

THE ROLE OF BEAUTY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #480 Calling off an engagement. Good Shabbos!

The Role of Beauty

At the beginning of this week's parsha, the verse says, "Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, and twenty years and seven years; the years of Sarah's life" [Bereshis 23:1]. The Medrash quotes the pasuk "Hashem knows the days of the perfect, their inheritance will be forever" [Tehillim 37:18] and comments "Just as the righteous are 'temimim' [perfect / complete] so too are their years 'temimim'. Sarah was as beautiful as a 7-year-old at age 20, and at 100 her quantity of sins was equal to that of a 20 year old.

The Medrash is obviously addressing the strange way in which the pasuk states that Sarah lived to the age of 127. It is understandable why the Medrash wants to point out the righteousness of Sarah. The longer we live, the more susceptible and open we are to sin. So we can readily understand the praise implicit in the statement that when she was 100, she was like a person who was only 20 in terms of the number of sins she had committed in her lifetime. This is a significant measure of piety that is worth knowing about our first matriarch.

But what is the point of the Medrash telling us that at twenty, Sarah was as beautiful as a 7-year-old? The Torah is not discussing someone who is entering a beauty pageant here. What is the point of this drasha (exegesis)? We are discussing our matriarch Sarah. Why is it significant to know that she had the beauty of a 7 year old when she was twenty?

Rav Mottel Katz, z"l, in his work *Be'er Mechokek* explains the very important concept of Biblical beauty. The Torah goes out of its way to describe the various matriarchs as being beautiful in appearance. This is not the type of description which we would expect to hear today in describing a prominent Rebbetzin or even in proposing a shidduch (marriage match) to a serious Rabbinical student. Even when someone is interested in "looks", it is still uncommon for one to stress "she is a beautiful girl" when discussing a potential match. We are supposedly above that. However, the Torah does point out that the matriarchs were beautiful people.

Our Sages state that ten measures of beauty descended to the world. Jerusalem took 90% of that beauty and the rest of the world divided up the remaining 10% [Kidushin 49b]. Here again, the Gemara emphasizes that Jerusalem is the most beautiful city in the world. Why is it important that Jerusalem be a beautiful city? Would it be any less meaningful or holy for the Jewish people if Jerusalem were not the most beautiful city in the world?

The answer is that we as human beings are very influenced by our physical surroundings. Physical beauty can put a person in a frame of mind that is more receptive to the spirituality that exists. The Talmud says elsewhere, "three things broaden a person's mind - a beautiful house, beautiful possessions, and a beautiful wife" [Brachos 57b]. What is the meaning of this Gemara? The meaning of the Gemara is that when a person lives in nice conditions and is not bogged down by physical distractions, he has the ability to be more receptive to matters of holiness.

A person who is in a beautiful home with beautiful furniture, beautiful surroundings, and a beautiful wife, can have the freedom and peace of mind to devote himself to the higher tasks of life. The beautiful home, car, and wife are not ends in and of themselves. But they allow the person to rise above the impediments of physical distractions that sometimes get in the way of spiritual growth.

When a person enters Jerusalem and looks out upon the beautiful Judean Hills, his soul becomes more receptive to be influenced by the inherent sanctity of the place than what would be possible if Jerusalem had been an equally sanctified but less attractive city.

Chazal tell us in the above quoted Medrash that the beauty of Sarah was like that of a 7-year-old. The beauty of a 20-year-old woman can sometimes be used for the wrong purposes in life. The beauty of a 7-year-old, on the other hand, has a certain purity and innocence. This is exactly the point made by Chazal. The beauty of Sarah was not used like the beauty of a 20-year-old woman can sometimes be used. It was used like the beauty of a 7-year-old girl -- not for malevolent, not for prurient, and not for sensual purposes -- but purposes of inspiration and aspiration, as our Sages say "Sarah converted the women."

A Tale of Two People

This week's parsha contains the story with Eliezer, the servant of Avraham. The Torah spends a tremendous number of pasukim on the mission of Eliezer and how he faithfully carried out his master's instructions. Chazal are inspired to say "the conversation of the servants of the patriarchs is even preferable to the Torah discussions of their descendants" [Bereshis Rabbah 60].

Our Sages say that Eliezer wanted his daughter to be engaged to Yitzchak. However, Avraham rebuffed this suggestion, telling Eliezer that he was a slave, descended from Canaan who was cursed. Therefore "the one who is cursed cannot cling to the one who is blessed."

However, the Medrash at the end of the parsha says that since Eliezer faithfully carried out his mission he left the category of "cursed" and entered the category of "blessed." Eliezer "shteiged" - he

grew.

These last two parshios -- Vayera and Chayei Sarah -- can be a contrasting study of two people: A study of a person named Lot and a study of a person named Eliezer. They led very similar lives. They both had a close relationship with the patriarch Avraham and were members of his household. They both spent time with and learned from Avraham Avinu. And yet Lot decided to leave Avraham and make his fortune in Sodom. We know what happened to Lot. He ended his life engaging in incestuous relationships with his own daughters. On the other hand, Eliezer starts out as a cursed slave and yet ends up emerging from the category of cursedness and entering into the category of blessedness.

This is a lesson in the ability to seize opportunities. Chazal say that Eliezer recognized that he was cursed with the curse of Canaan and was therefore destined to be a slave. But even given that fate, man still has some control over his destiny. One can be a slave to a wicked person, to a barbarian, to a terrible person or one can be a slave to the greatest personality of the generation -- Avraham Avinu. Eliezer's attitude was "I might as well try to make the best of a bad situation. If I need to be a slave, I might as well become a slave -- and a faithful slave -- to an Avraham Avinu."

He became the servant of an Avraham and used that opportunity to learn and to grow. The man turned his life around. He went from being an 'Arur' to being a 'Baruch.'

Lot had the same opportunity. The curse of Canaan did not hang over his head. Nevertheless, because he went to try to make a fortune in Sodom, he lost everything, and had no 'nachas', so to speak, from his children and his grandchildren.

Life presents us with opportunities. It is our choice whether to use these opportunities to grow and to bring ourselves into the realm of those who are blessed, or sadly to go in the other direction and wind up like Lot.

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:

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- Tape # 072 - Superstition in Halacha
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