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Seeing the Good

“Sarah’s lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah’s life” (Genesis, 23:1). This week’s Torah portion segments Sarah’s life into three different stages: one hundred years, twenty years, seven years. Why didn’t the Torah just say, “These were the years of Sarah’s life, 127 years?”

Commentaries explain that by segmenting Sarah’s life, it tells us that all the years – no matter what the stage – of Sarah’s life were good. When we take a step back and think about Sarah’s life, how

could they all have been good? Sarah dealt with infertility, gave her husband to her servant who disparaged and humiliated her, she was kidnaped by Pharaoh and Avimelech, and finally after having a son, hears that her husband sacrificed him. How do these events translate into a good life?

There is a profound lesson in *emunah* (faith in God) that we can learn from Sarah. Regardless of what was happening to her, she was able to maintain a real, inner happiness that led to a love of life. Sarah knew that whatever transpired, whatever was happening to her was directly orchestrated by God, and since God is a loving and compassionate God, was only for her benefit.

When we recognize that everything is for our benefit, even if we do not understand how, we are able to approach the situation completely differently.

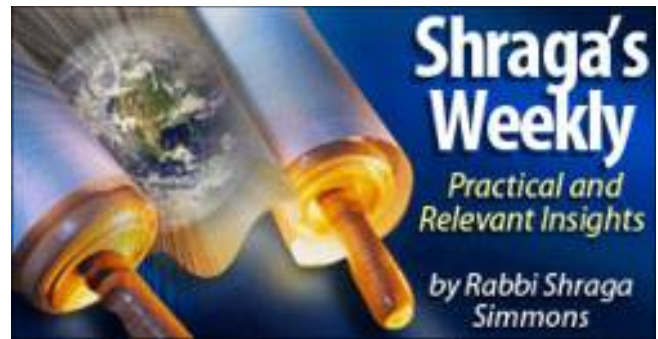
If someone experiences a minor inconvenience, it is easy to get emotionally wrapped up in that inconvenience. We get caught up in a whirl wind of emotion and annoyance that inhibits anything good coming from that situation. If we however, recognize that God is giving you this minor inconvenience for your benefit and that *nothing in the world is better for you right now*, then you are able to better deal with the situation and grow from it, which is the purpose of the inconvenience to begin with.

If, for example, someone is impatient and is running late to a meeting due to someone’s negligence, it is natural for that person to have feelings of anger, annoyance, frustration, etc.

towards that person. However, if the person realizes that God sent that negligence to make them late, and there is nothing better, even if you do not see how being late is beneficial, you are able to bring God into the picture, and strengthen your patience muscles. You can take a step back and not let your emotions run wild while dragging you along with them.

Maintaining a clear head and bringing God into the picture enables you to recognize that this is an opportunity for you to work on trust in God, patience, forgiveness, giving the others the benefit of the doubt. You can maintain a true happiness because you recognize that you have been directly given a precious opportunity from God who loves you. You are better equipped at keeping a positive outlook that enables you to maintain a joy of life, please God until 120 years old, just like Sarah.

Exercise: If an inconvenience occurs throughout the day, think that this was sent to you by God for your benefit. Try to accept it with love knowing it was sent to you out of love from God, and maintain your state of happiness.



Wasting Time

Mr. Cohen is pacing nervously in the waiting room of a hospital maternity ward where, inside, his wife is giving birth to their first child. Suddenly, the door swings open and the doctor appears. "Mr. Cohen, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the birth went smoothly. The bad news is that your son has a condition which, in time, will kill him."

Mr. Cohen is in shock. "This is terrible! What can we do?"

"I'm afraid nothing can be done," replies the doctor. "A cure has not been found. Furthermore, scientists have abandoned hope of ever finding a cure. Your son is definitely going to die."

"Oh no..." says Mr. Cohen, "What is this condition called?"

"Life," answers the doctor. "Life."

The saying goes, "Time is money." But given the choice, which is really more important: five minutes or five dollars?

It's obvious that time is more precious than money. We have a limited amount of time on this earth. The older we get, the clearer that becomes. When we're young, we may feel we'll live forever, "So what's the difference if I waste a decade..." But reality eventually catches up. Legend has it that on her deathbed, the Queen of England said, "I'd give up all my fame and riches for just one more hour of life."

One of the biggest human tragedies is to waste time – gossip, to moronic jokes, sitcoms, mindless surfing through cyberspace. In Los Angeles, a billboard for a popular entertainment promenade reads: "The place to go when you've got nothing to do." That is "Killing time... And vice versa."

There's a more subtle way of wasting time as well. I recall seeing a poster in a low-scale department store advertising clothes "to fit your busy lifestyle." The poster was appealing to our human desire to be busy. If we're busy, we feel important. But what are we really accomplishing? Imagine a tombstone that reads: "He ran a lot of errands." Isn't there more to life than just "being busy?"

The Measure of Life

The title of this week's Torah portion is "*Chayei Sarah*" – literally the "life of Sarah." Strangely, our parsha does not discuss the life of Sarah, but rather describes her death and burial. The parsha continues this theme and ends with the death of Abraham. If this parsha is all about death, why is it entitled "life"?

Life is like a boat. Typically a boat is christened upon its maiden voyage. We have hopes and

expectations that the boat will travel safely and successfully. But what happens many years later when the boat, beaten and weathered, comes back to dock? Where are the cameras, the crowds and the champagne?

Judaism says that is precisely the time for celebration. Because that is when we can evaluate and appreciate the success of the vessel. Which explains why the Torah uses the deaths of Sarah and Abraham to trumpet the great value of their lives.

Daily Growth

The growth spurts of a child can be measured in terms of months. For an adult, growth is detected over a period of years. But why should this be so? Just as we would not expect a 10-year-old to be acting as he did at age five, why should a 40-year-old act as he did at age 35?!

In describing Abraham's life, the Torah says: "*These are the DAYS of the YEARS of Abraham's life*" (Genesis 25:7). The Torah compares days to years to tell us that while the average person's growth can be measured in years, Abraham and Sarah's could be measured in days. They had daily growth spurts. They lived full days.

Sometimes we might think, "I could be growing more, if only my life weren't so difficult." This is a fallacy. Because our greatest growth comes not during the easy times, but in the difficult times. The Talmud says that "all of Sarah's years were equal in goodness." Yet Sarah suffered 90 years of barrenness and was kidnapped twice. Abraham, too, fought wars and was thrown into a fiery furnace.

Yet no matter what happened, Sarah saw every event as an opportunity to learn and to grow. There is no such thing as "standing still." Life is a constant state of entropy. If we're not growing, we're withering.

Spare Minutes

The average American spends 250 hours each year commuting, and another 200 hours standing in line. Over a 40-year working career, that's 18,000 hours. And what do we have to show for it? That we can recognize every hit song from the '60s and '70s? That we've listened to hours and hours of political analysis on talk-radio? That we cheered the Yankees to the pennant?

Driving and daydreaming is throwing money out the window. Instead, learn something! Set a goal. Learn Hebrew. Go through a series on [Jewish history](#). While eating lunch or while commuting, listen to [audio classes](#). There is no shortage of opportunities, if we truly desire to make it a reality.

One of my favorite stories illustrates this idea: There was a great rabbi in 19th century Europe named the Chasam Sofer. It would take him several years to learn through the voluminous Talmud, cover-to-cover. Upon completion, he would celebrate with family and friends. One time, he announced another celebration – just a few months after the previous one. His friends asked: "But your cycle is not due to complete for another several years?!" To which he explained: "All this time I have been learning through the Talmud on a second, concurrent cycle. I learned whenever I had five minutes to spare – whether standing in line, waiting for some event to start,

or while travelling. In this way – five minutes at a time – I was able to amass many extra years of Torah study!"

Purposeful Relaxation

This all sounds nice in theory, but we do need time to relax! Of course, everyone needs time to recharge and refresh. "Don't waste a minute" doesn't mean having a book in front of you 24 hours a day. (After all, we do sleep.) Rather, the Jewish idea of "relaxing" means to tune into another aspect of living. Relax, but don't "space out." Make all our actions purposeful and directed. When we sleep, it should be for the purpose of resting the body so that it will have the strength to do something truly meaningful. In this way, the sleep itself becomes meaningful.

Similarly, when visiting with a friend, rather than spend the time chattering about news, sports and weather, instead brainstorm ways to assist the community, or talk about the weekly Torah portion. Or take a walk through nature. Even though you change gears, it's not quitting. It's growth.

As descendants of Abraham and Sarah, we have inherited their spiritual genes. Every moment of their lives was purposeful and meaningful. May their example inspire us to do the same.

The clock is ticking.



Tips For Finding Your Life Partner

This *parashah* is sometimes referred to as "the *Shidduch parashah*" and we will share just a few points on the ins and outs of finding a life partner.

Abraham asks his trusted servant Eliezer to swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites in whose midst he dwells, but would return to Abraham's birthplace and seek a wife for Isaac there.¹

We wonder why Abraham is so adamant that Isaac not marry a Canaanite girl. It couldn't simply be because the Canaanites were idolaters, for the people of Charan (Abraham's birthplace) were also idol worshipers. In fact, at that time, the entire world was mired in paganism. Abraham's decision can be understood when we realize that idol worship is an intellectual error; it is a belief in a fallacious theology, and that can be overcome. However, the Canaanites were *morally degenerate*; they were innately dishonorable. While people can become enlightened and renounce their erroneous beliefs, corrupt character traits cannot easily be overcome. It was that which concerned our forefather Abraham. He knew that the future Matriarch of the nation

destined to stand at Sinai could not be found in such a population.

The test of a truly good family is evidenced by the *middos* (character traits) of its members. These character traits are passed down from generation to generation through the example set by the parents. In our world today, where the trappings of financial success are often the criteria for a "good match," we would do well to remember this teaching. Exterior trimmings, such as wealth, have no substance; they can disappear overnight, leaving darkness and pain in their wake. So, when seeking a life partner, first and foremost, look for exemplary character traits: kindness, refinement, patience, humility, generosity, and *simchas hachaim* (a positive attitude toward life). Moreover, beware of those who gossip, are quick tempered, arrogant, cynical, unforgiving, miserly, jealous, and selfish. Don't be blinded by good looks and glamour. If positive character traits are lacking, then even the most beautiful face can turn ugly overnight.

PRAYER

Eliezer *prayed* to God that He do *chesed* for his master Abraham and grant that he find a wife for Isaac. It is difficult to understand why one would have to pray for a match for Isaac, a man who had it all. He was the scion of a great family, fabulously wealthy, magnificent in appearance, and brilliant; in short, a great catch. Who would *not* want to marry him? But from this we learn that when it comes to finding our life partners, we all need God's help. It's easy enough to get married, but to marry the *right one* – for that we need Divine assistance, for that, we have to pray.

An especially auspicious time for prayer is during *Minchah*, the afternoon service, for that was the prayer that Isaac was reciting when he first beheld Rebecca.

CHESED

The litmus test that Eliezer used to recognize Isaac's *bashert* (Divinely destined life-partner) was *chesed*, kindness. "Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, 'Please tip over your jug so I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will even water your camels,' her will you have designated for Your servant, for Isaac"²

To appreciate the awesomeness of this test, let us remember that drawing water from a well is no easy task, and satiating the thirst of ten camels can be backbreaking labor. It would have been reasonable for Rebecca to have told the stranger to draw his own water; however, not only did she refrain from responding in such a manner, but her offer of help exceeded Eliezer's expectations, as she watered the camels until they were satiated and then, when Eliezer asked for lodging for the night, offered him food and stabling for his animals as well.

DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR PRINCIPLES

Although Abraham made Eliezer take an oath that he would not seek a wife for Isaac from the daughters of Canaan, he also told him that if the girl refused to return with him, he would be absolved from the oath. Nevertheless, under no circumstances should Eliezer consider taking Isaac out of the land of Israel.

From this we learn that, as critical as it is to make a *shidduch*, it should never be made at the price of

moving to a community that might stunt one's spiritual growth. Indeed, we must always make the effort to reside in a place where we can continually grow spiritually as Jews.

But if Eliezer were freed of his oath, whom would Isaac marry? Since he could not marry a woman from the land of Canaan, as Abraham had previously stipulated, and if no woman were willing to accompany Eliezer to Eretz Yisrael, what would happen to God's promise that the children of Abraham would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens?

Abraham had perfect faith in God and knew that His promise would be fulfilled. If there were no suitable matriarch of the Jewish People in Haran, one would be found elsewhere, *somewhere*. We learn that even if it appears that we are undertaking an impossible task, if that task is assigned by Hashem, we nevertheless follow God's commandments and trust that He will do the rest, as He did for our forefathers. Today, assimilation is rampant, intermarriage is rife, and people very often try to justify marrying out by claiming that there is no one else available. But God is the ultimate *shadchan* (matchmaker). We must trust Him to *send us our destined life partner* and He will surely do so.

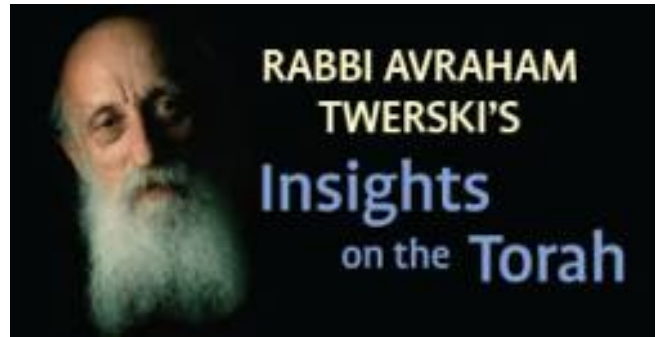
MOVE ON – AVOID PROCRASTINATION

Eliezer very clearly challenged Rebecca's family. "And now, if you intend to do kindness and truth with my master, tell me," he demanded, "and if not, tell me, and I will turn to the right or to the left."³ Eliezer wanted a clear *yes* or *no*, without delay, so he could continue to fulfill Abraham's command.

Once again, this is a teaching that we would do well to remember. Ours is a society in which procrastination is in vogue. People have a tendency to date endlessly, only to see their efforts end in futility. Often, critical months and even years are wasted and leave much heartbreak in their wake. Our Torah teaches that if a *shidduch* isn't working out, move on!

This teaching is also applicable in situations that end in painful breakups because one of the parties has a change of heart. Very often, the rejected party feels that his/her life has been put on hold and fears that the *bashert shidduch* has been lost. The teaching of *our parashah* comes to fortify such people. Eliezer could certainly have lost hope had they said no. After all, there were so many miraculous signs that indicated that Rebecca was Isaac's *bashert* and she was even a descendent of Abraham's own family. Yet Eliezer said, "Tell me yes or no, so that I may know whether I should turn right or left and continue my quest for a wife for Isaac."

1. Gen. 24:3-4.
2. *Ibid.* 24:14.
3. *Ibid.* 24:49.



First Comes Marriage

He (Isaac) married Rebecca, she became his wife, and he loved her (Genesis, 24:67).

Too often we may read a verse in the Torah without pausing to analyze its full meaning. Is it not noteworthy that the Torah points out the sequence, she became his wife and then he loved her?

Western civilization is awash in love. The media bombards us with love via every possible modality: verbal, graphic and lyrical. Is it not strange that with all the emphasis on love, the divorce rate is an alarming 50 percent?

What passes for "love" in western civilization is either blind passion, or at best, self-love. Neither of these are a basis for an enduring relationship. Passion dissipates fairly soon and self-love may be rather easily frustrated.

The dynamics of a couple "falling in love" is something like this: The young man sees in this young woman a person who he feels can satisfy his emotional needs, and she sees in this young man someone who can satisfy her emotional needs. This would seem to be the ideal basis for a

lasting relationship. But note: the young man is motivated primarily by his personal interest, and the young woman is motivated primarily by her personal interest. Although they profess love for each other, the reality is that they each love themselves, and the other is but someone whom they expect will please them. Should anything occur – the other partner is not pleasing them as they had expected, or if they meet someone who they think can better please them – the relationship is at risk of falling apart.

It may be difficult for us to understand how marriages were once made, with the parents of the couple arranging the engagement. In absence of passion and self-love, what was the basis for such marriages? It was a sense of responsibility to establish a family to whom the couple could transmit the legacy of Sinai. Certainly, the relationship was to provide satisfaction for both partners. However, if the level of satisfaction was not what each might have wished, the basis of the relationship was not weakened, and accommodation could more easily be reached. There was a common goal and purpose to the marriage rather than self-seeking interests. This enabled the development of a more mature love.

The Torah tells us, “He (Isaac) married Rebecca, she became his wife and he loved her.” The love developed *after* she became his wife. I can understand that. I saw it work.

My parents' marriage was essentially similar to that of Isaac and Rebecca. The marriage was arranged by their parents, and my father met my mother for the first time after the chuppah

(marriage ceremony). Self-love did not enter into their relationship at its incipience nor at its end.

My father was extremely well-versed in medicine, and when he found out that he had cancer of the pancreas, he felt there was no purpose in undergoing chemotherapy. “Inasmuch as it is not going to prolong my life, there is no reason to suffer the side-effects,” he said. I had to agree.

The doctor, however, told my mother that while chemotherapy in this condition was not of much value, it could extend his life for two or three months. My mother was adamant that chemotherapy be used, even if it would add only one day to his life.

My father said to me, “I'm sorry that the doctor gave Mother misinformation. However, if I refuse chemotherapy, then when I die, mother may have regrets. She may feel guilty that she did not insist on chemotherapy: ‘If only he would have had chemotherapy, he might have lived.’ I don't want Mother to feel guilty, so I will submit to the distress of chemotherapy. I've done many things for Mother, and this gives me a chance to do one last thing for her.”

This marriage was not one of self-love.

Even when the couple know each other before the wedding, a sincere effort at making one's own needs subordinate to those of the other partner can make the marriage one of true love.

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