the ultimate term of endearment and encouragement. Thus, Sarah, and the life she led, were both treasured by Hashem.

Another explanation of the expression "*chayeh Sarah*" is offered by Rabbi Chaim ben Moses ibn Attar *zatzal* (1696-1743), author of the celebrated Torah commentary entitled, "*Or HaChaim*." In a somewhat cryptic statement he suggests: "It [the Torah] states: '*chayeh Sarah*' because the *Tzadikim* bring life to their days, whereas in the case of the Evil Ones (*Reshayim*), their days bring life to them." In my estimation, Rav Attar is drawing upon a classic distinction between quantity and quality.

Time can readily be seen as a mechanistic entity comprised entirely of a finite set of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years and centuries. In this view, one second is the same as any other – so, too, in the case of the remaining points of demarcation. Stated somewhat differently, time is flat, one-dimensional and value-free in every sense of the term. It is simply something that one lives through, a medium devoid of any inherent message or meaning. This, I would suggest, is the time experience of the *Reshayim* to which Rav Attar refers.

In stark contrast, time for the *Tzadikim* is a qualitative entity. They invest it with purpose and meaning, particularly through their emphasis upon *mitzvot bein adam l'chaveiro* (commandments between man and his fellow man). The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) presented this class of *mitzvot* in the following manner:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave, and bury the dead, and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. Although all these mitzvot are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Scriptural commandment Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That charge implies that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your comrade in the Torah and mitzvot. (Translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In source after source, the Midrash teaches us that Sarah, like her beloved husband Avraham, was a master of deeds of kindness (*gemilut chasadim*). Moreover, as noted by my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, Sarah was not merely a moon to Avraham's sun; instead, she blazed her own path of greatness in the annals of our nation:

The name Sarai means "princess," a very important woman. Sarah's status in the history of Judaism is not only that of being Abraham's wife... No, the fact that Sarah was married to Abraham was not enough to give her a permanent place in the Jewish historical household. Rather, Sarah in her own right was a major figure, **as important as Abraham** – as a matter of fact, *Hazal* [our Sages of blessed memory] say she was *superior* to him (Ex. Rabbah 1:1)... Abraham never told her what to do; on the contrary, **she told him what to do**. She was not only beautiful; **she was a spiritual figure on par with Abraham**. (*Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, pages 114-115, bolding and brackets my own).

Our appreciation of Sarah's true stature enables us to symbolically call upon her to serve as our guide as we navigate the often-confusing waters of our lives. May we have the wisdom and courage to emulate Sarah's spiritual strength, and the *gemilut chasadim* at which she excelled. If we can achieve this goal, we will be well on our way to fulfilling

the Torah's sublime words to "do what is good and proper in the eyes of the L-rd, your G-d." (*Sefer Devarim* 12:28) May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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