**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT CHAYEI-SARA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Chayei-Sara begins with the death of Sara, and tells that after Avraham wept and eulogized his beloved wife, “Avraham arose from the presence of his deceased [wife]” (23:3). The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 58:6), seeking to explain the meaning of Avraham’s “arising” from the presence of Sara’s remains, writes, “This teaches that the Angel of Death was opposite him, warning him” (“*Melamed she-haya mal’akh ha-mavet matris ke-negdo*”). Avraham “arose” from his wife’s remains, according to the Midrash, because the Angel of Death stood over her remains, as though “warning” Avraham that he, too, would soon die. (In reality, Avraham lived for another thirty-eight years.) Rather than remain exposed to this frightening spectacle, Avraham left.

How might we explain the meaning of this image depicted by the Midrash, of the Angel of Death intimidating Avraham as he was near his wife’s remains?

It would seem that the Midrash here seeks to warn against excessive wallowing in sorrow and self-pity during times of grief and anguish. It is, of course, perfectly natural, appropriate and important to mourn and grieve after the loss of a loved one. However, the Midrash warns that a person can, in a sense, “die” as a result of inordinately focusing upon his or her sorrow, in that one can thereby lose his or her vitality and vigor, the ambition and passion that we all need in order to live meaningfully and productively. The “Angel of Death,” which is often associated with human weaknesses and negative instincts, lurked at the site of Sara’s remains in the sense that excessively dwelling upon our grief, our failures, our disappointments and our pain is harmful, and can lead to self-ruin. *Chazal* here urge us to follow Avraham’s example of “arising” from our sorrow and angst, of being able to regain our energy, enthusiasm, joy and vitality even after painful experiences, rather than spending too much time wallowing in grief and thereby squandering the great potential and numerous opportunities that we have to achieve and accomplish during our limited time in this world.

Sunday

A famous verse in Parashat Chayei-Sara (24:1) tells that Avraham, as an older man, was blessed by God with “everything” – “*va-Hashem beirakh et Avraham ba-kol*.” The Gemara in Masekhet Bava Batra (16b) brings several views among the *Tanna’im* in explaining the meaning of the word “*ba-kol*” (“with everything”) in this verse. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is cited as offering a mysterious explanation, commenting, “A precious stone hung from Avraham Avinu’s neck, and any ill patient who saw it was immediately cured.” According to Rabbi Shimon, the description of Avraham being blessed “with everything” refers to this unique jewel which Avraham wore and miraculously cured all ill patients. Rabbi Shimon then adds, “At the time when Avraham Avinu departed from the world, the Almighty hung it [the jewel] on the ball of the sun.”

What might be the meaning of this image, of a miraculous jewel wore by Avraham, and why does Rabbi Shimon associate this power with the sun?

One of the unique features of Avraham was his ability to bond with and relate to all people, regardless of their background and lifestyle. The famous Midrashic image of Avraham’s tent being open on all four sides signifies his universalist convictions, how he was sincerely committed to, and able to connect with, all people from all cultures and societies. (Several sources also describe Avraham’s initial ambivalence towards the command of *berit mila*, which set him and his descendants apart from the rest of the world, expressing the tension he felt between the creation of a special, distinct nation, and the interest in relating to and working with all people.) We are all limited in our ability – and, to some extent, our desire – to befriend and benefit all different kinds of people, given the immense difficulty entailed in bridging the enormous gaps that exist between individuals, societies and cultures. Avraham, however, transcended the barriers that normally separate people from one another, and had the unique ability to help, teach and inspire all people in the world. Whereas the rest of us are able, at most, to influence and assist only very specific types of people, Avraham was singularly capable of uplifting and enhancing the lives of everybody with whom he came in contact. Rabbi Shimon describes this unique talent by way of an analogy to an amulet which magically cures all patients. Anyone who came in contact with Avraham was “cured” to some extent from some “ailment”; he was positively affected in some way. After Avraham’s passing, Rabbi Shimon tells us, nobody ever again had this singular talent. The only thing in the universe with this kind of unlimited influence is the sun, which shines upon the entire earth without making any distinctions between different kinds of people. Avraham was the only person with the universalist reach of the sun, capable of shining upon and illuminating the lives of all people without exception.

Significantly, this is how Rabbi Shimon explained the description of God blessing Avraham “with everything.” In Rabbi Shimon’s mind, nobody can be said to have “everything” as long as his ability to relate to other people is limited. Even if a person enjoys the blessings of health, wealth, family and friends, and even if he also has the blessing of being able to exert positive influence, he cannot be said to have “everything” as long as there are people in his life whom he cannot help or uplift. For Rabbi Shimon, the Torah could speak of Avraham as having “everything” only because he had the singular ability to “cure” all people, to illuminate the entire earth like the sun, helping and influencing all different kinds people, no matter who they were or how they lived.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells of the mission Avraham assigned to his servant, commonly identified as Eliezer, instructing him to travel to Aram Naharayim and find a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak. We read that the servant set out from Canaan to Aram Naharayim with ten camels, with “*kol tuv adonav be-yado*” – literally, “all his master’s wealth in his hands” (24:10). Quite obviously, it is impossible to imagine that the servant brought with him to Aram Naharayim all of Avraham’s fortune, which was considerable, and thus some explanation is needed for the term “*kol tuv adonav*” (“all his master’s wealth”) in this verse.

This question, presumably, is what led the Midrash, cited by Rashi, to explain the verse as referring to a legal document prepared by Avraham formally naming Yitzchak heir to his entire fortune. Rashi writes that the servant brought this document in order to entice the family of the suitable girl to allow her to leave and travel to Canaan in order to marry Yitzchak. According to this interpretation, then, the servant brought a deed which affirmed Yitzchak’s rights to all of Avraham’s wealth.

The Ramban cites those who explain that the phrase “all his master’s wealth in his hands” is presented here as the reason why Avraham’s servant went ahead and took camels laden with gifts, despite not having been explicitly authorized to so. Avraham did not instruct his servant to take riches with him to Aram Naharayim, but the servant did so because he was fully entrusted over all of Avraham’s fortune. The Torah here thus explains that the servant took with him ten camels loaded with expensive gifts because “*kol tuv adonav be-yado*” – he had complete access to Avraham’s assets, given the level of trust he had earned. This approach – cited anonymously by the Ramban – is adopted by Chizkuni and Seforno.

The Ramban himself prefers a different explanation, suggesting that the verse be read to mean that the servant took all his master’s wealth that could be loaded onto ten camels. He brought with him as many of the choicest, highest-quality goods in Avraham’s possession as could be carried by ten camels in order to entice the girl deemed suitable as a wife for Yitzchak.

Chizkuni cites those who avoid this problem by noting the prefix “*mi-*” that appears earlier in the verse, in reference to the camels – “***mi-****gemalei adonav*” (“from his master’s camels”). These commentators suggest that this prefix is intended to modify not only the word “*gemalei*” (“camels”), but also the word “*kol tuv*,” such that the verse should be read as, “The servant took ten camels from his master’s camels, and **from** all of his master’s fortune.” According to this reading, the verse means that the servant took a sampling of the many different kinds of riches that Avraham owned.

An entirely different approach to solving this problem appears in the commentary of the Rashbam, who explains the term “*kol tuv*” as referring not to property, but to people. According to the Rashbam, this verse means that the servant took with him the most prominent of Avraham’s men. As the Rashbam notes, the Torah later (e.g. 24:54) makes reference to the men who journeyed together with Eliezer, clearly indicating that he did not travel alone, but was rather joined by a cadre of Avraham’s people. The Rashbam thus suggests that when the Torah speaks of the servant taking “*kol tuv adonav*,” it means that he brought with him the most important and influential of Avraham’s men.

Tuesday

Tuesday

Rashi, commenting to the opening verse of Parashat Chayei-Sara, observes the unusual manner in which the Torah mentions the number of years Sara lived: “Sara’s life was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years – these were Sara’s years.” Rather than simply stating that Sara lived for 127 years, the Torah mentions three distinct units of time – one hundred years, twenty years and seven years. Based on the Midrash, Rashi writes that this formulation points to the fact that all of Sara’s years were equal, that she was just the same at age seven, twenty and hundred, in terms of beauty and piety.

The Ramban questions this Midrashic explanation of the verse, noting that at the end of Parashat Chayei-Sara (25:17), the same formulation is used in mentioning the years of Yishmael’s life: “These were the years of Yishmael’s life: one hundred years, thirty years and seven years.” Yishmael is depicted by *Chazal* as a sinful character, who eventually repented as an older man (Bava Batra 16a). Clearly, then, it cannot be said of him that all his years were equal, as Rashi said about Sara. Therefore, the Torah’s breaking up the units of Sara’s life cannot be understood as an indication of their similarity, as evidenced by the fact that the same sentence structure is used in reference to Yishmael’s life, which went through drastically different phases.

Rav Chaim Elazary, in his *Mesilot Chayim*, suggests a bold explanation in defense of the Midrashic reading cited by Rashi. He asserts that if an evildoer sincerely repents and changes his life, then indeed, his entire life is considered to have lived properly. From a Torah perspective, a person life’s is not merely a composite of many different experiences and actions, but rather a progression. And if a person succeeds in learning from his mistakes and failures, using them as valuable lessons and as springboards for change and advancement, then he or she retroactively transforms them from evil to good. The mistakes we have made do not need to define us for the rest of our lives, and do not even have to remain as stains on our record for the rest of our lives. Through the process of genuine *teshuva*, whereby we learn and grow from our wrongdoing, we can convert them from moments of disgrace into precious moments of growth. And thus indeed, even about Yishmael it could be said that – as Rashi said about Sara – “*kulan shavin le-tova*” – “they were all equally good.” Since he ultimately repented, his years of wrongdoing retroactively became years of virtue.

Rav Elazary cites in this context the story told of a certain older man who was asked about his age, and he responded – to the questioner’s astonishment – that he was twenty-eight. The questioner naturally expressed disbelief, and the man explained that he spent much of his life as a delinquent, and it was only at the age of fifty that he succeeded in turning his life around and living nobly and virtuously. As such, he only started really living at the age of fifty, and thus he was just twenty-eight years of age. Rav Elazary writes that from a Torah perspective, this should not be the way we assess our lives. We should not forget about the mistakes we’ve made, but rather learn from them. We should see ourselves in the present as a product of everything we have done in the past, both right and wrong, by learning from our mistakes and utilizing them as catalysts for growth and positive change. If we can do this, then we can say about ourselves, too, that “*kulan shavin le-tova*,” that each and every stage of our lives was truly good, contributing to the noble personality and character that we are to continuously strive to build.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Chayei-Sara of Avraham’s strict instruction to his servant to choose as a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak, a woman from Avraham’s birthplace, and not from the Canaanite tribes among whom they lived (24:3-4). The Ramban, commenting later in this *parasha* (25:6), notes the irony in the fact that Avraham himself, after the death of his wife, Sara, married another woman – Ketura – who does not appear to have been from his homeland. The Torah (25:1) gives no information about Ketura, but there is no indication that she originated from Aram Naharayim, as Avraham had insisted that his daughter-in-law must. Curiously, Avraham demanded that his servant bring for Yitzchak a wife from Aram Naharayim – going so far as to make the servant take an oath to this effect – but he did not insist on this policy for himself. (The Ramban presumes that Ketura was a Canaanite, but also entertains the possibility that she was Egyptian or Philistine.)

The Ramban answers, somewhat ambiguously, that this policy was relevant only to Yitzchak “*ki alav nikhrat ha-berit*” – the covenant with God was made only for him. Meaning, God’s special covenant with Avraham’s offspring applied only to Yitzchak and his progeny, as God indicated earlier in Sefer Bereishit (“*ki be-Yitzchak yikarei lekha zara*” – 21:12). It seems that only those descendants included in the covenant could not be produced from a Canaanite woman; it made no difference to Avraham if he begot other children with a woman from Canaan. The Ramban does not, however, explain why this is the case.

One simple explanation that has been suggested is based upon Chizkuni’s understanding of Avraham’s insistence that Yitzchak not marry a Canaanite woman. Chizkuni writes (24:3) that this stemmed from Avraham’s concern that people might attribute his descendants’ claim to the land of Canaan to family connections. If Yitzchak had married a Canaanite woman, people might assume that Yitzchak received rights to the land as a gift from his wife’s family. Avraham insisted on making it clear that his descendants’ rights to the Land of Israel originate from God’s promise, and not from a familial connection, and so he demanded that his servant bring Yitzchak a wife from a distant land. If so, it has been suggested, then we can perhaps readily understand why Avraham had no qualms about marrying a Canaanite woman as an older man. The concern was relevant only with respect to Yitzchak’s hold on the Land of Israel, and so once this has been affirmed through Yitzchak’s marriage to a woman from Aram, Avraham did not have any concerns about marrying a woman from Canaan.

Thursday

The Torah tells that when Avraham’s servant returned to Canaan with Rivka, whom he had brought as a wife for Yitzchak, Rivka saw Yitzchak from a distance and asked the servant, “Who is this man who is walking in the field to greet us?” (24:65). The servant, of course, replied that this was Yitzchak.

The *Panei’ach Raza* (one of the Tosafists) cites a mysterious comment of the Midrash that Yitzchak appeared to Rivka upside-down – with his head on the ground and his feet in the air. This was, needless to say, a most unusual sight, and thus Rivka asked the servant who this person was.

How might we explain this peculiar image depicted by the Midrash – of Rivka seeing Yitzchak for the first time standing upside-down?

The Tolna Rebbe suggested that the Midrash depicts this image to underscore the directly opposite backgrounds of Yitzchak and Rivka. While Yitzchak was raised by saintly parents – Avraham and Sara – Rivka was raised in the home of Betuel, whom *Chazal* in several contexts describe as an idolater and corrupt evildoer. Yitzchak grew up in a home characterized by faith and kindness, whereas Rivka was raised in a home characterized by idol-worship, greed and selfishness. And so when Yitzchak and Rivka met for the first time, they appeared as opposites. Although Rivka was certainly different from her parents – as she would otherwise not have been chosen as Yitzchak’s mate – nevertheless, her upbringing and background were the opposite of Yitzchak’s. Now that Rivka was marrying Yitzchak, she needed to adapt to practices that were so drastically different from that to which she was accustomed, and this anxiety is graphically illustrated by the Midrash through the image of Yitzchak appearing upside-down.

As we go through life, we grow familiar and accustomed to, and comfortable with, certain ways of doing things, certain habits, procedures, protocols and norms. Anything different strikes us as strange, unusual and improper. The Midrash here perhaps teaches us of the need to open our minds and accept styles and approaches which at first seem “upside-down.” Not everything we have grown accustomed to is necessarily correct, and not everything we have grown accustomed to is exclusively correct. Certainly, we all hold to a number of important core values and principles, and follow a number of practices, to which we must stubbornly adhere. At the same time, however, when it comes to many of our ideas, opinions and behaviors, we are encouraged to open our minds to other possibilities, to acknowledge that even that which might initially seem strange and unusual might have merit, and that our way of thinking and behaving might not always be entirely correct.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Chayei-Sara tells the famous story of Avraham’s servant who was sent to Aram Naharayim to choose a woman as a wife for Avraham’s son, Yitzchak. When he arrived in Aram, the servant prayed that God should arrange to have the suitable girl at the well outside the city, and that she would offer to draw water for him and his camels after he requests water for himself. Sure enough, it was Rivka, the daughter of Yitzchak’s cousin, Betuel, who was at the well, and who graciously drew water for the servant and all his camels.

When the servant approached Rivka, he requested, “*Hagmi’ini na me’at mayim mi-kadeikh*” – “Allow me, please, to sip a little water from your pitcher” (24:17). The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 21:20) sees the servant’s modest request as an example of King Shlomo’s teaching in Sefer Mishlei (13:25), “*Tzadik okhel le-sova nafsho*” – “A righteous man eats to satiate his soul.” Rather than ask for a large amount of fresh water to drink, the servant instead humbly asked for just a small sip to quench his thirst. The Midrash notes the contrast between the servant’s request and the story told in the next *parasha*, Parashat Toldot, of Esav who arrived home after hunting in the field and asked Yaakov to feed him some of the stew he was preparing. Esav formulated his request with the word “*hal’iteini*” (25:30), which the Midrash explains to mean that Esav wanted Yaakov to feed him like an animal, pouring the stew into his mouth. The Midrash views Esav brutish conduct as an example of the second half of the aforementioned verse in Mishlei: “*u-veten resha’im techsar*” – “the belly of the wicked is lacking.” Whereas the righteous moderate their demands and expectations, needing only to satiate their hunger, the wicked are constantly “lacking,” always seeking more physical gratification, beyond what they need to sustain themselves. The Midrash sees Avraham’s servant as an example of moderation, as he requested just a small amount of water, and it saw Esav as an example of overindulgence, as he expected Yaakov to pour a pot of stew directly into his mouth.

Significantly, as some later writers observed, there is an important point of similarity between these two stories. Namely, both Avraham’s servant and Esav made their requests because were faint and weary. Avraham’s servant had been traveling from Canaan to Mesopotamia, and Esav had just returned from hunting, and is explicitly described as feeling faint (“*ve-hu ayeif*” – 25:29). Both men were in desperate need of food or water, but they expressed their requests very differently. The Midrash finds fault in Esav’s unrefined behavior, in order to teach us that we must strive to act in a dignified, respectable manner even when experiencing fatigue or other forms of discomfort or duress. It is natural for people to lose their composure and compromise their dignity when they feel weary, unwell, anxious, disappointed or aggravated. The Midrash here urges us to follow the example of Avraham’s righteous servant, who, even after a long, grueling journey, maintained his standards of dignity and self-respect, speaking and acting in an appropriate, composed manner despite his thirst and fatigue. And the Midrash teaches that coarse, unrefined speech and behavior – even when experiencing discomfort and stress – is a characteristic associated with Esav, which we, as the descendants and heirs of Yaakov, are to strive to avoid.

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