

"THEY WERE ALL EQUALLY GOOD"

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: #1007 – The Obligation to Marry Off Children: How Far Must You Go? Good Shabbos

The parsha begins with the *pasuk*, "Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life." [Bereishis 23:1]. Rashi comments on the strange construction of this *pasuk*, and in particular on the seemingly redundant phrase, "the years of Sarah's life" at the end of the *pasuk*. Rashi explains, "They were all equal for goodness." In other words, she lived a life that was good from beginning to end.

Let us ask ourselves, what is the meaning of the statement that all her years were equally good? Sarah was childless for ninety years. In addition, the Medrash calculates that her cousins all gave birth when they were eight years old. It must have been very painful for Sarah to desire children and not be able to conceive for all those years -- the bulk of her life.

Furthermore, she brought Hagar into her home as a co-wife. In Hebrew, a co-wife is called a "*tzarah*" (which also means trouble) because that is what it is! The tension between co-wives is much stronger than that of sibling rivalry. Ultimately, the situation with Yishmael became intolerable. She sees Yishmael trying to influence Yitzchak towards foreign cultures. She experiences a touch of *tzaar gidul banim* [the pain of raising children].

On top of all that, she partnered with Avraham in many of his *nisyonos* [trials]. She accompanied him on the journey away from her birthplace and homeland. She followed him down to Egypt and was kidnapped there into Pharaoh's palace. Later she had a similar traumatic experience with Avimelech.

Where does the realization of "they were all equal for goodness" come into play? Perhaps the final years of her life were tranquil, but overall she had a very bitter and traumatic life. What is Rashi talking about?

I heard a beautiful Torah insight on this question from the current Tolner Rebbe of Jerusalem. He cites a Medrash in Parshas Emor. The Torah says "And you shall take for yourselves the fruit of a beautiful tree (*pri etz hadar*)..." [Vayikra 23:40]. The Medrash says the word *hadar* [beautiful] refers to

Sarah as it says "and Avraham and Sarah were elderly" [Bereishis 18:11] for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* made her beautiful with elderly beauty (*seivah tova*).

The Maharzu, a commentary on the Medrash, notes that this *pasuk* in Vayera seems to be a very inappropriate link to the *pasuk* regarding the *Esrog*. After all, the entirety of the *pasuk* reads, "Now Avraham and Sarah were old, well on in years; the course of women had ceased to be with Sarah." Out of all the *pesukim* in the Torah, why is this *pasuk* used to marshal proof that Sarah was beautiful, comparable to a lovely *Esrog*? This *pasuk* itself alludes to the fact that Sarah had a very tough life. (She had already gone through natural menopause while she was still childless.) Furthermore, how is Sarah like an *Esrog*?

The Tolner Rebbe offers the following insight, based on a teaching of the former Slonimer Rebbe.

The Talmud [Brochos 54a] teaches that just as it is appropriate to make a blessing over good happenings, so too it is appropriate to make a blessing over bad happenings. This is one of the most difficult things in life -- accepting the bad along with the good. Not only must we accept bad happenings, we must actually be prepared to recite a blessing over them. This is a very hard spiritual level to reach -- to accept the good and accept the bad and make a *bracha* over both!

The source of this idea that we must make blessings over both the good and bad is from a combination of *pesukim* in Tehillim: "How can I repay Hashem for all His **kindness** to me? I will raise the cup of salvations and the Name of Hashem I will invoke." [Tehillim 116:12] and, just a few *pesukim* earlier, "The pains of death encircled me; the confines of the grave have found me; **trouble** and **sorrow** I would find. Then I would invoke the Name of Hashem..." [Tehillim 116:2-3] We see from this that *Shem Hashem Ekra* [we must invoke the Name of G-d] whether we are raising the cup of salvation or finding trouble and sorrow.

However, the Tolner Rebbe says -- quoting the former Slonimer Rebbe -- we can observe something interesting when we read this chapter in Tehillim. The *pasuk* regarding raising the cup of salvation and invoking the Name of Hashem is all one *pasuk*. When a person has witnessed salvation, he must immediately make a *l'Chaim*! However, the *pasuk* regarding bad occurrences in life ends with the words "troubles and sorrow I will find." The words "And I will invoke the Name of Hashem" do not appear until the next *pasuk*. This implies that there is not total equality between the requirement to bless G-d for the good and the requirement to bless Him for the bad. When good occurs, it is easy to say "*Baruch Hashem*"; when times are bad, indeed we must try to say "*Baruch Hashem*", but it is not in the same *pasuk*, because that is a very difficult thing to demand from a person.

However, there are people who reach such a spiritual level that even in the troubles that befall them, they see the Hand of G-d and they see the good therein. In Chapter 11, Yeshaya speaks of the coming of *Mashiach* ("A staff will emerge from the stump of Yishai and a shoot will sprout from his roots..." At the beginning of the very next chapter (Chapter 12, the shortest chapter in all of Yeshaya -

- only 6 pasukim), the *pasuk* says, "You will say on that day, 'I thank You, Hashem, for You were angry with me...' To what does "on that day" refer? It refers to the time after the coming of *Moshiach*. The redemption will finally arrive and we will look back on 2000 years of exile and persecution, from the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash to the Spanish Inquisition, to the decrees of 5408 and 5409, to Chmielnicki to the pogroms in Europe, to the Cossacks, and to the Holocaust. Klal Yisrael will look back and will be able to say on that day -- after the arrival of the *Moshiach* -- "I thank you, Hashem, for you were angry with me." Such a spiritual level is possible. Somehow, even within the *tzara* [trouble] one sees the *tova* [good].

The Slonimer Rebbe says that now we understand why the Medrash compares Sarah to the *Pri Etz Hadar* (*Esrog*). Sarah had a life "that was all equally good." This means that despite the fact that she was barren for 90 years, despite the fact that she had aggravation with Hagar and Yishmael, despite her experiences in Egypt (with Pharaoh) and in Gerar (with Avimelech), etc., etc., despite all this, in her mind, they were all equally good years. She had such a high spiritual level of faith (*Emunah* and *Bitachon*) that in her mind, they were *kulan shavim l'tova*.

The Yalkut Shimoni says that the *pasuk* in Mishlei [31:10], "A woman of valor who can find? Far beyond pearls is her value," is the eulogy Avraham gave for Sarah. What did Avraham mean by the expression "Far beyond pearls is her value"? The Medrash explains that she waited for 90 years to have a baby. Avraham eulogized, "this is the type of woman my wife was". She had no complaints against the Almighty. She waited 90 years for a child but never complained. She saw her entire life experience as one blessed by G-d.

We might consider what Sarah experienced and say, "That's a horrible life." However, Sarah did not see it that way. She had the capacity to see the "tova" in the "ra'ah". The Slonimer Rebbe says this is why she is like an *Esrog*. The Gemara says that the *Esrog* is the only fruit wherein the taste of the tree and that of its fruit are the same. The bark of an *Esrog* tree tastes like and *Esrog* itself!

The Slonimer Rebbe says that certainly, if a person tries taking a bite out of the bark of an *Esrog* tree, it will not taste as good as a ripe *Esrog*. Nonetheless, in the "tree", a person can already taste the flavor of an *Esrog*. Even though the wood is hard and brittle, it contains within itself a flavor reminiscent of the *Esrog* that will grow from it. Sara was like an *Esrog* because she too could sense the connection between the "tree" (i.e., – the process) and the "fruit" (i.e., – the result). Sarah saw the connection between all her trials and tribulations in her life (i.e., – the process) and the good that befell her (i.e., – the result).

This is what Chazal are trying to teach us by saying, "They were all equally good." There are people who are capable of looking at that which is a bitter life and saying, "No. It's all for the good."

We might think that such people do not exist in our day and age, but they do exist. Recently, I made a phone call that I anticipated being a very difficult call to make. I know someone who I have had dealings with five or six times over the last 10 years or so. He is a very nice fellow. Last week, he

married off a son. On the third day of *Sheva Brochos*, the son died. This is a mind-boggling tragedy. The Seven Days of Marriage Feasting (*Shivas Yemei HaMishteh*) turned into Seven Days of Mourning (*Shivas Yemei Aveilus*).

I am not that close to the father, but I do know him. We have had a pleasant relationship, so I called him. This type of phone call makes a person wonder, "What can I possibly say?" I began "Reb Shmuel, what can I say? There are no words to utter. It has just been on my mind the whole week..."

He is not a Rav or a Rosh Yeshiva. He is just an ordinary businessman. (Obviously, he is not really so "ordinary.") He told me "Reb Yissocher, this is all part of the puzzle. When *Moshiach* will come, we are going to understand all of this. I accept this as part of the Divine Plan, even though I do not yet understand exactly what it is all about."

I told him "You have strengthened me, more than I could have possibly hoped to strengthen you."

This is what Rashi is saying. "The years of Sarah were all equally good" means that Sarah was on such a high spiritual level that she viewed them as such. Chazal say that a person should always ask himself, "When will my deeds be equal to the deeds of my ancestors?" We need to strive for such a level. For most of us, this represents a seemingly unattainable spiritual goal. We will understand this, hopefully, in the Days of the Messiah. However, there were people -- and apparently, there are still people -- who can look at life -- even a life full of suffering and misfortune -- and say, "they were all equally good."

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Chayei Sarah is provided below:

- # 030 - The Shadchan in Halacha
- # 072 - Superstition in Halacha
- # 121 - The Jewish Cemetery
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- # 214 - Pilegesh: An Alternative to Marriage?
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- # 304 - The "Mazik" of a Child: Is He Responsible?
- # 348 - Determining the Salary of the Shadchan

- # 392 - Purchasing a Burial Plot
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- #1007 - The Obligation to Marry Off Children: How Far Must You Go?
- #1051 - Fulfilling P'ru U'revu -- With Boys or Girls
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