

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 VAYEIRA

DVAR TORAH: AVRAHAM'S COIN

Youth and old age could each make a convincing case of their superiority.

Of course youth would point out how new and exciting it is to start off life. It would mention its great potential and the joy of building a life from the ground up. And it would make a long list of the benefits of being in the peak of health and all the possibilities that opens up. Youth is also usually more energetic and happy.

But old age would also have what to say. Old age is superior, it would say, for it has gained much experience, and with it the wisdom born of experience. Old age can also claim to be more spiritual, for, as physicality wanes and bodily pleasures call out with a weaker voice, more focus can be placed on higher pursuits. For the most part, old age is also more patient and tolerant.

Wouldn't it be great, though, to access the wisdom and experience of old age while we are still young? And wouldn't it be wonderful to hold on to the energy and excitement of youth even as we reach old age?

This perhaps was the secret of Avraham and Sarah, managing to be both aged and young at the same time, both as individuals and as a married couple.

Their biography bears this out. Not only did Avraham and Sarah become new parents at an age that most people today don't even live to, but most of the events of their life – including all of Avraham's ten tests – took place during old age. "Avraham was seventy-five years old when he left Charan" (Bereishit 12:4). And Avraham's youth was focused on pursuit of wisdom and good character, from the time he was weaned until age forty when he came to the truth of monotheism (see Rambam Hilchot Avodah Zarah 1:3).

Avraham Avinu's coin, says the Gemara (Bava Kamma 97a), had an elderly man and woman on one side and a young man and woman on the other (Tosafot says the words zakein and zekeinah were on one side and the words bachur and betulah on the other). Though Rashi says that the young couple referred to was Yitzchak and Rivkah, a number of other commentators (Maharsha, Torat Chaim, Eitz Yosef, Shem Mishmuel) suggest that the young man and woman were also Avraham and Sarah. Says the Maharsha: the coin expressed how Avraham and Sarah began as an elderly couple, but then returned to a youthful state and had a child when he was 100 and she 90.

But, perhaps, the coin expressed not only this one-time miracle but a constant state they preserved all the years of their marriage. Perhaps that miraculous return to physical youthfulness happened in the zechut, in the merit, of Avraham and Sarah – as a married couple – holding on to their inner youthfulness during old age and tapping into the wisdom, patience, and spirituality of old age even while young.

We pray that all the descendants of Avraham and Sarah should all be blessed with marriages like that of our young-old ancestors.

SOURCE GUIDE: THE CHATAM SOFER – SACRIFICING PROPHECY

The Chatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, zt"l, 1762–1839, Hungary) wrote a lengthy introduction to his responsa on Yoreh Dei'ah devoted to **Avraham's unique status in God's eyes**. God refers to him as "Avraham *ohavi*" (Yishayahu 41:8), Avraham my beloved. We quote here from the Chatam Sofer's introduction and sources. What emerges is a surprising conclusion. Here is the verse he builds on:

Avraham My Beloved

<p>Yeshayahu 41:8 8) And you, Yisrael my chosen servant, the seed of Avraham my beloved.</p>	<p>ישעיה מא:ח (ח) וְאַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדִּי יַעֲקֹב אֲשֶׁר בְּחַרְתִּיךָ וְרַע אֲבָרְהָם אֹהְבִי:</p>
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This special love is an echo of a verse in Bereishit about Avraham:

<p>Bereishit 18:19 For I know him, for he will command his children and household after him to keep God's way, doing righteousness and justice, so God will bring upon Avraham what he spoke about him.</p> <p>Rashi For I know him – this expression connotes endearment ... for one who loves another brings him close, knows and gets acquainted with him.</p>	<p>בראשית יח:יט (יט) כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָוֹ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הִבִּיא ה' עַל אֲבָרְהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עָלָיו:</p> <p>רש"י שם כי ידעתי - לשון חיבה ... שהמחבב את האדם מקרבו אצלו ויודעו ומכירו.</p>
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What was the source of that love and how did it express itself? And why did other great people of those generations not merit similar affection and distinction? Chanoch, for instance (thus explains the Chatam Sofer), rose to such great spiritual heights that his soul separated from his body. "Chanoch walked with God and he was no longer because God took him" (Bereishit 5:24). Noach was described as purely righteous (Bereishit 6:9), yet neither of them were as dear to God as Avraham. Why?

The Chatam Sofer explains: Had Avraham secluded himself like Chanoch, meditated, and focused on lofty concepts like Chanoch did – he would also have reached similar heights, maybe higher. But Avraham realized that "God does not need to add another to his billions of angels." That is not the purpose of God sending man's soul down to this earth. And if the unique people of each generation would take the path of seclusion and personal elevation, God would be left with a few special lofty spiritualists "and the majority of the world would be left ruined (*mekulkal*)." God sent me down to this world, said Avraham, to emulate Him and try to influence others to do good.

This is also a central aspect of Torah. We are commanded to: (a) teach Torah to our children and students (Devarim 11:19); (b) give rebuke and aid others in coming close to God (Vayikra 19:17); (c) educate many students (Avot 1:1); (d) emulate Aharon – love people and bring them close to Torah (Avot 1:12).

<p>Responsa Chatam Sofer Introduction to Yoreh Dei'ah This tells us that God's love for Avraham Avinu, of blessed memory, was unique because Avraham taught the masses and brought them close to His service. This was considered more important than all of his good deeds and refining of his own soul. For, in truth, before him there were unique individuals that knew God and desired to know His ways, and constantly focused on His love.</p>	<p>שו"ת חתם סופר, הקדמה ליורה דעה הורה בזה כי נפלאות אהבת ה' לאברהם אע"ה על שלימד דעת את העם וקירבם לעבודתו, והיא שעמדה לו יותר מכל מעשה הטוב וזכות הנפש אשר היה לו לעצמו, כי באמת גם לפניו היה היו יחידי סגולה אשר ידעו את ה' ודעת דרכיו יחפצו ובאהבתו ישגו תמיד.</p>
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Delicate Balance – Seclusion and Connectedness

But this path, says the Chatam Sofer, also has its dangers. Mustn't Avraham also elevate himself? And isn't there a danger of himself being influenced by those he is trying to elevate? Says the Chatam Sofer: the goal is to balance *hitbodedut* – seclusion and focus on Godliness – with *hitchabrut* – connectedness with other people. A passage from the Rambam's Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah expresses this beautifully:

<p>Rambam Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah 5:11 ... If the wise man is stringent with himself and he speaks calmly with people, relates well to them, greets them pleasantly, bears insults but doesn't insult others, honors others, even those who treat him with disrespect, is trustworthy in his business dealings, doesn't spend a lot of time having meals or sitting in the company of commoners, and only appears involved in Torah, wrapped up in <i>tzitzit</i>, crowned with tefillin, and, in all of his actions goes beyond the letter of the law – provided that he doesn't distance himself too much or become forlorn – to the extent that all will praise him and love him and desire to [emulate] his actions - behold, such a person will sanctify God. Concerning him the verse says, "And He said to me, 'You are My servant, Israel in whom I will be glorified'" (Yishayahu 49:3).</p>	<p>רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ה:יא ... אם דקדק החכם על עצמו והיה דבורו בנחת עם הבריות ודעתו מעורבת עמהם ומקבלם בסבר פנים יפות ונעלב מהם ואינו עולבם מכבד להן ואפילו למקילין לו ונושא ונותן באמונה ולא ירבה באריחות עמי הארץ וישיבתן ולא יראה תמיד אלא עוסק בתורה עטוף בציצית מוכתר בתפילין ועושה בכל מעשיו לפני משורת הדין והוא שלא יתרחק הרבה ולא ישתומם עד שימצאו הכל מקלסין אותו ואוהבים אותו ומתאוים למעשיו הרי זה קידש את ה' ועליו הכתוב אומר ויאמר לי עבדי אתה ישראל אשר כך אתפאר ...:</p>
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Sacrificing Prophecy

The Chatam Sofer makes one more surprising observation. Before the episode where Avraham pleads on behalf of the people of Sodom God says:

<p>Bereishit 18:17 And God said, "Can I hide from Avraham that which I am [planning on] doing?"</p>	<p>בראשית יח:יז (יז) וְהִ' אָמַר הַמַּכְסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:</p>
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It seems like God is, so to speak, deliberating whether to give this prophecy to Avraham or not. "And if Avraham was on the prophetic level to know God's plans for some nation or city He would not have withheld prophecy – like God revealed prophecies about the nations to Yishayahu, Yirmihahu, and Yechezkel." Rather:

<p>Responsa Chatam Sofer Introduction to Yoreh Dei'ah But Avraham our father, in truth, had not reached this level of prophecy, for he was preoccupied constantly with teaching the students, and his mind was involved with them in order to bring them under the wings of the Divine Presence.</p>	<p>שו"ת חתם סופר, הקדמה ליורה דעה אך אאע"ה באמת לא הגיע אל מדרגת נבואה כזו, לפי שהיה מוטרד תמיד בלימוד התלמידים והיה דעתו מעורב בין הבריות להכניסם תחת כנפי השכינה.</p>
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Avraham was involved with even the lowest levels of society, and was not able to pursue the meditation and focus necessary to reach higher levels of prophecy. "But God, in his Goodness, knows the hidden recesses of the heart and soul, and knew Avraham. 'This is my servant Avraham. Even if he hasn't reached this level of prophecy, how can I hide anything from him, for he lacks no perfection. And the only reason he isn't prepared for this level of prophecy is because he is troubling himself for My honor. For My sake only he cast aside – and stole from himself – prophecy. How can I hide anything from him?'" Because Avraham was so involved in trying to elevate others he did not have the time and context to elevate himself to higher levels of prophecy. But God – out of His love for one so devoted to His true honor, "Avraham my beloved" – **gave him** those high prophetic levels. How can I hide anything from Avraham?

THE POWER OF GOOD, BY RABBI MENDEL FARBER

I would like to relate to the story of Sodom and Amorah differently than we normally do. Concentrating on these people's very deep and intense evil and the resultant total destruction of themselves and the very earth on which they lived, hides something that I think is very significant.

Avraham Avinu conducts a negotiation with Hashem to save the five Sodom cities. At first he asks Hashem, "Will you destroy the tzadikim – the righteous – together with the reshaim – the evil ones?" But then he goes further: "Will you not save those five cities if you find fifty tzadikim in them?" Avraham is no longer satisfied with saving just the tzadikim but tries now to save them all.

How does Hashem react? He does not tell Avraham, 'There's nothing to negotiate about and that the fate of the cities and their lot has been set without any chance of reprieve.' Hashem agrees to Avraham's request and is prepared to save the cities if there were fifty tzadikim in them. Avraham continues negotiating until he gets Hashem to agree to save all five cities if had within it ten tzadikim.

It is unbelievable. Cities so corrupt and perverted like those of Sodom, with who knows how many people living there! If in those cities there were ten tzadikim Hashem was prepared to save them all, to leave the people and the cities – almost unbelievable.

I ask: Why not save the ten tzadikim and destroy all the rest of them? Why did Hashem agree and why did Avraham Avinu try so hard to save all the people?

Avraham knew that if there were ten tzadikim in those cities there was a very good chance that the tzadikim would be able to influence the entire population. Hashem would destroy the cities only if there was no hope or chance that they could possibly be changed. If there was a reasonable possibility of the righteous influencing the others to correct their ways, they would not be destroyed. Hashem agreed with Avraham that if there were ten tzadikim the chances of teshuvah taking hold of the residents of Sodom was real enough to save the cities.

It is interesting to note that we can learn the power of good from the very intense evil of Sodom. Evil was at its ultimate worst in the cities of Sodom and Amorah. And as we said above, who knows how many people lived in those cities? Yet if there were ten righteous people they would all be saved. And I would venture to say that this is not because Hashem would permit the existence of such evil if there were ten good people, but, rather, the ten tzadikim would ultimately change them all into good people.

How powerful would those ten tzadikim have been. And how powerful can every one of you, wherever you are, be. With this I wish you all – Good Shabbos & 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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