WEEKLY DVAR TORAH • CHAYEI SARAH

The Years We Leave *Out*



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כֻּלָּן שָׁוִין לְטוֹבָה

"All of them were equally good."

RASHI, BEREISHIS 23:1

Sometimes we look back at a difficult period in our lives and feel that *our real life began only after that period ended.* Once we left that school, got out of that relationship, or found our way out of an environment where we never felt accepted, we could finally begin becoming the person we wanted to be.

We may be grateful for how far we have come but we have a much harder time looking at the person we were during those years. We remember how badly we wanted to belong, what we tolerated, and the choices we made. Somewhere inside of ourselves there is a voice that says, "I can't believe I was like that."

Those years are part of our history, but we struggle to give them a place in the narrative of our life. What could they possibly have to do with our relationship with Hashem now?

וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה

"And Sarah's life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years; the years of Sarah's life."

BEREISHIS 23:1

The way the Torah counts Sarah's years is unusual. Why separate a hundred, twenty, and seven? And after finishing the count, why repeat *shnei chayei Sarah*, the years of Sarah's life?

Rashi explains that each grouping teaches us something about Sarah. At a hundred she was as free of sin as she had been at twenty, and at twenty she was like seven in beauty. On the final words, he adds:

כֻּלָּן שָׁוִין לְטוֹבָה

"All of them were equally good."
RASHI, BEREISHIS 23:1

How can that be? Sarah endured famine. She was taken into Pharaoh's house and later Avimelech's. She spent decades longing for a child. Surely the years before Yitzchak was born were different from the years when she could hold him.

The Sfas Emes explains that Sarah Imeinu embodied the quality of *hishtavus*, remaining wholehearted through changing circumstances. He describes Sarah's early suffering and the abundance she experienced later, and writes:

וְלֹא נַעֲשָׂה בָּהּ שׁוּם שִׁנּוּי בְּכָל הַשִּׁנּוּיִים הָאֵלֶּה

"All these changes produced no change in her."
SFAS EMES, CHAYEI SARAH

The Sfas Emes is speaking about her *temimus*, her wholehearted devotion to Hashem. Throughout all of the varied experiences of her life, the ups and the downs, she served Hashem faithfully. When Rashi calls all her years good, the Sfas Emes understands that goodness as referring to her ability to have a meaningful relationship with Hashem no matter what she was going through.

This is something we can easily overlook in our own lives. We know how to recognize the value of having overcome a struggle. It is significantly harder to recognize that we had a life while we were still struggling.

The Medrash (Bereishis Rabbah 58:1) introduces Sarah's life with a pasuk from Tehillim: יוֹדֵעַ ה׳ יְמֵי תְמִימִם וְנַחֲלָתָם לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה. "Hashem knows the days of the wholehearted, and their inheritance will endure forever." (Tehillim 37:18) The Medrash comments, בְּשֵׁם שֶׁהֵן תְּמִימִים כָּךְ שְׁנוֹתָם תְּמִימִים, just as they are whole, so their years are whole. But what does the Medrash mean when it says that Sarah's years were whole? How do years filled with such different experiences come together to form one life?

The Sfas Emes compares this to the different limbs of a body. A hand and an eye perform entirely different functions, but both receive life from the same neshama. That shared source of life makes them parts of one person. He describes הַנְּקוּדָה הַפְּנִימִיּוּת הַנּוֹתֶנֶת חַיִּים לְכָל רְמַ״ח אֵיבְרֵי הָאָדָם, the inner point that gives life to all 248 limbs, where הֵם בְּאַחְדוּת אֶחָד, they are one unity.

Similarly, Sarah's years were connected by her devotion to Hashem. Each stage asked something different of her, but through all of them she was serving the same Hashem.

וּכְמוֹ כֵן שְׁנוֹתֵיהֶם תְּמִימִים כִּי גַּם יְמֵי הַשָּׁנָה יֵשׁ לָהֶם דְּבֵיקוּת וְשַׁיָּכוּת

"Similarly, their years are whole, because the days of the year also have connection and relationship."
SFAS EMES, CHAYEI SARAH

Just as the different limbs are expressions of one life, Sarah's different years were expressions of one relationship with Hashem. During the years of waiting, she served Him through her longing and tefillah. After Yitzchak was born, she served Him through raising her son. What she was being asked to do changed, but each stage gave expression to the same devotion. The years before Yitzchak's birth were therefore as much a part of her life with Hashem as the years that followed. Different circumstances called for different avodah, but all of it belonged to one life of Avodas Hashem.

Our own years have not all reflected Sarah's wholehearted devotion. Some include choices we regret and things we need to repair. But how do we approach those years today? Can we bring them into our relationship with Hashem through understanding what happened, grieving what hurt, and doing teshuvah for what needs repair? **Can we recognize that all of our history is part of our one life?**

Imagine someone remembering a year in school when he laughed along as other children were being hurt. He wanted the right people to like him and was afraid of losing his place. He would never behave that way now, but remembering it still fills him with disgust. "I was pathetic."

If a child came to him with the same story, he would meet that child with compassion. He would help the child understand the harm he had caused and his responsibility to make amends, but at the same time he would also help the child understand the loneliness and the fear that made acceptance feel so necessary. Why is that understanding so difficult to extend to ourselves?

We may feel that compassion would excuse what we did, but calling ourselves pathetic certainly does not help us grow. We cannot hate ourselves into meaningful and enduring change. Acknowledging how frightened I was of rejection helps me understand my choices. It may also help me recognize a fear that still affects me, even if my behavior has changed.

> *We cannot hate ourselves into meaningful and enduring change.*

I can then bring something real into my avodas Hashem. I can ask forgiveness from someone I hurt, I can work on my need for approval and I can begin to care about the child who was so afraid that no one would want him.

The Medrash returns to the final words of the pasuk:

מַה צָּרִךְ לוֹמַר שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה בָּאַחֲרוֹנָה, לוֹמַר לְךָ שֶׁחֲבִיב חַיֵּיהֶם שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים לְפָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְלָעוֹלָם הַבָּא

"Why is it necessary to say 'the years of Sarah's life' at the end? To teach you that the lives of the righteous are precious before Hashem, in this world and in the World to Come."
BEREISHIS RABBAH 58:1

After counting Sarah's years, the Torah speaks of them again because her life is precious to Hashem. We often look at our own years primarily in terms of what we accomplished or wasted. The Medrash reminds us that a life can also be looked at with love.

Hashem knew us during the years we struggle to remember. He knew what we did and what we needed to repair. He also knew the fear we could not explain and the longing we were embarrassed to admit. Nothing we bring to Him now is something He is only just discovering.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Those years are part of how I became the person I am today.

So when an old memory comes up, perhaps we can stay with it long enough to ask what was happening inside us then. What was I afraid of? What did I need? What still needs care, and what needs teshuvah?

We may wish those years had been different. We may have things to grieve and things to put right. But we can do that work within our relationship with Hashem.

Our life before Him did not begin only when we became proud of the person we were.

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SOURCES

Bereishis 23:1 (sefaria.org/Genesis.23.1) · Rashi on Bereishis 23:1 (sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.23.1) · Sfas Emes, Chayei Sarah (5632 and 5656) · Bereishis Rabbah 58:1 (sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.58.1) · Tehillim 37:18 (sefaria.org/Psalms.37.18)