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Path

CHAYEI SARAH To Follow

22 HESHVAN 5771 - 10/30/ 2010

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SPIRITUAL PERFECTION AND MATERIAL PERFECTION (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years; the years of Sarah’s life” (Bereshith 23:1). Rashi says that “the years of Sarah’s life” means that they were all equally good. He is compelled to explain things in this way because he found it difficult to understand why the Torah wrote “the years of Sarah’s life” after having said, “The life of Sarah was” at the beginning of the verse.

We may expand upon this issue by saying that this verse alludes to the fact that everyone should establish two paths for himself: One material and the other spiritual. When he is dealing with one, he should not deal with the other, as we read with regards to the festivals: One verse says, “An assembly for Hashem” (Devarim 16:8), while the other says: “There shall be an assembly for you” (Bamidbar 29:35). We therefore divide it: Half for Hashem and half for ourselves. When a person is occupied with material pursuits, he will benefit from them and rejoice in the festival. Likewise when he is occupied with spiritual pursuits, he will study Torah without paying attention to other things. If he mixes both pursuits, he will succeed in neither.

Also on this subject, King Solomon wrote: “Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under heaven” (Kohelet 3:1), and the Gemara states: “At first Israel were like hens picking in the dunghill, until Moshe came and established a definite mealtime for them” (Yoma 75b). Furthermore, a person must pay attention to not mixing both endeavors because each has a specific time that has been designated for it, as it is written: “The times for prayer and Torah [study] are distinct from one another” (Shabbat 10a).

Along the same lines, Rabbeinu Yona explains the teaching of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai to his disciples, “Go and see which is the good way to which a man should cleave” (Pirkei Avoth 2:10). Of all virtues, a person should cleave to one in particular and perfect himself in it, rather than trying to possess numerous virtues and perfecting himself in none.

Even When Eating and Drinking

This was how Sarah lived. Throughout her life, she had two paths: One material and the other spiritual, and she clearly differentiated between the two. She certainly did not mix them together! This is why, once the verse details the number of her years, it again states: “the years of Sarah’s life.” The term shenei (“years”) should be understood in the sense of “two” (shenei) – “the two lives of Sarah.” In other words, throughout her life Sarah had two paths that she did not mix together, and she followed each to perfection.

We should not think that in her material endeavors, Sarah had no thoughts of acting for the sake of Heaven. This tzaddeket clearly had two paths – one spiritual and the other material – and she sanctified herself even in regards to her material pursuits, doing them for the sake of Heaven. As the Ramban writes in his Iggeret HaKodesh (Letter on Holiness), “The minds of the Patriarchs were not distracted from the supernal light, not even when eating and drinking.” This is what Rashi is saying: All the years of Sarah’s life were equally good. In other words, although she had clearly established two paths during all the years of her life, we should not think that her material pursuits were not done for the sake of Heaven. Rather, everything she did was equally for the good, and there is nothing “good” but the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written: “Taste and see that Hashem is good” (Tehillim 34:9). That is, each of the two paths were equal in this regard, for she devoted both of them entirely to Heaven.

Since Sarah did this for her entire life, she was not pleased with Ishmael the son of Abraham. In fact she drove him out of her home, along with his mother, as it is written: “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, mocking. So she said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this slavewoman and her son, for the son of this slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac’” (Bereshith 21:9-10). The Sages are divided as to the nature of this mockery. Some say that it con-

sisted of indecent behavior, Sarah having seen Ishmael violating young women. Others say that it consisted to idolatry, Sarah having seen him build altars, catch locusts, and sacrificing them (Bereshith Rabba 53:11).

When Sarah saw these revolting things in Ishmael, she began to fear that he would have a disastrous influence on her son Isaac. She therefore told Abraham to drive him away along with his mother. This is difficult to understand, for how could Sarah have seen these things in Ishmael, while Abraham did not? And if Abraham had seen them, can we possibly think that he would watch his son Ishmael doing such things without reacting, without saying a single word, until finally Sarah mentioned it to him?

Furthermore, if Ishmael practiced idolatry, was it possible that Abraham had allowed idols into his home? How could this be? After all, Abraham did not even allow guests into his home before they washed their feet, for he was afraid that they had bowed to the dust of their feet!

Without Losing Focus

All the things that the Sages mention, however, come to teach us that Ishmael mixed good with evil. Within him were character flaws that resembled idolatry, flaws such as pride – which is as grave as idolatry, as the Sages have said: “Every man in whom pride dwells is as if he worships idols” (Sotah 4b) – and anger: “It is as if he worshiped idols” (Midrash L’Olam 15). A love of money is also compared to idolatry (Iggeret HaKodesh at the end of the book Noam Elimelech). Nevertheless, Abraham believed that Ishmael could still achieve faith in Hashem while possessing such flaws.

Since Ishmael did possess these flaws, however, he did not choose the right path to follow, which is why Sarah told Abraham: “There are wicked character flaws in Ishmael. He mixes good with bad, and I’m afraid that he will have a harmful influence on my son Isaac, who will learn from him. I beg you,

drive out this slavewoman and her son!” The Holy One, blessed be He, agreed with her, as it is written: “All that Sarah tells you, heed her voice” (Bereshith 21:12).

The verse describes these character flaws as “mocking” because whoever mixes good and evil, failing to choose a single path, will not succeed even in one area. The entire Torah will seem like a joke to him, since it is impossible for such a person to love Hashem and possess pride at the same time, or to love both Hashem and money. It may be that this is what King Solomon meant when he said, “Anger is better than mockery” (Kohelet 7:3), meaning that it is better for a person to show his true flaws, even in a bad way (such as by getting angry), than to put

on a façade of deceit and mockery, so that nobody really knows what is going on within him.

Generally speaking, it is impossible for a person to believe in G-d unless he chooses a path from which he will not stray, as Sarah did when choosing two paths, one material and the other spiritual, though both were directed towards Hashem. With regards to Sarah, the Torah says that everything was equally for the good. We also read, “You shall love Hashem your G-d with all levavecha [your heart]” (Devarim 6:5), which the Sages have interpreted as “with both your hearts” (Midrash Tannaim, Devarim 26:16), meaning that even when we deal with material matters, we must not turn away from G-d, from the Torah, or from the mitzvot.

THE WORDS OF THE SAGES

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN MARRYING INTO A FAMILY

It is written, “She became his wife” (Bereshith 24:67).

Families in which children reach the age for shidduchim wonder about the character traits that they should be looking for in families that their children will marry into. What character traits must prospective in-laws have in order to establish a Jewish home?

This question was also asked by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach Zatzal. His family recounts how he too, the Rosh Yeshiva of Kol Torah, described an extraordinary incident from which we can draw an important lesson.

The character traits that have exemplified the conduct of the Jewish people throughout the generations also have a direct bearing on the home.

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman recounts that the famous gaon Rabbi Baruch Frankel-Teomim Zatzal of Leinik (the author of Baruch Ta’am) was set to marry a girl from a wealthy family. A few days before the wedding, his future in-laws came to his home to conclude the final details of the marriage.

Shortly before his guests arrived, the gaon learned that the village water drawer had been struck by a grave illness, and that he could no longer provide his family with water. This news pained Rabbi Baruch, and his face was filled with grief.

At that very instant, when his involvement in the pain of the water drawer’s family was at its height, his future in-laws arrived.

The guests were shocked to see how the face of Rabbi Baruch had changed. They were used to seeing the light of Torah shining on his face, when he resembled an angel, and yet now his face was downcast, and they did not know why.

When they expressed their surprise to him, the gaon explained that he had just received news of the water drawer’s illness, and he described how much this grieved and pained him.

At that point, Rav Shlomo Zalman says, one could see how surprised the future in-laws were. They told Rabbi Baruch how shocked they were to see that a simple water drawer could cause him so much pain, such that it could be seen on his face.

When Rabbi Baruch saw their reaction and sensed that they did not understand him – that they were not even able to understand that he, as a Rav, so fully shared in the family’s distress – he arose and announced that the Shidduch was off.

“I cannot become part of a family that does sense the pain of others,” he said.

He did not change his mind, not even at the last minute.

In his book Alenu Leshabaeach, the gaon Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein Shlita states that from here we learn an essential characteristic to look for when choosing one’s in-laws.

IN THE LIGHT OF THE PARSHA

How Sarah Served Hashem

From the Teachings of the Gaon and Tzaddik Rabbi David Hanania Pinto Shlita

It is written, “The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years; the years of Sarah’s life” (Bereshith 23:1).

Rashi explains that the verse says “years” after each number in order to tell us that each should be interpreted separately. That is, “When she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin. Just as a twenty-year-old has not sinned, because she is not liable to punishment, likewise when she was one hundred years old, she was without sin. And when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old as regards to beauty. The years of Sarah’s life – they were all equally good.” What do we learn by being told that they were all equally good, since she was already compared at one hundred to twenty, and at twenty to seven?

We can understand Rashi’s explanation in the following way: A person’s service of Hashem is not the same in youth as it is in old age, for each age has its own particular characteristics. The service of Hashem in youth is characterized by purity and enthusiasm, whereas in old age it is characterized by greater knowledge and understanding.

We may say that because the verse states “years” after each number, it means that Sarah served G-d in old age exactly as she had served Him in youth. At one hundred she was like twenty, and at twenty she was like seven, the years of her old age being similar to the years of her childhood. From the fact that the verse adds the expression, “the years of Sarah’s life,” we see that even during childhood she strived to serve G-d just like an adult.

This is what constitutes “they were all equally good.” There was no difference between Sarah’s service of G-d in her youth and in her old age, for both were equal: As a child she was like an old woman, and as an old woman she was like a child. Such service of G-d surpasses the norm, for people usually serve G-d in relationship to their age.

AT THE SOURCE

Removing the Years

It is written, "The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years" (Bereshith 23:1).

An extraordinary Midrash states: "When Sarah died, Adam began to speak Aramaic."

Rabbi Yosef Lalzer (the author of Nezer Yosef) cites an amazing teaching from Rabbi Tzion Naki to explain this statement.

When Adam sinned, man was condemned to become mortal. When a person dies, he goes to Adam and says to him: "You are the reason why I died." Adam replies, "Come, we will open the Book of Life and see if you committed any sin!" At that point the person leaves.

Now when Sarah was one hundred years old, she was like twenty years old in that she had not sinned at all, as Rashi explains on the repetition of the word "years" after each number. Thus upon her death, Sarah said to Adam: "You are the reason why I died." Adam immediately began to read the verse in Aramaic from the Targum: "The life of Sarah was one hundred and twenty seven years" – without repeating the word "years" after each number – so as to avoid the proof that Sarah died at one hundred and twenty seven years, being at one hundred as she was at twenty.

Returning to the Source

It is written, "Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hevron" (Bereshith 23:2).

Rabbeinu Bechaye explains why this place has two names ("Kiryat Arba, which is Hevron"):

"We may say that Kiryat Arba is called Hevron because the souls of all who are buried there cleave [from the root hivur] to G-d's realm above, with the four camps of the Shechinah. It is not without reason that the Patriarchs desired this place, for it is from there that the souls of the departed cleave to their source, which is the Throne of Glory."

This is the meaning of "Kiryat Arba, which is Hevron."

Bakol

It is written, "Abraham was old, advanced in days, and Hashem had blessed Abraham in all" (Bereshith 24:1).

The Sages have explained that bakol ("in all") means that Abraham had a daughter named Bakol (Bava Batra 16b). In his book Tiferet Yehonatan, Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz is surprised by the connection that this has to the account of Eliezer's mission, such that the Torah found the need to specify that Abraham had a daughter whose name was Bakol.

He explains that when father and son are both obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of marriage, the father has precedence over the son. However if the father has already fulfilled the mitzvah of having offspring, meaning that he already has a son and a daughter, then the son has precedence over the father.

After the death of Sarah, both Abraham and his son Isaac had to marry. Hence the Torah tells us that Abraham had already fulfilled the mitzvah of having offspring, since Sarah had given birth to Isaac and Bakol. This meant that the son had precedence over the father in terms of marriage, which is why this information is found next to Eliezer's mission to "take a wife for my son, for Isaac" (Bereshith 24:4).

Come in Days

It is written, "Abraham was old, advanced in days" (Bereshith 24:1).

The Kli Yakar notes that in describing Abraham's old age, the verse should have used the expression yatza bayamim, not ba bayamim (literally "come in days").

The reason is that evildoers view the years of their youth as years of light. They take this view because such years are a good time to benefit from their bodies, which is their main goal in the world. Hence the years of old age seem like night. In fact when evildoers grow old, the world seems dark because they can only taste but a few of its pleasures. To them, the days of their youth are the best of all, and growing old seems as if they have gone from day to night.

Not so with the righteous, who proceed from night to day, for the days of old age are good for acquiring wisdom. Hence the expression ba bayamim is used for the righteous, since they have "come" to the days of their old age, the days of acquiring wisdom.

The Water Arose

It is written, "The servant ran to meet her" (Bereshith 24:17).

In his book Maskil Doresh, Rabbi Yiyah Korach Zatzal gives an explanation for Rashi's view, namely that Eliezer ran to meet Rebecca because "he saw that the water had risen to meet her."

Rabbi Korach states that when people gather water from a well using a small bucket, it is called "drawing." Once they draw this water up, they pour it into a portable container until it is filled. Now a miracle was performed for Rebecca when she went to the well, for a great deal of water rose from the well, to the point that it was completely filled. This gave people the impression that the water rose to meet her. She therefore did not have to draw the water using a small bucket, but instead placed her portable container into the water until it was filled, and then she took it out.

A similar thing occurs in our time, in the spring found by the grave of the chassid Shabazi Zatzal. People go to the spring of the Rav when afflicted by illness or misfortune in order to immerse themselves in its waters. When a person's prayer is accepted, the water will suddenly rise in abundance, until it reaches half his height or more. This is a sign that he will be healed, and when he sees it, he is happy and greatly consoled over his deliverance. Alternatively, the water does not rise for a person whose prayer is not accepted, for it remains at its usual level when he enters it.

The same occurred with the Patriarchs, for the water miraculously rose to meet them in order to signal the abundance that they brought to the world. It also rose for them because they were worthy of great goodness without any effort on their part.

Before the Merchant

It is written, "Four hundred shekels of silver over la'socher [current with the merchant]" (Bereshith 23:16).

By way of allusion, we note that each letter in the term socher appears immediately after, in the Hebrew alphabet, each letter in the term nezek ("damage"). The term over means "before," as in the expression over le-asiatan ("before doing"). Now Ephron, who was greedy, believed that making this deal could damage him financially. As King Solomon said, "One overeager for wealth has an evil eye. He does not know that cheser [want] may befall him" (Mishlei 28:22). For Ephron, the letters of socher became cheser.

This is a lesson that applies to every merchant, for before a socher (merchant) lay nezek (damage) and cheser (want). If a merchant fulfills Hashem's will by not transgressing several prohibitions (not to steal, not to oppress, not to deceive), he will succeed. However if he transgresses them, he will experience both damage and want.

We may also cite a statement made by our Sages: "The salt of money is decrease" (Ketubot 66b). Since salt is a preservative, this alludes to the fact that by giving tzeddakah, a person can become a successful merchant.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH

It is midnight on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in the year 5742, and we are at the cave of Machpelah. There are several minyan of selichot taking place. Normally, reciting selichot is a routine part of prayer, but on the eve of this Rosh Hashanah, these selichot last for more than three hours, and they are accompanied by cries and powerful shouts from the people, Sephardim and Ashkenazim together. They do not know why this prayer lasts so much longer than normal, for it conceals an audacious plan that was carefully hidden, a plan that has been prepared in advance down to the last detail.

At the start of the 1980s, a Jewish researcher by the name of Tuvia Sagiv published a paper in which he asserted that the cave of Machpelah is not the tomb of the Patriarchs, but rather an ancient Edomite shrine, nothing more. A group of residents from Kiryat Arba, close to Hevron, were tremendously curious when they heard this, and so they decided to discover the secret of the cave and to ensure that the Patriarchs were indeed buried within it.

The leader of this group was Rav Moshe Yaakov, from the Shavei Hevron yeshiva, whose great dream was to descend into the depths of the cave. He was motivated by the words of the Zohar, which states that when a person dies, his soul passes through the cave of Machpelah on its way to the gates of Gan Eden.

In a special gathering that took place with Rav Moshe Yaakov, he revealed everything that happened during that historic attempt. His account goes as follows:

“At midnight, we arrived at the cave equipped with heavy instruments to help us in our arduous and complicated task. We entered the burial chamber of Isaac with everyone who had come to recite selichot. It is unusual to enter the burial chamber of Isaac on a regular day. The excavation began beneath the old Byzantine-era bimah, where we began digging and removing stones with a chisel and hammers.”

Rav Moshe Yaakov was asked, “What were the other people doing, those who had come to pray in the chamber?”

He replied, “The entire group stood some distance from me, praying loudly and reciting selichot and tehillim in order to hide the sound of the hammers. It took us half an hour to dig through an opening that had been blocked since Byzantine times. The truth is that nobody imagined that we would be able to enter it.

“I attached a rope around my body and slid to the bottom. I entered the cave and closed the heavy door behind me. After I had forced it open, I was surprised to discover 15 steps, neither more nor less, that led to the center of the cave. This number is surprising, for it corresponds exactly to the number of stones steps on the Temple Mount. At the place corresponding to the Holy of Holies, a cavern had been hewn into the rock, and there we descended by another 15 steps. In the Temple as well, there were 15 steps leading from the Temple courtyard to the Ezrat Nashim, and upon each step the Levites would sing one of the 15 Shir HaMala’alot.

“As I descended these 15 steps, I felt that I was being drawn towards the bottom, and I couldn’t stop myself. I arrived at the entrance of a cavern of extraordinary beauty, 1.08 meters high, 0.65 meters wide, and 36 meters long, a cavern entirely cut from an enormous stone. The secret behind this cavern, according to the holy Zohar, is that the souls of the dead pass through it on their way to meet the Patriarchs, the Patriarchs, and Adam. When the soul leaves the body, it enters the cave of Machpelah, where the entrance to Gan Eden is found, and there it meets Adam and the Patriarchs.

“At the end of this cavern, I reached another structure, which is the upper chamber described in the Gemara [Eruvin 53a] in the discussion

between Rav and Shemuel: One thinks that the cave consists of two chambers, one within the other; while the other thinks that it consists of a lower and upper chamber.

“After having reached the upper chamber, I saw a very ancient chain, at one end of which were olive oil lamps that Arabs would light every morning and bring there.

“Once my friend and I had broken the central pillar, which is the idolatry of the Christians, and once we failed to find the remainder of that cavern, I left the upper chamber. Yet by a miracle, I felt as if someone was turning my head 180 degrees. I then shined my flashlight towards the ground, and to my great surprise I discovered that beneath the stairs of the upper chamber, there was a small round hole, about 0.15 meters in diameter, that had been cut into the ground. I placed my hand at the entrance of this hole and felt some air coming up. The air had an extremely pleasant odor, truly the scent of Gan Eden, as the Zohar states.

“I took an iron nail and a hammer, and I placed it in a crack in the rock, and suddenly the rock moved by itself. I shined my flashlight towards the ground and saw a stunningly beautiful cavern that had been hewn into the rock, about 12 square meters in size. I descended into that cavern and there I felt a wind blowing. Once I entered that cavern, I saw a narrow opening that led me towards a second cavern. I therefore crawled into the second cavern using my flashlight to guide me. It was about the same size as the first, 12 square meters, and at the bottom of it was the grave of Adam. I turned to the left, and there I saw another cavern hewn into the rock. Next to it was debris from an oil pitcher, apparently one for the lamps at the entrance of the cave, perhaps even dating back to the time of the Patriarchs.

“My friend brought me my bucket, and I began to remove dust from the cavern. It filled the bucket about 10 to 20 times, the contents of which my friend would take and empty into the first cavern.

“Once I arrived at a depth of about a meter from the entrance of the cavern, I could make out a round clay object, about the diameter of the cavern, which covered the remainder of it. Engraved upon it was a Star of David, seven stars, above which I could see special letters with the secret of the tribes and the Patriarchs.

“It was precisely at that moment, as I touched the clay in the cave of Abraham, that I was told it was time to leave. That day was a holiday for the Muslims, who were about to arrive for their prayers in the burial chamber of Isaac, which was above us, the entrance of which was located where they would be praying.”

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

An Assembly of Scoffers

Scoffing brings misery upon the world. It becomes difficult for people to earn a living, and everyone is punished because of the scoffer, as the Sages have said: “He who scoffs brings destruction upon the world” (Avodah Zarah 18b). It is forbidden to scoff even in passing, and if we see scoffers and remain in their presence – even if we do not join them – this too is a transgression. Thus it is written, “Who did not sit in the company of scoffers” (Tehillim 1:1). The Sages have taught, “One who cleaves to sinners, even though he does nothing like them, is punished along with them.” We must leave their presence so as not to learn from them, and instead we must seek to associate with those who speak words of Torah. We will then be happy in this world and in the World to Come.

– Shmirat HaLashon