

A MEANINGFUL LIFE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Dedicated by Ephraim Sobol in loving memory of his father, Shlomo Mordechai ben Yaakov a"h.

The Torah covers quite a bit of ground in a very short period of writing in this week's first parsha of the Torah. The ten generations from Adam to Noach are dispatched of without too much detail or description. The Torah in its entire narrative does not spend effort to inform us of the particularities of the lives of many of the people that it mentions. The Torah instead concentrates on detailing the lives of the people whose lasting moral impression on humankind was so great that they live on throughout the generations.

The Torah in fact comes to teach us the great lesson of opportunities granted and either frittered away or positively exploited. The Torah obliquely mentions our father Avraham already at the beginning of its narrative even though he will not appear in real life for another twenty generations. The Torah thereby points out to us the truism that our rabbis in Avot stated, that Avraham exploited his opportunity for spiritual greatness and received the reward of all of the preceding generations while those people preceding him did not, either out of passivity or willfulness.

The lesson here is obvious. In every generation, each and every person has an opportunity to enhance spirituality and morality in the world. It is those that exploit this opportunity that the Torah details and expands upon. They are the true builders of civilization and goodness in God's world. The Torah slows down, so to speak, to enable us to analyze their lives and deeds and to draw conclusions from this to apply to our own lives.

The length of life of the people that the Torah mentions in this week's parsha is also astounding. Centuries on end did they live and yet apparently they had very little accomplishment to show for all of those years. Though length of life is certainly an important factor in one's own life, apparently it is not the most important factor.

There are those who accomplish much in a relatively short time and those who leave little inspiration behind them after living many decades. King Solomon in Kohelet makes note that even if a person lived a thousand years that would not be a guarantee that a productive and meaningful life took place.

We are bidden by Moshe in his famous psalm to "count our days in order to bring forth a wise heart."

The phrase can certainly be understood to mean that one should attempt to make one's days count as well. Our father Avraham is described as having come to his old age with his days in his hand. Time is a precious commodity and squandering it is one of our foolish and self-defeating habits.

Adam is criticized by the Midrash not only for his original sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden but for withdrawing morosely from life for so many long decades thereafter. Avraham is complimented for being active and vital even till his last days on earth. The attitude of Judaism towards life is to make it meaningful and elevating, productive and noble. It is for this purpose that we were in fact created.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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