

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of Northwood United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH

DVAR TORAH: REDEMPTION THROUGH SERVITUDE

One of the heroes of our parshah is Avraham's trusty servant, who journeys to Avraham's birthplace and finds a wife for Yitzchak. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 60:2) praises Eliezer, referring to him as an eved maskil, a wise servant (an expression that appears in Mishlei 17:2).

What merited this description? The Midrash elaborates: Eliezer said, 'Anyways I'm destined to servitude because of Noach's curse. So before some barbarian takes me as a servant, better I should become a servant in Avraham's house.' But what was so wise about this? This seems prudent, asks the Sfas Emes, not necessarily wise. The Sfas Emes explains Eliezer's approach to his servitude based on three words in this week's Parshah.

Eliezer calls God "Elokei adoni Avraham," the God of my master Avraham. This choice of words shows that Eliezer realized that he is truly a servant of God – but that God wants him to serve Him through serving Avraham. Servitude was inescapable for Eliezer, but his realization that Hashem Himself placed him in Avraham's servitude brought him redemption. By diligently serving Avraham he removed himself from the curse of his ancestor Canaan and became transformed into a blessed person.

Particularly wise was Eliezer's ability to squeeze out the solution to the Canaan predicament through the formulation of Noach's curse. His words were. "Canaan is cursed. He will be the servant of servants." One could live out his curse as a "slave to slaves" – at the bottom of the barrel; but Eliezer opted for an alternate reading. By being a servant of one of God's servants – Avraham – he found the ability to become blessed. Eliezer thus broke out of the curse, achieving redemption through servitude.

Eliezer's approach, says the Sfas Emes, can be adapted for Jews. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot says that if one accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, then the yoke of derech erez – here used in the sense of working to make a living – is removed from him. The Sfas Emes makes a simple observation: only the yoke is removed, not the need to work. Does not another Mishnah (Avot 2:2) tell us how important it is to combine Torah study with work? Rather, only the yoke is the problem. The ol malchut – the yoke of the government – is also removed. Likewise, only the yoke is removed, not the need to be a citizen of a country ruled by a government. What is that yoke and why is it removed from those who accept the yoke of Torah?

A yoke is an expression of a relationship of subservience and subjugation, of being led and driven by another. Work and government should not be our masters. We should have no yoke upon us other than the ol Malchut Shamayim, the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. We should not view our work and our government as controlling or dominating us.

Rather, says the Sfas Emes, we should, like Eliezer, be conscious that the realities of our lives – like work and citizenship or, for Eliezer, servitude – are only the contexts within which Hashem wants us to serve Him. Through this realization their yoke is removed from us, and we rise above being dominated by them. When we realize their Divine source, the seeming limitations of our lives transform from being our masters into God-given opportunities to serve Him with.

SOURCE GUIDE: THE EULOGY OF SARAH IMEINU

Avraham eulogized Sarah, says the Midrash Tanchuma (Chayei Sarah 4), through the words of “Eishet Chayil,” the last chapter of the book of Mishlei that we customarily say Shabbat evening before Kiddush. One of those verses is:

<p>Mishlei 31:25 (25) She is clothed in strength and beauty and she laughs about the last day.</p>	<p>משלי לא:כה (כה) עוז וְהֵדָר לְבוּשָׁה וַתִּשְׁחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן:</p>
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On this the Midrash Tanchuma comments:

<p>Midrash Tanchuma Chayei Sarah 4 She is clothed in strength and beauty – this refers to the clouds of glory that surrounded her tent.</p>	<p>מדרש תנחומא חיי שרה פרק ד עוז והדר לבושה – אלו ענני כבוד שהיו מקיפין את האהל שלה:</p>
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The Eitz Yosef commentary suggests that this not only refers to the Divine Presence that was with her, but it also symbolizes her high level of prophecy – that was even superior to Avraham’s.

This is echoed in Rashi’s comment (based on Bereishit Rabbah 6:16) on this week’s Parshah:

<p>Rashi on Bereishit 24:67 [Yitzchak brought Rivkah] to the tent of Sarah his mother – He brought her to the tent and she “was Sarah”. That is to say, she became modeled after Sarah his mother. For as long as Sarah was alive there was always a candle lit from Erev Shabbat to Erev Shabbat, there was a blessing in the dough, and a cloud hovered over the tent. When Sarah passed away they left, and when Rivkah came they returned.</p>	<p>רש"י על בראשית כד:סז (סז) האהלה שרה אמו - ויביאה האהלה והרי היא שרה אמו כלומר ונעשית דוגמת שרה אמו שכל זמן ששרה קיימת היה נר דלוק מע"ש לערב שבת וברכה מצויה בעיסה וענן קשור על האהל ומשמתה פסקו וכשבאת רבקה חזרו (ב"ר):</p>
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Question: Why do the words עוז והדר – strength and beauty – refer to the clouds of glory above her tent?

Strength and Beauty

Strength and beauty are not an obvious natural combination. Brute strength is often ugly, and beauty is often fragile. But strength and beauty do come together when describing the Divine:

<p>Tehillim 29:4 The voice of God comes with power. The voice of God comes with beauty.</p>	<p>תהילים כט:ד (ד) קול ה' בַּפֶּחַח קוֹל ה' בְּהַדָּר:</p>
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<p>Siddur Shabbat Morning, Yom Kippur Beauty and victory (this could also be translated as eternity) are to the One who is alive forever.</p>	<p>סידור – שבת בבוקר, יום הכיפורים הנוי והנצח לחי העולמים:</p>
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<p>Divrei Hayamim I 16:27 Splendor and beauty are before Him; strength and joy are in His place.</p>	<p>דברי הימים א טז:כז (כז) הוֹד וְהֵדָר לְפָנָיו עֹז וְחֵדָה בְּמִקְוֵהוּ.</p>
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This combination also appears in a Talmudic discussion of the *ketoret*, the incense used in the Temple:

<p>Kritot 6a <i>Borit Karshinah</i> – that they would rub the <i>tziporen</i> with so it would be beautiful. Cyprus wine – that they would soak the <i>tziporen</i> with so it would be strong.</p>	<p>כריתות ו. בורית כרשינה ששפין בה את הציפורן כדי שתהא נאה יין קפריסין ששורין בו את הציפורן כדי שתהא עזה.</p>
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The clouds of glory – above Sarah’s tent and that accompanied the Children of Israel in the desert – also combined those two qualities. Hashem used them to protect Israel from its enemies, at the Sea from the Egyptians, and throughout their travels. But they are also where the Divine revelation manifests Itself in all of its glory or honor – they are *ananei hakavod*. [Kevod is often associated in the Tanach with beauty – for instance, see Yishayahu 39:2, Tehillim 8:6, Tehillim 145:5.]

Wearing Middot Like Clothing

Sarah, mirroring the Divine, also managed to combine strength with beauty. But what is the import of the word לבושה in the expression “She is clothed in strength and beauty”? עזו והדר לבושה? An explanation is found in Rav Aharon Kotler ztl’s eulogy for his own father-in-law Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer ztl. He prefaced it with one of Rav Yisrael Salanter zt”l’s fundamental teachings:

<p>Mishnas Rabbi Aharon p. 208-9 The words of the Gaon Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, ztl, about using our character traits are well known. He says that each and every character trait should only be applied in the proper place and time. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to act both one way and then its opposite, each time according to what is appropriate to the situation ...</p>	<p>משנת רבי אהרן עמוד קח-ט ידועים דבריו של הגאון רבי ישראל סלנטר זצ”ל בענין השתמשות במידות, שכל מידה ומידה אין לה אלא מקומה ושעתה, ושצריך התאמצות מרובה בזה להתנהג בדבר והיפוכו לפי הענין ...</p>
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Rav Isser Zalman, he said, was by nature extremely good-hearted and wanted to accommodate everyone, and was humble to the core. But when there was a need to “wear” strength – when the honor of Heaven was at stake or there was an urgent communal need – “he would become as a mighty warrior” and take a strong public position, making his voice heard clearly. We close with his explanation of עזו והדר לבושה:

<p>Mishnas Rabbi Aharon p. 209 It is possible to thus explain “She is clothed in strength and beauty and she laughs about the last day”. For strength refers to might and bold of spirit – “Be as bold as a leopard” (Avot 5:20). And beauty refers to the traits associated with doing good, lovingkindness, humility – “those that are beautiful in the eyes of man” (Avot 2:1) ... We stand astounded as we see that with all of his strong-mindedness and boldness of spirit he never made enemies. On the contrary, all had love and endearment towards him. Not only that, but I don’t think I exaggerate if I say that there is no one in our generation who was as beloved as he. This fact needs explaining. But the matter is as was explained above. Character traits did not control him, but he used them in a measured way, in a manner that could be described as “wearing them as clothing.” He was a man of truth and distant from any personal bias. He understood and always felt the side taken and the claims made by another, more than his own. All felt this; and therefore his struggles were devoid of any bitterness and personal insult ...</p>	<p>משנת רבי אהרן עמוד קט ויש לפרש בזה מה שכתוב, “עזו והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון”. דעזו היינו הגבורה והעזות ברוח, הוה עז כנמר. והדר היינו מידות ההטבה והחסד ומידת הענוה ביחוד שהם תפארת לו מן האדם ... משתאים נעמוד בראותנו שעם כל תקיפות דעתו ועזו רוחו לא רכש לעצמו שונאים, ואדרבה כולם רחשו לו אהבה וחיבה, ולא עוד אלא שלא אגזים אם אומר שלא היה אדם בדורנו שהיה אהוב לכל כמוהו. העובדה הזאת ודאי שיהא דורשת ביאור. והענין הוא כמו שנתבאר לעיל, שהמידות לא שלטו עליו אלא השתמש בהם במידה ובמשקל באופן של “לבושה”. לבו היה טהור בתכלית כי היה איש אמת ורחוק מאד מנגיעה עצמית. הוא הבין והרגיש תמיד את צד זולתו וטענותיו הרבה יותר מצדדיו וטענותיו. וכולם הרגישו את זה כי על כן במאבקיו נעדרה המרירות והפגיעה האישית ...</p>
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AVRAHAM'S SPIRITUAL GROWTH, BY RABBI ANTHONY MANNING

One of the most enigmatic episodes in Parshat Chayei Sarah is the expulsion of the six children of Keturah – Avraham's last wife whom he married in his old age. This follows in the wake of last week's parshah, in which we saw the expulsion of Yishmael, and the theme is continued next week as we witness the alienation and effective expulsion of Esav.

This process is a fundamental theme of Sefer Bereishit – the focusing and concentration of the children and grandchildren of Avraham in order to create the best possible model of a nation dedicated to spiritual growth. As part of that process, certain lines had to be 'discontinued' and rejected as part of the Jewish people, even though, as children of Avraham, they go on to form great and powerful nations in their own right.

The Chasidic masters refer to this process as the removal of pesolet – unfit material – from the neshamah, the soul of the Jewish people. With this in mind, the Shem Mishmuel asks a perplexing question about bnei Keturah, the children of Keturah. Surely they should have been removed from Avraham Avinu's household before the birth of Yitzchak, just like Yishmael was. If the purpose of sending them away was to hone and perfect the neshamah, the soul of Yitzhak, how could this be achieved decades after Yitzchak was born?

His answer gives us an important insight into the nature of spiritual growth. He explains that when Avraham was 'only' 100 at the birth of Yitzchak, the spiritual pesolet represented by the bnei Keturah did not yet register in his neshamah as negative since he was not yet on a level where it made a difference. However, after another 40 years of growth and development, Avraham's neshamah was now so much more refined that the negative impact of the benei Ketura was very significant. The Shem Mishmuel is telling us that the Avraham Avinu that we met in Lech Lecha was a very different person to the one we leave in Chayei Sarah. Even in his old age, he was on a journey of constant change – the epitome of the "afar ve'efer" that he calls himself in Vayera. Efer is the ashes of something old which has been destroyed. Afar is the fertile soil which gives rise to new life. His life was one of constant re-creation and reconstruction – always keeping himself at the peak of his spiritual potential.

We need to ensure that we are not still dealing with the same spiritual issues at age 40 as we were at 20. The struggle for growth should be just as strenuous as we age as they were in our youth, but the context of our battles should become more and more refined.

Shabbat Shalom

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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