

HETER-YISKA

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

(You might be wondering, "What does 'heter-yiska' mean?" It is a play on words, the real term being "Heter-Iska," a technical process used in business to avoid breaking the Torah prohibition of earning and collecting interest. As Rashi revealed at the end of Parashas Noach, one of Sarah's names was "Yiska," and being the righteous woman that she was, she opened many spiritual doors for generations of women to come, permitting them ("heter"), so-to-speak, to strive for greatness.)

The life of Sarah was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years ... (Bereishis 23:1)

The time has come, once again, to focus on Sarah Imeinu--Sarah, Our Mother. She was born in the year 1958 from creation, or 1803 BCE, ten years after Avraham was born. As we learn from the end of Parashas Noach, her name was also "Yiska," from a word that means "to look," because she could see the future, and, because everyone looked at her beauty. The name "Yiska," as Rashi also explains, refers to princely dignity, which is also indicated by the name "Sarai" and "Sarah" as well.

We are told that when Shlomo HaMelech composed "Aishes Chayil," which we sing before Kiddush on Friday Nights, he had Sarah Imeinu in mind. The stanzas follow the Aleph-Bais, from "aleph" to "tav," because Sarah fulfilled the Torah from "aleph" to "tav" (Shochar Tov, 112a). From the Midrash, we learn that she was so righteous that she even had angels at her command (Lekach Tov).

Avraham married Sarah when he was twenty-five years old, which would have made Sarah only fifteen years old at the time. We know this because, according to the Yalkut (Lech-Lecha, 78), and Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu (Chapter 18), Avraham and Sarah went childless for seventy-five years. Since we know she gave birth to Yitzchak when she was ninety years old, she had to have been fifteen years old when she married.

As the Talmud points out, Sarah's barrenness was the result of a physical reason, namely, that her body lacked the physical capacity to bear children (Yevamos 72a). In other words, the miracle of the birth of Yitzchak was not just that Sarah finally had a child after waiting for so long; it was a miracle that her body was able to conceive and carry a child altogether!

Of course, it didn't have to be that way. G-d could have easily had Sarah born with all her physical necessities and capable of having children, whenever He deemed it appropriate. What was gained

by making Sarah physically incapable of having a child, only to give her one later on in her life?

In a sense, her situation mirrored what was accomplished with Avraham through his life, and then finally, with Bris Milah. Why didn't Avraham perform Bris Milah much earlier in life? Why did G-d wait for so long before commanding Avraham to do what, seemingly, should have been done long before?

The answer is Yitzchak, or rather, Ya'akov. In order for Yitzchak to be the father of Ya'akov, who, in turn, could be the father of the Twelve Tribes, a certain spiritual environment had to be built and nurtured, so that it could remain pure from the influences of the outside world. In other words, Yitzchak's birth had to be in a miniature Gan Aiden, with the holiness of Gan Aiden, which is what Avraham and Sarah achieved by the time Yitzchak was conceived and born.

Being such a spiritual "environment," Yitzchak's birth had to be supernatural, the way it would have been in Gan Aiden. This was achieved with the help of Bris Milah, usually performed on the eighth day which symbolizes the supernatural, and in a womb that could only conceive supernaturally.

This is why the three miracles that occurred for Sarah represented rectifications that brought the home of Avraham and Sarah into the realm of Gan Aiden. The "Cloud of Glory" that encircled her tent was like that in the desert that elevated the Jewish people into a supernatural reality--free of the dangers and needs of the desert. The miracle of the "challah" symbolized the rectification of Chava's sin, as did the Shabbos candles burning from week to week.

No small feat for one woman. Unless, of course, that woman happens to be Sarah Imeinu.

Shabbos Day:

I [Avraham] will give you [Ephron] money for the field, take (kach) it from me ... (Bereishis 23:13)

The tractate of Talmud referred to as "Kiddushin" begins with the following mishnah:

A woman is acquired in [one of] three ways, and she acquires herself [back] in [one of] two ways. She is acquired with money ... (Kiddushin 2a)

The mishnah, of course, is talking about "Kiddushin," the Torah version of betrothal, except that Kiddushin is, in many legal ways, marriage itself. One does not simply "break up" Kiddushin; ending Kiddushin means a halachic divorce and a "get" to verify it. This is one of the reasons why Kiddushin today is not performed until the actual wedding ceremony at the time of Chupah itself, when marriage is certain.

In order to affect Kiddushin, a man can use one of three "ways," of which one is the transference of a certain sum of money from husband to wife. Given that the amount of money needed to be

transferred is minimal and fixed, regardless of the financial worth of either the husband- or wife-to-be, this is obviously not a simple financial transaction taking place over here.

That transferring money between future spouses is appropriate for creating Kiddushin is part of the Oral Law, as this mishnah states. However, since we know that all of the Oral Law has some "place" in the Written Law, at least in the level of "hint" (remez), the Talmud asks,

"How do we know that a woman can be 'acquired' with money?"

--that is, which posuk in the WRITTEN LAW can be considered the "literal" source for this ORAL LAW?

The Talmud answers its own question, using a well-known Talmudic process of deduction where the same word used in a different context provides a deeper understanding of the overall concept. For example, first the Talmud makes reference to the posuk in the Torah that deals with marriage:

When a man will take (yikach) a wife ... (Devarim 22:13)

--and then refers to the posuk in this week's parshah, when Avraham purchased Ma'aras HaMakpelah to bury his beloved wife, Sarah:

I [Avraham] will give you [Ephron] money for the field, take (kach) it from me ... (Bereishis 23:13)

In each of the two possukim, the Hebrew word for "acquisition" is used--kichah--except that in the first posuk, it does mention how the acquisition is made, or with what means. However, in the second posuk, which discusses Avraham's acquisition of the burial place for Sarah, money is mentioned as the means by which Avraham acquired the right to the land.

Therefore, concludes the Talmud, Avraham's purchase of the field with money hints to the fact that money can also be used to make Kiddushin, by way of the well-known Talmudic principle of "Gazeirah-Shava" (see, "Rebi Yishmael's Thirteen Exegetical Principles," #2, immediately preceding the "Introductory Psalms" in the Siddur).

We now have a hint in the Written Law to a law previously known only through the Oral Law Tradition.

We could stop here and call it a meal, and some may do exactly that. However, it is irresistible to assume that it is not a "coincidence" that the source to learn about "acquiring" a wife with money comes from the source dealing with the burial of the ultimate wife, the "Aishes Chayil" herself. How much more so is this the case when one considers the following:

A bag of money he took in his hand... (Mishlei 7:4)--there is no "money" except for the righteous, as it says "A bag of money he took in his hand..." (Sanhedrin 96b)

The Talmud is saying that "money" is a euphemism for a "righteous person." And, there is a deep philosophical reason why, but, suffice it to say that both represent potential that can be spent in the

service of G-d. This is why "Chanukah-Gelt" on Chanukah--a holiday that is all about using potential the righteous way--is such an important matter.

Hence, we can conclude that, as much as the technical transaction of Kiddushin is performed with actual money, it is also symbolic of what a husband and wife are really agreeing upon--to sanctify themselves and their relationship by pursuing a common life of righteousness. This is the real "money" that makes the Kiddushin (literally, "sanctification") spiritually take effect, and what makes the marriage, ultimately, an eternal one.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Avraham was old, and came of days (boh b'yamim), and G-d blessed Avraham in all things. (Bereishis 24:1)

The Torah can be quite poetic, often employing terminology that no one uses anymore, if they even ever did. However, the Torah was not written by men of the past, who only knew of their own language, and had no way to even guess how people would speak in the future, leaving us to stumble over leftover "thees" and "thous." The Torah was written by G-d, to whom there is no past or future, only the present.

And, even though the Talmud often states that certain language was used in the Torah because that was the language of the time, or, because that is simply the way men speak, that does not preclude the exegesis of those terms, to teach all generations a moral about life in This World.

For example, with respect to the term "came of days," used in the verse above, which, on a "psbat" level means that old age overtook Avraham, the Gra had the following comment:

"It says in Bereishis Rabbah (59:6), that Rav Acha said, 'There are those who are old, but not "b'yamim" (literally, "of days"), and there are those who are "b'yamim," but not old.' We can explain this based upon the Zohar on the posuk, 'And the days of Yisroel approached to die.' (Bereishis 47:29), meaning that, when a man leaves This World, 'his days' [leave as well] to account before G-d. In the case of a tzaddik, there was never a day in all of his years that was not spent learning Torah, doing mitzvos, and performing good deeds. Not so with the Evil! whose days 'hide and are ashamed to come before The Holy One, Blessed is He. This is the explanation of 'there are those who are old but not b'yamim ...' that is, since they sinned right into their old age, their days are afraid and ashamed to come before The Holy One, Blessed is He [and therefore he does not come with his days to Heaven]. However, there can also be a 'kosher' and pious individual who [dies young, but who nevertheless] 'comes with his days' before The Holy One, Blessed is He, and they testify regarding the pious person's perfection. Having died young, he did not reach 'old age.' However, Avraham [the posuk informs us] achieved both [old age, and a life filled with days able to testify before G-d about Avraham's righteousness]."

Therefore, the Gra is reminding us, it is not enough just to grow old. Everyday of our lives we are supposed to be trying to add more "witnesses" to the lot that will, in the end, on that awesome "Day of Judgment," testify on our behalf and affect our portion in the World-to-Come. You can even ask yourself before bed each night, "What about today? Was today a day that will be ashamed to stand before G-d and testify on my behalf, or will it proudly stand up and praise me before my Creator?" How's that for a "Cheshbon HaNefesh"--a daily accounting of one's life?

MELAVE MALKAH:

Bless the L-rd, O my soul, and all that is within me ... (Tehillim 103:1)

The Talmud quotes:

Five times did Dovid say, "Bless the L-rd, O my soul." In reference to what was this said? He said it in reference to The Holy One, Blessed is He, and in reference to the soul. For, just as the Holy One, Blessed is He, fills the entire world, so, too, does the soul fill the entire body; just as The Holy One, Blessed is He can see, but cannot be seen, so, too, can the soul see but not been seen; just as The Holy One, Blessed is He, feeds the entire world, so, too, does the soul feed the entire body; just as The Holy One, Blessed is He, is pure, so, too, is the soul pure; and, just as The Holy One, Blessed is He, lives in the innermost realm, so, too, does the soul live in the innermost realm. Therefore, let the soul which has these five attributes come and praise Him, to whom these five attributes belong. (Brochos 10a)

Some of us take for granted that we have a soul, and can't understand why others dispute what seems to be an obvious fact. On the other hand, when was the last time anyone saw a soul (not including the fish you had last night for supper, or the bottom of your shoe)? Exactly. As Dovid HaMelech alluded, the mystery of the soul goes right up there with the greatest mystery of all time, G-d Himself.

So, how can one be so sure that the soul exists? Because it leaves "footprints" (pun intended), spiritual traces that manifest themselves in physical actions, like sharing food that we'd rather have for ourselves, visiting the sick when we'd rather be at home in bed, and, in extreme cases, risking our own lives for to save the lives of others.

In other words, the soul becomes INTELLECTUALLY perceptible when we act against instinctual drives to accomplish a noble task, when the situation morally demands it. For example, instinctually, a person may want to eat on Yom Kippur, and may even worry how he will survive the fast. However, his mind tells him that he must fast, that he will survive just fine, and that he will even benefit as a result of fasting and praying all day.

In fact, several times during the course of the fast, a body may scream out (in silence, hopefully),

"I'M STARVING! IF WE GO ON LIKE THIS, WE'RE GOING TO DIE!!!!"

Some people might succumb and eat, G-d forbid, even on Yom Kippur. However, G-d-fearing and Torah-abiding Jews will reply, also in silence,

"Relax. You're not going to die. You're going to be hungry for about ten hours, which will do you good, considering how many things you did this last year worth fasting for! Just hold on until nightfall."

If you think about it, it is not much different when it comes to G-d as well. G-d is quite invisible, but He, too, leaves "footprints." What kind of footprints does G-d leave (besides very, very big ones)? The Rambam addressed this issue when he wrote:

There is a mitzvah to love Him and to fear Him, as it says, "You shall love Hashem your G-d ..." (Devarim 6:5), and, "Hashem, your G-d, you shall fear ..." (Devarim 6:13). What is the way to love and fear Him? When one contemplates His awesome and mighty actions and creations, and sees from them that there is no way to measure or limit His wisdom, immediately he will love, praise, and glorify Him, and greatly desire to know His Great Name, like Dovid said, "My soul thirst for G-d, the living G-d!" (Tehillim 42:3) ... (Yad, Yesodei HaTorah 2:1-2)

In other words, to KNOW G-d is to LOVE G-d, said the Rambam, and to KNOW something you don't have to physically see it, at least not directly. As the following says, whether it comes to G-d, or the soul, it is all the same matter ...

"... Perception of the miraculous requires no faith or assumptions. It is simply a matter of paying full and close attention to the givens of life, i.e., to what is so ever-present that it is usually taken for granted. The true wonder of the world is available anywhere, in the minutest parts of our bodies, in the vast expanses of the cosmos, and in the intimate interconnectedness of these and all things ... We are part of a finely balanced ecosystem in which interdependency goes hand-in-hand with individuation. We are all individuals, but we are also parts of a greater whole, united in something vast and beautiful beyond description. Perception of the miraculous is the subjective essence of self-realization, the root from which man's highest features and experiences grow. (Michael Stark and Michael Washburn, "Beyond the Norm: A Speculative Model of Self-Realization," Journal of Religion and Health, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1977), pp. 58-59)

--it is a matter of perceiving the miraculous.

Have a great (and miracle-perceptive) Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston