

FOUR OUR OWN GOOD

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Chayei Sarah begins (23:1), "Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life." Rashi quotes the Midrash which explains that the repetition of the word "years" after each unit of Sarah's life (100's, 10's and 1's) divides Sarah's life into three phases, each with its own uniqueness, yet each sharing the characteristic of the others. At one hundred, she was as sinless as a twenty year old [a person does not suffer Heavenly punishment until the age of twenty]. And at twenty, she still had the wholesome beauty of a seven-year-old. The conclusion of the pasuk, "The years of Sarah's life," comes to teach us that, "Kulan shavin le- tova, All of her years were equally good."

Mefarshim (commentators) question this. How is it possible that all of Sarah's years were equally good? Even a cursory study of the Chumash reveals that Sarah did not have an easy life. She did not give birth until the age of ninety. From Sarah's "laughter" in last week's parsha when she was told that she would soon give birth, we can discern the great pain that she must have felt living a life of childlessness. Certainly, the thirteen years preceding Yitzchak's birth, when Hagar her maidservant had given birth to Yishmael from Avraham, leaving Sarah alone in her childless predicament, must have been especially painful. She was twice taken prisoner, once by Pharaoh of Egypt (Bereishis 12:14-20) and a second time by Avimelech, king of Gerar (Bereishis 20:1-18).

In fact, our Sages point out that the parsha's first three words can also be understood as, "Vayihyu" was the life of Sarah. The numerical value (gematria) of the word "Vayihyu" is 37 (6+10+5+10+6=37). Sarah was 90 when she gave birth to Yitzchak, and when she passed away at 127, Yitzchak was 37 years old. These 37 years (Vayihyu) were the true life of Sarah (Chayei Sarah).

So how is it that, "All of her years were equally good?"

The following Talmudic story answers this question: Once, on a journey, Rabbi Akiva and his students were refused hospitality at a certain town. Instead of becoming upset, Rabbi Akiva said, "Whatever Hashem does is for the good!" However, the group had to spend the night in a field.

Rabbi Akiva had brought along a donkey, a rooster to awaken him early, and a lamp for studying Torah. That evening, as he was studying, a wind blew out his lamp. Then a cat pounced on his rooster and ate it. Finally, a prowling lion ate his donkey. Rabbi Akiva's reaction to all this was: "Whatever Hashem does is for the good!"

Late that night, marauding troops raided the town and took all its inhabitants captive. The next

morning, Rabbi Akiva and his students awoke and discovered what had happened. Then he reminded his students: "Didn't I tell you - whatever Hashem does is for the good! If the lamp would have been shining, or the rooster would have crowed, or the donkey would have brayed, we too would have been taken captive!"

The same, explained Rabbi Zisha of Anipoli, was true with Sarah. "All her years were equally good," because whatever happened, she constantly reminded herself that it was Hashem's will. As a result, it must be "for the good."

R' Zisha used to explain in this vein the berachah (blessing) that we recite each morning. "Blessed are you... who has made for me all my needs." We affirm that all that we go through, that which is pleasant and even that which is not, is ultimately something we need.

We recite at the end of bentsching (Grace after meals), "But those who seek Hashem will never lack all good (Tehillim/Psalms 34:11)." Is this indeed true? Do all seekers of Hashem in fact live a life of serenity and "all good?" Rather, the pasuk is explained thus: "But those who seek Hashem will never lack." Why not? Because, "All is good," everything they go through they accept with joy and tranquillity, knowing that it must ultimately be for their good.

The Rebbe R' Zishe's explanation is not just a nice peshat. It is something he lived and practised, as the following story demonstrates. Two disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch once approached their holy teacher. "How is it possible," they asked, "that the Talmud instructs, 'one is obligated to bless Hashem over the bad [that occurs to him] just as he blesses Him over the good? (see Berachos 54a)' Perhaps one could be told to accept bad - but to bless Hashem? How can one ever reach such a level of equanimity?"

"Go," their Rebbe told them, "to R' Zishe of Anipoli, who sits in the beis ha-midrash. He will provide you with an answer to your question."

The disciples found R' Zishe sitting on a bench, hunched over a Gemara. His clothes were thread-bare. He bespoke poverty. They approached him. "Please explain to us," they asked, "the meaning of that which our Sages teach that, 'One is obligated to bless over bad just as he blesses over good.' Our Rebbe said you could provide us with an answer to our question."

"How strange," R' Zishe said. "I just can't understand. How am I, who have, thank G-d, never experienced a bad day in my life, to explain to you the meaning of this dictum?!"

They had their answer.

It is not often that we are blessed with the good fortune of Rabbi Akiva and his students who were able to see first hand how bad manifested itself as good. Often, the "bad" in our lives lasts for much longer than we might like. Still, we must "seek out Hashem" in every situation, and constantly remind ourselves and be strengthened by the knowledge that, "Gam zu le-tova," ultimately everything is for our good.

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