NO GOLDEN YEARS OF RETIREMENT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Ask Not What External Events Can Do To You;
Ask What You Can Do To Maintain Equilibrium In The Face of External Events

The Medrash comments that the name change from Sarai to Sarah signified our Matriarch's being given dominion over the entire world (from the word Sarah -- female officer or ruler). If one looks at Sarah's life, however, one certainly does not get the impression that she ruled over the entire world and that she "called the shots". In effect, she was dominated by events that surrounded her. For many years she had no children. She was taken as a captive, first by the King of Egypt and then by Avimelech. And yet, we are taught that she was given the name Sarah (rather than Sarai) because she ruled over the entire world.

Rav Nissan Alpert suggests that in spite of all that happened, Sarah did rule over the entire world. A person who can maintain her equilibrium, her serenity and faith, in spite of the events that surround and effect her is indeed a person who "rules over the entire world".

We cannot change the course of events. There are things that will happen between nations; there are natural phenomenon; there are things that will happen in a family. This is what life is all about. As anyone who has lived for any significant amount of time knows, life is a series of going from one crisis to another.

How does one rule over all that and manage to "dominate events"? Only by maintaining one's serenity and equilibrium throughout it all. That is what the life of Sarah was. For a woman to remain barren for 90 years and experience so many the trials and tribulations was not a simple matter. And yet we see the same Eishes Chayil [woman of valor], the same Ba'alas Chessed [personality of kindness], the same Matriarch Sarah throughout. This is indeed a person who ruled over the entire world.

This too can be used to explain the continuation of the Medrash. The Medrash attaches symbolism

to the 127 years that Sarah lived. "Let Esther the granddaughter of Sarah who lived for 127 years come and rule over 127 provinces." The commentaries are all perplexed by the apparently random equation of the number 127 appearing in two places in the Bible.

The explanation is that Esther also had a life of trials and tribulations. Esther had a life that could have been influenced by events that happened to her. She was an orphan. She was taken against her will to the palace of the King...

Esther could have forsaken her people in exchange for the success and the fame that she was receiving. However, Esther remained rock solid in her faith. She did not let events shape her life. She maintained herself. Therefore, Esther could rule over 127 provinces -- virtually the entire known world at that time.

If a person has learned the secret of not letting external events shape his or her life and rather maintains an internal serenity in spite of those events, that person has in fact achieved a great degree of control.

One Can Still Get Burned From "Matches Made in Heaven"

The Torah tells us that Eliezer traveled to the house of Besuel and Lavan looking for the right wife for Yitzchak. On the way, Eliezer received tremendous S'yata d'Shmaya [Help from Heaven]: Our Rabbis tell us that the distance miraculously shortened for Eliezer. It took him much less time than it should have normally taken. Eliezer received Divine approval. The sign that he made up helped him unambiguously identify the right match for Yitzchak. (The maiden who says, "I will also give your camels to drink...") Everything fit into place like a glove.

When Eliezer related the entire story to Rivka's father and brother (Besuel and Lavan), they responded "This matter has come out from G-d. We cannot speak about it -- for bad or for good" [Bereishis 24:50]. In other words, they recognized that this match was Ordained in Heaven. It was 'Basherte'.

Eliezer took Rivka, brought her back to Yitzchak, and related all that had happened and all of these signs. If anyone ever needed confirmation that he had the right Shidduch [marriage partner], Yitzchak surely had such confirmation in Eliezer's description.

The pasuk [verse] then says that Yitzchak brought Rivka to the tent of Sarah his mother, and he married her [24:67]. The Targum interprets this verse to mean that "Yitzchak took Rivka and he saw that her deeds and actions were like those of his own mother, Sarah. Therefore, he married her."

The Brisker Rav asks, what more did Yitzchak need? Eliezer told him about all the miracles and all the incontrovertible signs from Heaven. What more could he ask for?

The Brisker Rav answered that simple people always see these "signs from Heaven", but not a Yitzchak. Yitzchak knew that all that matters is whether she was a righteous woman - whether she

had the attributes and deeds of his mother Sarah. The "righteous individuals", Lavan and Besuel, are blown away by the "signs". They see the Hand of G-d in everything. However, the holy person - the really righteous person, does not look for signs or try to play "Providence Guessing" games. Such a person looks at the bottom line.

I often deal with young men who are going out on dates with prospective marriage partners. Everyone is looking for 'simanim' (signs) from Heaven. I remember when I was going out, many long years ago. I was driving with a girl who happened in fact to be the girl that I married. We were driving on Long Island and we stopped in a store and bought a box of Cracker Jacks. (That week Cracker Jacks were Kosher). For those who remember back to the time when they used to buy Cracker Jacks, the box used to contain a little prize and a "fortune" message. Here I was, on a date, we bought the Cracker Jack and the fortune said, "You will meet a man with blue eyes, whose name is Joe".

We pulled into a gas station. In those days there was no self-service. The attendant came out. I looked into his face and I see that his eyes were blue. I asked him, "What's your name?" He answered, "Joe". I almost proposed on the spot! -- From G-d the matter has come out!

This however, is not the proper approach. The correct approach is not seeing "signs". The correct approach is not intuiting that "it is Basherte" (destined) because everything is going so smoothly and everything is pointing to it.

All of that is nothing. What it comes down to, as the Targum explains, is "and Yitzchak saw that her actions were those of Sarah". Do not look for signs; do not look for Providence; do not look for miracles. Look for the standard by which we know how to judge: actions, kindness, religiosity, and honesty.

Miracles are for G-d. We live in a world of action. It is not in Heaven (Lo b'Shamayim he). We can not look at signs. That is for Lavan and Besuel. For Yitzchak, the only thing that is important is the fact that her actions are those of Sarah.

Sources and Personalities

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Targum (Onkelos) (died c. 90); Authoritative Aramaic translation of Chumash.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Chayei Sarah are provided below:

- Tape # 030 - The Shadchan in Halacha
- Tape # 072 - Superstition in Halacha
- Tape # 121 - The Jewish Cemetery
- Tape # 168 - The Laws and Customs of the Hesped
- Tape # 214 - Pilegesh: An Alternative to Marriage?
- Tape # 258 - Intrusion on Another's Shidduch
- Tape # 304 - The "Mazik" of a Child: Is He Responsible?
- Tape # 348 - Determining the Salary of the Shadchan
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