

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*His eyes haunt me; looking out as they do from a picture taken over seventy years ago.
Just one drop of one story amongst a sea of pain.*

*His name was Martin Stiebel, and his picture is one of many that hang on display in the
museum at Dachau, the Nazi regime's first and longest standing concentration camp.*

*He was born in 1899 and in 1933, the year Hitler rose to power, he was working for one
of the many political organizations in Nuremberg trying to bring more freedom and
equality to a post World War I Germany, rife with poverty and suffering.*

*Being a spokesperson for a political group that was odds with Nazism, he, like many
innocent German Jews of his day, did not see the writing on the wall. He was arrested in
1933 and sent to Dachau, where he was publicly humiliated and brutally treated
immediately upon entering the camp. He was one of those rare few who attempted to fight
the Nazi machine, even from within the camps.*

*Upon arrival, Jews were herded into a long barracks where they were stripped of every
last piece of clothing and every belonging they owned, after which, amidst a hail of kicks
and blows they were run through the camp and out into the open roll call area. Old and
young alike, they were made to run and roll, up and down for hours upon hours, even
forced to drink from puddles of swill on the ground, until the weak and the old eventually
collapsed. Of course, that was all the Nazis were waiting for....*

*Stiebel was caught attempting to smuggle out secret notes on what was really going on in
the camp, and in November of 1933 was thrown into an isolation cell.*

*Recall that in 1933, the Nazis still had to present a veneer of respectability and
legitimacy. (In fact, until finally removed from his post, the chief German prosecutor for
the area filed charges against a number of Nazi officers in the camp for deaths that were
presented as suicides but which he felt to be murders, and this as late as 1935.)*

*Subjected to daily beatings and torture he refused to sign papers attesting to his own
'guilt' of whatever fabrication the Nazis had invented until eventually he was found
'hanged' in his cell in April of 1934.*

*Five years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Dachau which today still stands just outside
of Munich. You can still walk across the same path the prisoners were run down as they
entered Dachau from the train tracks, and cross over the Wormen River where prisoners
were thrown into the icy water in the midst of the freezing German winter, at the whim of
an SS guard....*

And as you enter the bathhouse where prisoners were forced to undress and surrender anything they had left in the world, Stiebel's picture hangs on a wall as testimony to one lonely story of so very many painful stories.

And with all the different images that assault the senses in that terrible place, for some reason, his picture stayed in my head.

Looking at the hooks near the ceiling where they hung prisoners by their arms which were tied behind their backs, I wondered if what was going through Martin Stiebel's mind amidst all that pain.

And looking out at the infamous, huge open area in front of the barracks where prisoners were made to stand for hours on end, near naked in the bitter cold, or forced to do knee bends wearing heavy greatcoats in the blistering heat of summer, I couldn't help but wonder where Martin Stiebel might have been standing, trying to stay up on his feet amidst the terrible blows that might have come his way.

And most of all, I couldn't help but wonder, opposite the torture cells of the Gestapo, how a Jewish bureaucrat, all alone in such a terribly lonely place, managed to stand up to the might of the Nazi regime for six long months.

By the mid 1940's, the Jews in the camps had a sense of what was coming. After years of Nazi oppression in the ghettos and the work camps, they knew their enemy. But in 1933, prisoners taken to Dachau could not possibly have imagined the horrors that awaited them. How does a person who wakes up in a Democratic world of rights and laws, find himself by mid-day in the darkest version of hell we cannot even begin to imagine, and still stay sane?

How long did it take Martin Stiebel before he finally realized no-one was coming to hear his case and fight for his rights? How long before he fully understood that he had been a human being one morning and was now in the hands of animals? What kept him going those six long months, when one signature would have at least ended the horrible torture? (It is now accepted that 'suicide by hanging' was the result of the Nazis not being able to secure a 'confession'). Could there have been some light, some dream that kept Martin Stiebel going?

Is it possible to bring light even into the darkest of places?

This week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*, finds Avraham in what should have been one of the darkest points of his life. An old man, he has just lived through what seems to have been the greatest challenge of his life: the binding of Isaac, which occurs not long after his battle against no less than four kings.

Indeed, it would appear Avraham's life has been one long challenge: having to leave everything he knows behind to journey to a far off land at the will of G-d, only to be forced to leave almost immediately upon arrival, due to famine, sending him down to Egypt in search of sustenance. And then the departure of his beloved nephew Lot, followed by the forced exile of his son Yishmael when he is forced to choose between his wife and his son.

And this week, coming home from this latest ordeal, only to find his beloved wife Sarah, his life partner, dead.

All of which is what make a particular verse in this week's portion so very strange:

“Ve’Avraham Zaken, ba’ bayamim, va’Hashem beirach et Avraham bakol.”

“And Avraham was old, well on in years, and Hashem blessed Avraham with everything.” (Bereishit (Genesis) 24:1)

How can the Torah tell us Avraham is so blessed, when he has literally just buried his wife? Especially when the Torah makes it abundantly clear that this was a terribly painful loss for Avraham who “mourns *her and cries for her*”. (23:2)

And what does it mean that the Torah tells us that Avraham is blessed “*bakol*”, with “*everything*”, when we know that Avraham just lost his wife who must have meant ‘everything’ to Avraham!? So if you’ve just lost everything, you should now feel as though you have nothing, yet specifically at this juncture the Torah tells us that Avraham has been blessed with everything!

Equally interesting is the fact that this verse introduces Avraham’s desire to find a suitable wife for his son Yitzchak. Which again, means there is something Avraham feels is lacking, so how can the Torah tell me he has ‘everything’ when he is about to send his trusted servant Eliezer to find and bring back what is obviously missing (a bride for Yitzchak)!?

And most fascinating is **Rashi’s** comment on this verse pointing out that the numerical value (*gematria*) of the word ‘*bakol*’ (everything) is 52, which is the same as the word ‘ben’ or son, implying that when the verses says Avraham has been blessed with everything it is referring to his son Yitzchak (hence the explanation of why this verse leads into the story of Avraham’s desire to wed his son....).

But one has to wonder, why, if Yitzchak was born in last week’s portion and has been alive for quite some time, why the Torah feels the need to express this blessing now?

And why does **Rashi** who according to his own description of his commentary is attempting to arrive at a contextual and basic (*P’shat*) understanding of Torah, choose to explain this verse in this way?

In order to understand this verse and respond to some of these questions, we need to understand what a blessing is really all about.

Most people think that when I make a blessing I am thanking G-d, but that is not actually correct. ‘*Bracha*’ (the Hebrew word for blessing) does not mean thank you. We have a word ‘*Todah*’ or ‘*Nodeh*’ which means thank you, and we use it often both when we pray as well as after we eat (“*Nodeh lecha*’ we *thank* You....”). So obviously ‘*bracha*’ (blessing) has to mean something different.

In fact the word bracha means to increase; hence when we are told that Hashem (G-d) has Blessed ' Avraham with everything what it means is Hashem has increased Avraham's wealth or future, by giving him in this case, a son, Yitzchak.

And this makes a lot of sense. After all, what is it I am trying to do when I say a blessing? I am trying to increase Hashem's presence in my life. I can choose just to eat a piece of bread, or I can choose to use that bread as a vehicle for deepening my relationship with G-d.

Most people don't think twice when they bite into a soft piece of fresh bread, other than to relish its taste. But the Talmud tells us the reason the blessing over bread contains ten words is to remind us of the ten processes involved in transforming a barren piece of land into a wheat field that eventually yields the bread one is about to eat.

Contrary to our modern 'wonder bread off the shelf' mentality, it takes a lot of work to make bread: You have to plough and then sow a field, then reap the crops, and thresh and winnow and sift the grains and eventually crush the wheat into kernels and produce and then knead the dough until finally baking it into bread. And all this is completely dependant on rain and sunshine....

And by seeing myself as a partner with G-d in producing this bread I increase Hashem's presence in my life and thus in the world.

As such, our verse which describes Hashem's blessing of Avraham with everything, is as much about how Avraham chooses to see the world Hashem gives us, as it is about what Hashem actually bestows upon Avraham.

And maybe that is why this verse appears here, after Sarah's death, just as Avraham is contemplating the fact that he will have to marry off Yitzchak on his own, without Sarah. Maybe part of what makes Avraham who he is, is the fact that even here he can still see that he is so blessed. And especially now, after coming back unexpectedly with his son Yitzchak still alive by his side (despite the initial assumption that Yitzchak would be bound to an altar), Avraham can choose to wallow in the loss of Sarah, or revel in the joy of Yitzchak.

Ultimately the only real choice we have in this world is how we choose to look at the world. And Avraham is blessed "*bakol*", with "*everything*", only because he **chooses** to focus on seeing Hashem **in** his life, as opposed to focusing on where Hashem is **hidden from** his life.

As we exited the museum, I noticed across the wide open area where the shouts and screams of roll call used to fill the Dachau air, a few young folk in what appeared to be Israeli army uniforms. I rubbed my eyes to be sure I wasn't imagining the image, but as we got closer, sure enough we encountered a small group of Israeli army officers who were in Germany on a military liaison mission with their counterparts in the German army.

When they realized that their trip itinerary did not include a visit to Dachau, even though they were to visit the industrial zone nearby, they insisted on being taken to see the camp.

It was a cold day in Germany but these young officers were touring the camp without coats on so that people passing them by would see their Israeli army uniforms (which they were wearing as part of an official visit).

When we entered the barracks, their guide was explaining that the cubby holes for clothing in the middle of the barracks were built because the prisoners were forced by the Nazis to sleep at night without their clothes in the bitter cold nights of the German winter.

And I couldn't help but be in awe of the powerful fire of spirit that must have burned in Martin Stiebel's heart to be able to withstand all that he endured in those dark days.

A few moments later, in front of the crematoria as I shared a memorial prayer with those Israeli soldiers in Dachau I realized that while overwhelmed by the images of so many thousands of Jews suffering, I could choose as well, to see the image of Israeli Army officers with a Jewish flag on their sleeves stomping their boots in the cold on the dust that remains of the Nazi empire....

It is indeed possible to bring light even into the darkest of places, if we so choose.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman