

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

It had been a grueling few weeks. After almost thirty years in the reserves I was definitely getting too old for this. Midnight ambushes with 10-20 kilometer treks carrying heavy gear and wearing heavy bullet-proof ceramic vests, all day patrols in the hot sun, trying to stay alert commanding checkpoints in dangerous areas over the green line; we had been attached for this reserve duty to a unit of paratroopers most of whom were 20-25 years younger; it was all getting to be a bit much.

We were three days away from finishing this stint of reserve duty and to be honest, I was counting the hours. I had come back from a late-night ambush and after trekking deep into a valley and having to come back on foot with all our heavy gear I finally collapsed onto my cot in the army tent, only to be woken a few hours later and informed I was the Officer on Duty for the ready alert squad which meant suiting up and briefing the men before lying down again though this time on full gear.

Every unit and every base has a squad on alert whose job it is to be the first response in the event of any unexpected emergency. This squad sleeps with their uniforms on, down to their boots, all their gear next to them, ready to roll at a moment's notice. As I had already had the unpleasant experience of being thrown into response mode twice on this reserve duty, I was praying things would stay quiet until our shift was over. About to turn fifty, the intense physical, not to mention mental, pressure was starting to take its toll, and the trek the previous night had left me exhausted; I could barely move.

But of course, G-d has a great sense of humor and just as I was finally back on my cot falling into a deep sleep, the alert siren went off and shouts of "hakpatzah!" signifying that there was an emergency filled the air. Throwing on my gear while yelling at the rest of the squad to hustle out, we were greeted outside the tent by a message that was actually not an alert; it was a drill; someone had decided to test the alert squad, most probably some high-ranking officer. The announcement said there was an infiltrator at the base's main gate so our job was to make our way up to the main gate whilst covering each other.

The position of our tent meant this was a run of a couple kilometers up a very steep road, all the while covering each other in the event of an infiltration.

I was starting to get seriously annoyed; we only had a couple days left and having long since proven our worth; this was a waste of time. But you never know who initiates such a drill so you do what needs to be done; the complaining can come later.

Running and jumping and hitting the ground every 10-15 seconds as we took cover, ran, took cover and ran again, we were getting closer to the main gate when I saw my direct commanding officer operating as the pretend infiltrator which seriously ticked me off; if there was anyone who knew how exhausted we were and that we were almost done with this reserve duty it was him; I could not believe he was doing this to us.

Breathing heavily from all the running and diving, and directing my men to close in, as I ran the last 30 yards to take out the 'terrorist' and prepared to give this Commander a serious mouthful, I suddenly stopped in shock; because there, standing off to the side, near the main gate were my wife and kids, all laughing hysterically. I had completely forgotten it was my fiftieth birthday, and they had driven all the way to the base to surprise me with a cake, only to discover civilians were not allowed entry. So my commanding officer had devised this drill to get me up to the gate for the surprise....

It took me a few minutes till I had caught my breath enough to have a good laugh ... about the same time I realized I was seriously too old for this; it was time to pass the baton to younger commanders; that was my last serious reserve duty....

Old age; it kind of creeps up on you and before you know it, you just can't do what you used to. It's a reality of life: one day we will walk more slowly, and tire more quickly; we will eat less, and need more sleep, and everything will seem to ... slow down. And it's not something we can hide, try as some of us may; our faces, our hair, our stature and even our voices and speech will *appear* older. It's something we generally do not look forward to or anticipate, with one exception.

This week's portion is actually the first and perhaps the most powerful chapter in Jewish History of pure transition. It is named *Chayei Sarah*, literally the life (literally *lives*) of Sarah, though it actually begins with Sarah's death.

This portion also sees the death of Avraham, (who, along with his beloved wife Sarah, was the founder of Judaism), and the passing of the baton to his son Yitzchak. And, most fascinating of all, it will introduce us to the concept of old (advanced?) age.

“Ve’ Avraham zaken; ba’ be’yamim...”

“And Avraham was old, coming into days...” (Bereishit (Genesis) 24:1)

It is interesting to note the additional descriptive phrase for old age: *ba’ be’yamim...*” which literally translates as *coming into days*. What does it mean to ‘come into days’? In fact this phrase seems counterintuitive to what aging seems to be: *losing* one's days.

In the West, we seem to view old age as an ending, a bittersweet, even sad remnant of what once was. Perhaps Judaism has a different perspective?

It is worth pointing out that Avraham is only described as old *after* he has buried his beloved wife Sarah, suggesting that perhaps it is her loss that ‘ages’ him. Rashi notes that the numeric equivalent of ‘*bakol*’ (52) is identical to the numeric (*gematria*) equivalent of ‘ben’ a son, suggesting that Avraham despite his age, has been given a son and is thus responsible to marry him off. And in fact this is the next chapter of the Jewish story: finding a suitable mate for Yitzchak.

Yet, Avraham does not set about this task himself, entrusting it instead to his faithful servant (Eliezer?) (ibid. 24:2).

Perhaps because Avraham is too old to do it himself? After all, isn't that what old age is all about? We can no longer do the things we used to, instead sinking into a time where sweet memories are eventually all we have left ...?

And yet, Eliezer himself is described (ibid. 24:2) as “*Zekan beito*”; “*The Elder of his (Avraham's) house*”. If Eliezer is also old, why is he more suited to the task than his older master? Is he just *not quite* as old?

The west is obsessed with being young: we see it in advertising, in literature, in the entertainment world; there is an entire industry of plastic surgery, Botox, anti-aging creams and the like, all designed to keep people young, perhaps because our society sees getting old as life being over. And yet, the Torah tells us (ibid. 25:1) that Avraham takes another wife *Keturah* (Hagar?) *after* he is described as old?

In our society people tend to look askance at older people marrying, sometimes wondering if it's 'for the money' or if they have taken leave of their senses. Often the children resent such unions and even contest them. Yet **Rashi** (ibid. 24:62) suggests that it was actually Yitzchak who arranged this marriage, bringing Hagar back to his father Avraham! So it seems the baton has passed: we began with Avraham arranging and setting in motion the search for a wife for Yitzchak, and now it is Yitzchak who finds a wife for older father Avraham.

But if getting old is an ending, someone seems to have forgotten to tell Avraham who not only remarries but has many more children! (ibid. 25:1-4)

Most fascinatingly, there is no sadness, and no difficulty associated with Avraham becoming old; in fact, according to the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65) Avraham actually *asks* for old age (how else will people know the difference between him and his son Yitzchak?). He does not dread old age, he welcomes and even desires it!

Indeed old age seems to bespeak a certain standing, sought after and finally achieved. And as the verse (*ba' be'yamim; coming into days*) suggests, the old man is not missing the past, rather he is coming into the present!

Sadly, aging in our society is associated with boredom: playing golf, whiling away the time until death, moving down to Florida and into facilities where our elders are 'out of sight: out of mind'. If our fascination with youth is that so much lies ahead, and it is so exciting to build a future, then old age has no future with nothing left to accomplish.

Judaism however, suggests that as much as planning a future is important, what is most important is the present: the here and now. Indeed, as the verse in Ha'azinu says:

"She'al Avicha ve'yagedcha' Zekeinmecha veyomru Lach"
"Ask your ... **elders** and they will tell you..." (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 32:7...)

It is those who have experienced life who have the wisdom to impart that which is most valuable of all. The elder is *ba bayamim* and comes into days: he has learned not to spend all one's time trying to *get* there, without first appreciating where you already are. Old age teaches us the value of learning to be in the moment: blessed are the youth who learn this lesson at a younger age.

Indeed the holiest day of the week, Shabbat, is all about learning to be in the moment and get off the incessant race to what lies ahead, learning to appreciate the NOW....

Perhaps this is why our portion is called Chayei Sarah, because in valuing all the wisdom learned from Sarah each moment becomes a living testimony to all that Sarah represents, and thus, Sarah never really dies; she lives on in each of us

And as we get older, we have so much more to impart to the youth who have so much to learn, such that we are 'coming into each special day, every day. The measure of a valuable older age, is to what degree we succeed in sharing this wisdom with those who still see it all as what lies ahead....

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman