

ONE MAY LIVE MANY YEARS WITHOUT HAVING THE DAYS ADD UP

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Chayei Sarah

One May Live Many Years Without Having The Days Add Up

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: CD# #876, Kavanah - First Bracha of Sh'Moneh Esrei. Good Shabbos!

A Medrash in this week's Parsha relates the following story: Rabbi Akiva was once delivering a lesson to his students and noticed that his audience was dozing off. He wanted to wake them up (with a seemingly far-out teaching) and expounded as follows: How was it -- (i.e. in what merit was it) that Esther was able to rule over 127 provinces [Esther 9:30]? It was because she was a direct descendant of the matriarch Sarah, who lived to be 127 years old. The great grand-daughter therefore ruled over 127 provinces!

The Chiddushei HaRim explains the connection. Sarah's accomplishments in each year of her life were so magnificent that for each year she lived, Esther ruled over one additional province. Carrying this analogy one-step further, we can say that if each year of Sarah's life brought another province into Esther's empire, logically, it would follow (since each province contained dozens of cities) that each week of Sarah's life brought another city into her empire. Likewise, it can be said that what Sarah did each day of her life brought another village to her great granddaughter and what she did each hour brought another neighborhood to her great granddaughter.

This Medrash teaches us what a person can accomplish with each day of his life.

A different Medrash teaches a similar thought. The Medrash (on the pasuk "And Abraham was old, coming in days" [Bereshis 24:1]) teaches that some people reach "old age" and some people reach "many days". There are people who are "old" but are not "coming in days" and conversely there are people who are not "old" but they are "coming in days". In the case of Avraham, he was both old (zaken) and coming in days (bah, b'yamim).

The Ostrofsker Rebbe comments that a person can live 80 years, but out of those 80 years, how many days did he waste? A person who wastes most of his days may in fact be old but he is not one who has "come in days". A person could live to a ripe old age but if we add up only the productive days that he lived, he unfortunately may have lived a very short life!

I tell this to my students in Yeshiva. Boys study in Yeshiva for a limited number of years. Students come to the Yeshiva when they are 14 or 15 years old. They think they will be there forever. The typical "Yeshiva career" - even for someone who will learn later in Kollel is not forever. What is it? Five years? Ten years? Twelve years? It is not open ended. It is finite. I encourage them to make the most of their time. If one is going to spend ten years in Yeshiva, maybe not every single day can be productive, but at least 80% of the days should be days when we accomplish something towards the goal we set out for ourselves to accomplish in this limited period.

This applies to all of us. Man's life is but 70 years in length [Tehillim 90:10], but how many days do we REALLY live? This is what the Medrash means. There can be people who are old but have not "piled up" many days of accomplishment.

In Europe, there was a rather common custom that when a noteworthy person was ill, others might "donate" years of their life for the merit of his recovery. Communities actually would hold appeals - not for money but appeals which asked people to "donate years from their life" to the life of the person who now appeared to be on the verge of death.

There was a young single fellow who was very sick in the Yeshiva of Radin. The Yeshiva made an appeal among the other students that they should donate years of their life to this young man who was deathly ill. Different students pledged various numbers of years to the student. The Chofetz Chaim was asked how many of his years he was willing to donate to the cause. He thought awhile and responded that he would "donate a minute".

The Chofetz Chaim knew what a minute could do. He knew what he could accomplish with a minute of his own life. He felt he could not give up a year of his life based on the principle of charitable distribution: "The poor of your own city take precedence" (aniyay ircha kodmin).

I recently saw that the Chofetz Chaim did not wear shoes with laces. He made the calculation that it would take him approximately one minute a day to tie his shoes. In a year, that would come out to 360 minutes - 6 hours! In the course of a lifetime that would be 420 hours. The thought of wasting 420 hours of his life tying his shoes, prompted him to wear shoes without laces. He was not willing to give up 420 hours of his life on a "non-productive" activity. He had an appreciation of what one can do with a small amount of time.

That is why - among all his other accomplishments - he was such a prolific writer. The Mishna Berurah (written just over 100 years ago) is quoted countless times throughout Klal Yisrael every single day. Add to that the Sefer Shmiras HaLashon and all the other Seforim that the Chofetz Chaim wrote. He was a Rosh Yeshiva, he had children, he spoke for communities. When did the man do it

all? The answer is that when one calculates how many minutes one would be "wasting" tying one's shoes, one finds time in the day to accomplish a lot more than the average person does.

What Remains Is Not My Teacher's Torah, It Is How He Acted

The story of Eliezer finding a shidduch [marriage partner] for Yitzchak is one of the longest narratives in the entire Torah. Rashi cites a Rabbinic teaching: Despite the fact the Torah is normally very 'stingy' in its language and we often derive new laws from just the inclusion of an extra letter vov in a pasuk, here the Torah elaborates in great, repetitious, detail the events surrounding Eliezer's mission because "the conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs is dearer even than the Torah of the children." In other words, we can learn more about the manners and personalities of the founders of our religion - the "Avos" - by contemplating the actions and conversational nuance of their servants than we can even from delving into the Torah of their descendants.

Rav Aharon Kotler, zt"l, once commented about this teaching of Chazal: "Torah may be expounded, but personality traits must be learned". (Torah ken mir darshenen, ober midos tovos daf men oys lernen.) It is much more difficult to inculcate someone with proper behavior (middos tovos) than it is to teach them a piece of Talmud.

The reason the Torah goes to such lengths describing this narrative is because Eliezer was a reflection of Avraham Avinu. When we want to know what proper behavior and integrity is -- this is our paradigm. This is what the Book of Bereishis is all about! It is called the Book of the Upright (Sefer haYashar) because it teaches us the ways of the upright (Yashrus).

Many Gedolei Yisrael [great men of Israel] are such geniuses that we can never aspire to their level of Torah study. We have neither the talents nor the perseverance to reach their level of intellectual accomplishment and mastery of Torah knowledge. But something we can aspire to is to try to learn from their "menshlichkeit" and their "middos" [their pristinely ethical personalities].

I would venture to say that for most people who learned in Yeshivos and who were exposed to great Torah personalities, they do not remember so much of the "Torah" of their teachers but they certainly remember how their teachers acted. That is what remains. What remains is not the "Torah"; what remains is "how my Rebbe used to act".

Someone recently told me that Rav Pam, zt"l, was walking down the street and an obviously non-religious person came over to him. The person recognized Rav Pam but Rav Pam did not recognize him. He told Rav Pam, "You were my Rebbe in fifth grade."

The fellow is today not observant. He told Rav Pam "Do you know what I remember about you? When I was in fifth grade, I was taking a test and you caught me cheating." Anyone who knew Rav

Pam knows that cheating and falsehood were an anathema to him. The student went on, "Do you know what you told me? You told me 'If you need any help, I can help you.'"

This fellow probably does not remember even one interpretation or insight that Rav Pam ever said, but that is how he remembered him. He remembered that Rav Pam told him "I can help you."

This past Shabbos, I happened to be at a retreat and I was sitting at the Shabbos table together with Rav Dovid Feinstein. Another Rabbi brought over a fellow (who again was not religious) and introduced him to Rav Dovid Feinstein. While he was talking with Rav Dovid I asked the Rabbi who brought him over, who the fellow was. He told me that he used to live on the Lower East Side in the same neighborhood as the Feinstein family. I asked him, "Does this guy remember anything about Rav Moshe Feinstein?" He told me, "Yes. He remembers one thing about Rav Moshe Feinstein. When they used to play hop scotch on the street of the Lower East Side and Rav Moshe would walk down the street, Rav Moshe would wait until the kids finished hopping before he would walk through."

This made a tremendous impression on him. Forty or fifty years later, he still remembers the hop scotch that Rav Moshe refused to interrupt. Picture the scene: Rav Moshe Feinstein, the Posek of the Jewish people, the Gadol Hador, waiting on the street for these kids to finish jumping before he continues walking to his apartment building.

This is what people remember. This is the idea that "superior is the casual conversation of the servants of the Patriarchs to the intensive Torah study of their children." That is why the Torah spends so many pasukim retelling the story because "Torah can be expounded, but good manners have to be learned."

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

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