Parashat Chayei Sarah

Young at Heart and Soul

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

"Sarah's *life* was 100 *years* and 20 *years* and 7 *years*, the years of Sarah's *life*."

The repetitious nature of Genesis 23:1 is unmistakable. Why repeat "years" (שָׁנָה, שָׁנִים) three times instead of the economical "one hundred and twenty-seven years"? And why does the verse end with a kind of repetitive summation—"the years of Sarah's life"?

Rashi discerned in this Sarah's praise. When she was 100, she was like 20 with respect to sin, and not someone who had lived a full life; when she was 20, she still retained the beauty of when she was 7. The concluding phrase "the years of Sarah's life" indicates that all of her years were "equally good."[1]

What does it mean that all the preceding years enumerated were "equally good"? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik proposed that it means that for her entire life Sarah was contemporaneously a centenarian, a woman of twenty, and a seven-year-old child. She was at once very old and very young. Although physically the body ages, attitudinally one can be any age.

The elderly possess wisdom, maturity, and perspective. They are cautious and display sober judgment. Someone in their twenties is an idealist and has a zest for life, pursuing opportunities like marriage or a career. The child is a naïve dreamer and experiences genuine excitement in encountering the world. Sarah, in the Rav's thinking, combined elements of all three. She exhibited the wisdom of an elder by setting standards in her home and establishing its ethos. She showed the vitality of a young adult in defying the surrounding society and pursuing her ideals. Even in her twilight years she retained juvenile curiosity and sincerity. The flower of her youth never faded.[2]

This insight aligns beautifully with a comment made by the Rav's forebear, the Netziv, concerning the word "life" (חיי[ם]) that appears twice in the opening verse. He brings sources showing that while the Hebrew word *chayim* usually means "life," as opposed to death, it can also mean "happiness," as opposed to sadness.[3] The repetition in the verse communicates the youthful exuberance and felicity that filled Sarah's entire life. This can explain the rabbinic notion that Sarah was greater than Avraham in degree of *ru'ach ha-kodesh*, being suffused with the holy spirit. Avraham was surely the greater prophet, but Sarah had a more sustained encounter with this manifestation of the divine in her life, because the holy spirit only rests on a person who is content and joyous on account of deep-seated faith.[4]

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[1] Rashi on Genesis 23:1.

[2] *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:158–159.

[3] In English as well, we find the adjectives "alive" and "lively" to mean happy and energetic.

[4] *Ha'amek Davar* on Genesis 23:1, s.v. שני חיי שרה.

Sarah's blend of the very best the various stages of life have to offer is essential for Jewish living and for membership in the covenantal community. At one moment we must be the mature and wise elder, and at the very next moment the excited youthful dreamer. It is particularly important to stress that with three major religious duties the Rav believed that we need to access our inner child and draw out sincerity, innocence, and passion. They are prayer, faith, and Torah study.

Prayer

The experience of prayer, as the Rav described it, is like that of a child who clutches her mother and yearns simply to be held and embraced by someone whose love is intense and unconditional. The child pines for their parents' presence and protection. "This feeling," says the Rav, "is the root of prayer."[5] This is an instinctive and unreflective posture that comes naturally to a child.

We preface the Amidah with "God, open my lips" (Psalms 51:17), intimating that we need God's help to formulate our prayer. We begin on a note of apprehension. All the wisdom in the world cannot summon the appropriate words for God's praise; only with the help of our Father in Heaven can we articulate our words correctly.[6]

In the introduction to his commentary on the siddur, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook contrasted the gesture of prayer with the act of Torah study. In so doing, he quoted a Talmudic passage to the effect that prolonging prayer is effective, but then opines that prolonging prayer and contemplation leads to heartbreak.[7] Why should that be? Because prayer is not the time for analysis and speculation; the intellect should be the handmaiden of the spirit here. During Torah study one can dissect and utilize a microscope, hypothesize and draw conclusions. Prayer should come from "the deep recesses of the pure soul, which turns longingly to the God of its salvation."[8] We can prepare ourselves for prayer with the mind, but when the time for prayer comes, we put our thoughts down so that we can rise above, and approach God with sincerity and innocence.

Faith

Faith is a "very important religious act that only the child in a person can perform."[9] The Rav exemplified this with Avraham, who suspended all rational judgment when called upon to sacrifice his son. Avraham did not shout at God, raise questions, or even grumble. The Rav concluded, "An adult could not do that; only a child is capable of absolute, unconditional

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[5] *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:159.

[6] *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, 306.

[7] *Berachot* 32b.

[8] *Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, *Inyanei Tefilah*, *Tefilah ve-Torah.*

[9] *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:159.

surrender."[10] One can add to this Aharon's silence in the aftermath of his two sons' tragic deaths. "Aharon was silent" (Leviticus 10:3)—verbally and mentally.

The Rav expanded on this idea by saying that beside the depth, scope, and sharpness of thought needed to be a *talmid chacham*, a Torah scholar, the truly great Jewish personality must also possess "the playfulness and innocence of a child, full of curiosity, enthusiasm, and limitless faith." He conveys this idea in a eulogy for his beloved mentor, the illustrious Rabbi Chaim Heller. The following are the Rav's words:

> The adult is too clever. Utility is his guiding light. The experience of God is not a businesslike affair. Only the child can breach the boundaries that segregate the finite from the infinite. Only the child with his simple faith and fiery enthusiasm can make the miraculous leap into the bosom of God. […] The giants of Torah—when it came to faith, became little children, with all their ingenuousness, gracefulness, simplicity, their tremors of fear, the vivid sense of experience to which they are devoted. […] Whenever [Moshe] fell before God, he cried like a child. Who can fall before his father, raise his eyes to him alone, to seek consolation and salvation, if not the child! […] The mature, the adult, are not capable of the all-embracing, all-penetrating outpouring of the soul. The most sublime crown we can give a great man, sparkles with the gems of childhood.[11]

Torah Study

The Talmud interprets the Hebrew word for "aged" (זָקֵן) as an acronym for "one who has acquired wisdom" (זֶה שֶׁקָּנָה חָכְמָה).[12] Since Torah study requires applying one's intellect, drawing on one's fund of knowledge, and making judicious comparisons and contrasts, it is associated with the wisdom and maturity that come with age. The trained and experienced adult mind is essential for the rigorous analysis and lengthy exploration that constitutes Torah study.

Nevertheless, the Rav often emphasized the non-intellectual components of Torah study in his writings and talks. His conception of Torah study is an encounter with God, which is why the Rambam says that night is ideal for Torah study, given the quiet and intimacy of the pockets of light in the vast dark.[13] In addition, when we recite every morning the blessings over the Torah, we say that we are commanded to delve into (*la'asok*) the words of Torah, to develop a deep familiarity that creates an emotional bond. Later in the same blessing, we ask that God

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[10] Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey*, 190. When teaching *Chayei Sarah* in 1972, the Rav shared the following: "I remember observing a little boy who had almost unlimited faith in his mother. Whenever he was asked a question he would in turn inquire: 'What did mama say?' Though he was a quite capable and intelligent child, he would suspend his own judgment because of his unlimited trust in his mother. This is exactly the way that an adult should act in his relationship with God. However, an adult is not capable of such behavior. Who can do it? Only a child. So the adult has to rise and wake up the child within him. He must have this child perform on his behalf and act of total faith. Then the adult must say to the child within him: 'I will join you!'" (Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:1–2).

[11] *Shiurei HaRav,* 63–64 (= *Divrei Hagut ve-Ha'arachah,* 159–160).

[12] *Kidushin* 32b.

[13] See further *Parashat Mishpatim*, "*Avodah she-ba-Lev*: Torah of the Heart."

sweeten the words of Torah for us, so that we can connect on an emotional level.[14] Study should inflame the passion of youth.

The Rav discerned this symbolically in the cherubim that adorned the ark of the covenant. Their childlike faces reflected that Torah study requires one who studies Torah to be filled with purity, naivete and a child-like longing to feel God's presence.[15]

Exploring the Rav's Insight

To be an observant Jew demands maturity. But in our faith, prayer, and Torah study, we are actually called to revert to a kind of "immaturity," to a yearning for God that is not obstructed by questions and criticisms of the intellect. Religion is a serious business, but it does not require obliterating all traces of childhood from the man or woman. Our matriarch Sarah provided us with the model personality who struck a balance between the seasons of life, who showed that all years can be "equally good."

The Rav beautifully relays the idea that the three daily prayers symbolize this very motif. The morning's Shacharit is a child's prayer. It comes at the start of a new day, and we may not engage in worldly affairs until it is finished. The afternoon prayer, Minchah, must be said in the bustle of midday, and so is the prayer of midlife. We have our hands full with work, spouses, and children. Ma'ariv is the prayer of the night, a time of anxiety and uncertainty about what the future holds. Our strength is drained from a long day. This is the prayer of the elderly.[16]

The Talmud tells of a coin issued in the time of Avraham and Sarah. The obverse displayed an old man and woman, and the reverse a young boy and girl.[17] The Rav remarked that Sarah and Avraham were able to heroically merge together the multifaceted stages of life.[18] They were young at heart and soul.

(Excerpt from Torah United OU Press)

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[14] *Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, 270.

[15] From an unpublished eulogy of the Rav for Rabbi Joseph Shalom Shubow (1899–1969).

[16] Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, "Parshat Vayetze 5774," https://ots.org.il/parshat-vayetze-rabbi-riskin-text/ (accessed March 24, 2021). See further *Parashat Vayechi*, "To Fall and Rise Again."

[17] *Bava Kama* 97b.

[18] *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 1:159.