

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of Chayei Sara | Volume 49 | 27 Heshvan



First Shabbat Meal

“And the days of Sarah numbered one hundred years, twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah’s life (Bereishit 23:1).”

Even the most difficult challenges are from Hashem and for one’s benefit

The Parasha begins with a count of Sarah’s lifespan: “And Sarah’s years numbered one hundred years, twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah’s life (Bereishit 23:1).” Rashi comments that the particular phraseology of this verse reveals to us that each year of Sarah’s life was equally as good as the next; she lived a life which was only good.

This statement begs the question: How is it possible to describe Sarah’s entire life as being good when the tribulations and challenges she experienced are explicit in the Torah? Sarah was barren for ninety years, kidnapped twice, once by Pharaoh and then by Avimelech, and lastly, her husband, Avraham, endured ten life-testing challenges (most famous of which was being thrown into the furnace). How can these experiences be categorized as positive experiences for Sarah? This teaches us a very valuable life lesson. A person can experience and live through great difficulties and challenges and be entirely happy with them; it all depends upon their perspective. If one understands that everything comes directly from Hashem - being Hashem’s explicit will - then they will come to accept whatever challenges are brought upon them, even if painful, in good spirit. Sarah’s life was littered with hardships and tests but she perceived everything as Hashem’s will and accepted it in good spirit. She may have been barren for many years, seen her husband endure ten life-defining tests and been abducted twice, but she accepted everything with joy.

Each challenge has an implicit lesson which Hashem wants us to absorb. It is our obligation to investigate and reveal what it is that Hashem wants from us in that particular situation. Every situation is unique and so is the lesson Hashem is transmitting through it. One must build one’s character and psyche through these experiences and lessons.

A person might fall face flat onto the floor, but that only serves to bring their attention to what may be lying on the floor.

While standing, they may have never noticed it, but now that they have fallen it lies before their eyes. There are life lessons that can only be learnt through tribulations. One must be vigilant to pick up on these lessons and retain them for later on in life.

It is important to internalize that every challenge and difficulty that comes about is the explicit will of Hashem and for that person’s good. One must therefore be content upon having experienced a given challenge. This was Sarah’s perspective throughout every one of those extraordinary challenges she experienced.

ספר דברים

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Soul Of the Rif

People should be careful to view and learn from all the Shiurim (Torah classes) in their entirety, absorbing all the words and values of Torah. This approach is a recipe which will bring light and ensure the health of one’s soul. It will lead one to be healthy in both mind and sight.

If however, one only observes a slim slither of a Torah class, or perhaps only focuses on the conclusion, then they will only be privy to a narrow slice of the Torah. In this sense, they will be unable to imbibe the Torah in a wholesome manner, and allow that Torah to inject them with life. Therefore, one should seek to imbibe all of the Torah, and in so doing, be revitalized by the Torah and rejoice in it, with it serving as a cause of strength, great light and salvation for us.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"And the days of Sarah numbered one hundred years, twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life (Bereishit 23:1)."

If a person fulfills Mitzvot throughout their life, then even if they die before their time, they will even receive reward for the years which they would have lived.

The holy Torah in this week's portion teaches:

"And the days of Sarah numbered one hundred years, twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life (Bereishit 23:1)."

We must question why the Torah repeats "these were the years of Sarah," what does this mean?

We can suggest a tremendous concept in order to answer the question. It is known that our mother Sarah passed away before her due time, as she should have lived for another few decades, but because she heard about the binding of Yitzchak, her soul departed. In light of this, when she ascended to Heaven, she came before the Heavenly Court at the age of one hundred and twenty seven, and the question was whether she would receive reward for the years she lacked as she had died before her due time.

It is necessary to be aware of the following incredible concept: When a person dies before their time, Hashem goes and counts their remaining years. If they conducted themselves with sanctity and purity within the time that they lived, with modesty and separation from this world, then Hashem will take this into account. He will reckon the time that they did not live, and add this to their merits as if they had lived out those years. However, if a person's life was not filled with Torah and Mitzvot, Hashem does not fill and calculate based on the time which the person lost out on, for they died before that point in time.

This provides us with understanding of another verse in the Torah, which says "I will fill your days (Shemot 23:26)." If a person dies prior to their time, then provided they lived their lives by the Torah and with Mitzvot, then Hashem 'fills in' the days in this world which they lost out on with the lost Mitzvot and Torah. However, if they did not conduct themselves in such a manner, He does not give them their reward for these missing days.

Our mother Sarah was a Tzadikka and a holy woman, who died before her due time. Therefore she merited two types of life, as indicated by the addition of the word "the years of Sarah" at the end of the verse. She received the life which she actually lived, and she also merited the life of those years which did not live physically, but which Hashem filled in for her due to her passing before her time. Hashem conceptually filled that time in for her as if she lived during those years and gave her the due reward as if she had fulfilled Mitzvot and performed good deeds during that time.

This is a tremendous concept. If it happens that one time, a person is unable to fulfill a Mitzvah, but they do fulfill that Mitzvah throughout the rest of their life, then Hashem will grant them reward as if they had filled that Mitzvah on that occasion.

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Q & A with the Rif



Question:

What is Rav's view on on the one hand surrendering my own opinions to that of a Rabbi, whilst also ensuring that that the Rabbi does not come to control my life?

Answer:

It is our view that controlling one's student is forbidden. A rabbi needs to give advice and educate in order to help people lead their lives according to the Torah and Halacha (Torah law). If a rabbi enters into the lives of students and says "do this" or "live your life like this," or "why did you eat like this" or "you should drink like this," they are not defined as a rabbi; these words and approaches are not those of a rabbi. A rabbi needs to teach people ideas and Halachot, but not enter into their personal lives. Entering people's personal lives is outside of the remit of a rabbi, and enters the realm of a dictator. This can occur if one enters into something of a cult, something which is neither healthy nor good.

In people's lives, a rabbi is someone who gives inspiration, encourages people to learn, or informs them of the Halacha, or which things are worth doing, and what should be avoided. Moving into someone's personal life, and in particular in regard to a person's private matters, is not healthy, and one needs to have strong and clear red lines.

The failure to have such boundaries has led to all sorts of problems, such as someone thinking that because they are a rabbi, they are permitted to do as they please. This is not so, being a rabbi does not endow one with special permissive privileges. It is true that one must honor a rabbi, and the fear of your rabbi should be like your fear of Heaven (Avot 4:12). Indeed, one must honor a rabbi and treat him properly. However, he must not interfere in the lives of his students, this must not happen in our schools or communities.





3rd Shabbat meal

“And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and cry over her (Bereishit 23:2).”

Every change, even if positive, presents a person with challenge and anguish.

The Talmud (Shabbat 105b) teaches that whoever weeps over the passing of a righteous person is forgiven for all of their sins. Rabbi Yehuda says in the name of Rav that whoever is lazy in eulogizing a Talmid Chacham is fit to be buried while they are still alive. Whoever mourns and weeps over a Talmid Chacham merits great things; if a person hears that a Tzaddik or a Talmid Chacham has passed away and does not cry or feel any pain, they are punished severely.

This week's portion recounts how “Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and cry over her.” The word “livkota” (“to cry over her”) is written with the letter ‘Kaf’ in small font. Every letter and even the crowns of the letters contain secrets and hints. In light of this, we must ask why the letter ‘Kaf’ is small?

The commentators explain that Avraham wept a little for Sarah, but not in abundance. This gives rise to a very difficult question, why did he not cry over her greatly? Indeed, a person is obliged to weep over a righteous person who passes away and Sarah was certainly a Tzadikka?! The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni on Parashat Noach) states: Rabbi Yitzchak said: Yisca is in fact Sarah. And why is her name called Yisca? For she was adorned [socheh] with the holy spirit.

If so, why did Avraham only shed minimal tears over her passing?

An answer can be gleaned from the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 16b), which states as follows:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: Four things can tear up a person's negative judgment: Charity, crying, changing one's name and changing one's deeds. There are several methods through which a person can tear up a harsh decree which is set to befall them. If a person changes their name or moves to live in another place, this can change their Mazal (fortune). Likewise, charity and crying out in prayer can transform the nature of a decree on a person.

The transformative power of prayer and charity to repel a negative decree is understood, but the question must be asked, why should changing one's name or abode change one's decree? If a person is called Avraham until today, but from tomorrow onwards is called Yitzhak, why should this have any impact on what happens to him? The same question can be asked about a person moving residency from one town to another?

In answer to this question, there is a key concept that one needs to be aware of. Whatever changes one undergoes, can impact them negatively, causing them to be sad. If a person lives in a small house and moves to a larger house, even if it is more splendid, there is a certain sadness in their heart. Within every change that a person undergoes in life, the new thing causes them a little sadness. This is why people are always upset between the winter and the summer, because every change of season causes people to have bad feelings. If a person is used to one thing and something changes, they tend not to like this.

Even in regard to change in a good direction, where a person ascends to higher levels, the change causes a person to feel sadness.

One needs to cause joy to the bride and groom for seven days, even though they have just got married and are happy because there is some level of sadness in their hearts, because every change causes some form of internal sadness.

Therefore, one who changes their name has their decree torn up, because the change causes them a form of sadness, for even a change to a good or better name causes some sadness in the heart. A person who moves residency is happy that they have moved to a nicer town, but feels some internal sadness and it is this feeling which atones for sins.

Based on this, we can suggest that there are several times which are difficult for a person. When a person leaves their mother's womb and enters this world is a very difficult moment for a baby. Though they do not remember it, this is a trauma which remains etched into a child's soul for their entire life. Another tough time is when their soul departs from this world to the next. This moment of death is exceptionally harsh, as at that time, the angel of death places three drops into a person's mouth, corresponding to jealousy, lust and honor. Through this injection, the angel takes a person's soul, and this transition between worlds is an exceptionally difficult ordeal.

However, our mother Sarah was a Tzadikka, such that even in this world, her life was truly one of the World to Come. Since this was the case, she experienced no pain moving from this world to the next. With the above in mind, we can explain that although ordinarily we must weep over a person who has died, for they are undergoing a transformation from this world to the next, Sarah was not so. Sarah's entire life was permeated with righteousness and sanctity, which perfectly resembled her life in the next world, in which she was adorned with the holy spirit. Therefore, in death, she experienced no change and no resulting pain.

It was for this reason that the word livkota “to weep for her” is spelled with a small ‘Kaf.’ Avraham did not have to shed many tears over Sarah, for her departure did not entail great sadness. Indeed, she seamlessly transitioned to the World to Come without any suffering or pain.

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Treasure charms from the Rif



If one fears that others wish to do negative things to him, or harm him, he should recite the follow verse:

“And the men who were at the entrance of the house they struck with blindness, from small to great; and they tried vainly to find the entrance (Bereishit 19:11).”

He should recite this verse back and forth, forwards, and backwards seven times, and this will be extremely virtuous to save him from evil things. Indeed, this charm has been successfully drawn upon for many years to protect people from harm.



One who saves even a single soul, is regarded as having saving the entire world

In the event that man senses oncoming trying times or crises, he should strive to do kindness to all those who surround him, safe in the knowledge that kindness and righteousness can save one from danger. In a similar vein, if one sees that his livelihood is likely to undergo strain, he should engage in the following charm to ward off the challenge. He should locate an orphaned bride, or indeed any poor bride and commit to pay for a significant portion of the wedding cost, if not the entire sum; this act of kindness will surely open new horizons for his own financial stability, being a charm for abundance. Indeed, I have received the tradition from my ancestors, that one who takes care of brides and bridegrooms will merit to have the gates of Heaven open for them and be showered with unbounded blessings, the likes of which they could never have envisaged. Finally, a G-dly blessing stemming from such a lofty mitzvah will only be accompanied by joy in abundance, devoid of misery.

In tandem with the above, one should know that kindness can also be expressed through non-monetary means. This may include striving for the redemption of captives, or encouraging those who are struggling, or simply brightening someone's day through a smile. Anyone who sacrifices their time and energy in order to do kindness for others can be assured that Hashem will record this in their favor. Indeed, this is stated in regard to Avraham, when the verse says: "And he believed in G-d, and this was considered righteousness on his part (Bereishit 15:6)."

On Shabbat Kodesh, I heard a story from a close friend. He related that during the Holocaust there were twenty-four distinguished rabbis, including Chassidic Rebbes, who successfully fled from their homes to Italy. Once in Italy, they were caught by the Italian government who sought to return them to the Nazis - in effect, a death sentence. The Jews in America heard about their desperate situation and immediately jumped to action. The leading businessmen of American Jewry approached the authorities seeking any means possible to save the twenty-four sages. However, try as they might, their attempts were to no avail.

The businessmen then approached the great sage, and leader of Torah in America, Rabbi Aharon Kotler and told him about the desperate situation. He asked them what they could do to help, to which they responded that they had already exhausted all the usual bureaucratic channels and were at a loss of what to do. Rav Aharon thought for a moment and told them about an Italian family based in New York. He explained that the family headed a mafia gang and were feared throughout New York and Italy; they had endless resources at their disposal and were not afraid of being involved in dangerous endeavors. He turned to the businessmen and said: "Perhaps they'll be able to help?" The businessmen stood aghast, unable to believe what they were hearing, but the Rabbi continued and said: "Please bring the head of the family to see me in my Yeshiva. This is a case of saving Jewish lives, we must do whatever we can!"

The businessmen left, made some calls and were able to persuade the named man to come to the Yeshiva. When the man arrived, he was confused, having no idea why he had been summoned. He asked Rav Aharon who he was and why he wanted to see him.

Rav Aharon responded, explaining that he was the head of the Yeshiva. He then asked the man who he was, to which the man responded that he was the head of the most notorious mafia family in America.

Rav Aharon nodded to the man and then said that he wished to make a deal with him. He asked the man to ensure the release and safe transit of the twenty-four rabbis and in return, he assured him that he would pray for the man to live a long life and die a natural peaceful death in his bed. The man was taken aback, and to everyone's astonishment, nodded his head in agreement. Within the next two weeks, all twenty-four rabbis were miraculously released to freedom.

Many years passed and one day a limousine pulled up outside the Lakewood yeshiva. Some hefty looking Italian men exited the car and entered the yeshiva and asked to see Rabbi Aharon Kotler. The students responded that Rav Aharon had passed away, however they could see his son if they wished. Rav Aharon's son came down and the men said that their father had just passed away aged ninety-seven from natural causes in his bed. It was their father, they explained, who had made the deal with Rav Aharon all those years ago, and now they, as his children, wished to do business again. They sought a blessing for good health and longevity. The above story illustrates that when one gives of himself, the potential resulting good is incalculable; it can be beyond his wildest dreams. In fact, the holy Sefarim (books) note that each act of righteousness one performs actually engenders the creation of an angel which ascends to heaven. These angels serve to protect the person and argue their case, battling against destructive angels which seek their destruction. In this sense, the angels born through one's kindness, serve to protect one and provide him or her with vitality and vigor.

There was a certain great Tzaddik who had a unique mode of Avodat Hashem (service of G-d); he was focussed on redeeming captives. Every day he would visit different prisons holding innocent captives and do what he could in order to ensure their release. Redeeming captives is one of the most profound Mitzvot.

Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair, the great Tannaic sage would engage in this special Mitzvah with unusual alacrity and self-sacrifice. It is recorded that one day he went to pay a visit to a certain town, and while there, the locals took him to visit the local prison. They guided him around the prison, to observe the conditions and welfare of the prisoners. Rav Pinchas appreciated the visit, however he was also confused, unsure as to why they had decided to take him there. After the visit, Rav Pinchas could not stop pondering why the Almighty had guided him to see the prison? What had been the value of the trip?

His confusion led him to visit a renowned Tzaddik, and he asked him why he had been guided to see the prison? The Tzaddik responded: 'You are engaged in redeeming captives all day. This is an exceptionally draining task, often failing to bear fruits, which can result in despair and exhaustion. Therefore, perhaps the Almighty wanted to see to it that you feel a greater sense of the captive's plight - truly internalizing the anguish of a prisoner. Therefore, you were taken around the prison, to empathize with the prisoners, to fuel your life's work with increased energy and motivation to free those captured.'



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