

THE COMPLETION OF LIFE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Sleek sports cars, trendy clothing, hip hairstyles. So many middleaged and even old people are pre-occupied with these things, trying to make themselves look young and up-to-the-minute.

Why has old age come to be perceived in modern-day society as a liability? Why are fifty-year-olds considered over-the-hill? Surely, most middle-aged people, if given the choice, want to exchange places with a teenager. The quality of their lives is usually far superior to that of a teenager. It would seem obvious that these people are not really seeking youth, only the appearance of youth. But again, why should they want to delude themselves in this way?

Let us focus on the opening verse of this week's parshah, which is called Chaye Sarah, the Lifetime of Sarah. The Torah begins by telling us that Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years and follows immediately with an account of Sarah's death. Why then is the parshah called the "Lifetime" of Sarah?

The answer goes to the heart of the Torah's perspective on time. Unfortunately, many of us have been conditioned to view time as an adversary. We look in the mirror and see a gray hair, and suddenly we feel panic. We are getting old! As the birthdays pile up into the higher numbers, they start to bring feelings of depression rather than joy. Some of us even lie about our ages. Why? Because we feel we are losing something, that our grip on this wonderful thing called life is slipping away. And so we devise all sorts of clever schemes and stratagems to escape the tick of the clock. But whether or not we listen, the clock never ceases to tick.

In the view of the Torah, however, time is infinitely precious, and each moment has enormous value for itself. Life is a long progression of small units of time which are infused with value by the experience of living itself - by the wisdom we gain, the people whose lives we enrich, the spiritual growth we achieve. The Torah encourages us to do the best we can with these precious moments of our lives, to fashion them into jewels and ornaments to carry with us forever. Death is not the destruction of life. It is the completion of life.

A beachcomber once went down to the shore at the break of dawn, carrying an empty sack over his shoulder. For hours, he picked through the flotsam and jetsam that had washed up onto the beach, filling his sack with pretty seashells and anything else of value he could find. The sun beat down on him mercilessly, but he continued to work. By early afternoon, his sack was full. He was thoroughly exhausted but satisfied.

As he set off for home, he met a newly-arrived beachcomber carrying an empty sack. The newcomer looked at the first beachcomber and sneered.

"Look at you!" he said. "Your face is red. Your hair is matted. Your clothes are soaked with sweat. You are bent over like an old man. And look at me! I am fresh as a cucumber. Wouldn't you love to exchange places with me?"

"Are you kidding?" the first beachcomber replied. "Didn't you notice the full sack on my shoulder? If I changed places with you, I would have to start all over again filling that empty sack of yours. How would I be better off?"

This is the Torah's perspective. Life has a destination and goals, things to be accomplished, growth to be achieved. Therefore, age rather than youth must be venerated. The Torah commands us, "You must stand up before the elderly." The elderly, regardless of scholarship and piety, are laden with valuables, while the "sacks" of the young are still empty. Each year of life yields wisdom and experience that the most accomplished young person cannot possibly attain. It is true that youth is bursting with strength and vigor, but a person's worth is not to be measured by physical endowments. The body is but an accessory of the soul, and the spiritual growth of old age enriches the soul.

Our matriarch Sarah lived with this perspective. Every moment was molded with loving care into a precious jewel to be carried with her - and to be enjoyed by her descendants - for all eternity. In this light, her death marked the completion of her journey and the full illumination of the "Lifetime of Sarah."

If we integrate these ideas into our own lives we will find that we have much more happiness - and much more time. We must give value and meaning to the years we spend on this earth, filling them with honesty, integrity, love, kindness, study and spirituality. Let us learn to appreciate the value of life. Let us be the beneficiaries of Sarah's legacy - to live a lifetime. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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