

Lessons Big & Small

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This week we study Parshas Chayei Sarah, as we continue our trek through Sefer Bereishis, learning about our forefathers and mothers so that we can follow in their ways.

While the Torah reports on the passing of Sarah Imeinu, the Medrash provides additional context about what brought about her death. It explains that the Soton told her about the akeidah, and she was so overwhelmed by the pain of the thought that she died.

At first glance, it seems obvious that if Avrohom had gone through with the initial plan and Yitzchok had died, Sarah Imeinu would certainly have passed away upon hearing such news.

However, Rav Elya Ber Wachtfogel, in his recently published sefer on chumash, Even Me'irah, says otherwise.

He recounts an incident that occurred in Yerushalayim, when people were gathering to daven in the minyan of Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin. Someone entered the room and reported that a fire had destroyed the shop of one of the people present. Upon hearing that his source of livelihood had been destroyed, the shop owner, overcome by pain and anguish, fainted.

Immediately, Rav Yehoshua Leib declared with certainty that the report was incorrect and that the store had not burned down.

After they finished davening, some people went to investigate and found that the roov was indeed correct. The fire had not affected the man's store. It was another shop that had been destroyed.

When they returned to Rav Yehoshua Leib, they asked him how he had known that the man's store was still standing.

Rav Yehoshua Leib explained that when Hashem gives a person yissurim, He also grants him the strength to deal with the challenge. "When I saw the man faint upon hearing the news," said the great gaon, "I knew that his store had not been consumed by the fire. If it had been his store, Hashem would have given him the strength to cope with the loss."

Rav Elya Ber applies this principle to Sarah Imeinu. He explains that if Yitzchok had indeed died at the Akeidah, Hashem would have given Sarah the strength to deal with her loss. However, because there was no gezeirah to pain Sarah with the death of Yitzchok, she lacked the strength to process the false report from the Soton that Yitzchok had passed away.

We study the parshiyos and uncover profound lessons in the stories they tell of our avos and imahos, lessons that we can apply to our daily lives.

If, chas v'shalom, unfortunate things happen in our lives and we are beset by pain and loss, we must remember that we are provided with G-d-given strength to face and overcome those challenges. Nothing ever happens to us that we cannot endure.

As the parsha continues, we learn how Avrohom Avinu sent his trusted aide, Eliezer, to his homeland to find a wife for Yitzchok.

When Eliezer arrived in the city of Nachor in Aram Naharayim, he davened for Hashem to send him the girl destined for Yitzchok. He also devised a test to confirm that he had found the right girl: If the girl he met would not only offer him water to drink but would also offer to give water to his camels, Eliezer would know that she was Yitzchok's intended.

The posuk (24:17) tells us that Eliezer saw Rivkah approaching, and he ran toward her to perform his test. Rashi cites the Medrash that states that Eliezer ran because he saw that, as she approached the watering well, the water rose toward her. The Sifsei Chachomim explains that Eliezer had seen this miraculous phenomenon happen to his master, Avrohom, so when he saw it occurring to the girl, he understood that she was worthy of marrying into the house of Avrohom.

Rav Elozor Menachem Man Shach, whose yahrtzeit was this week, would ask why Eliezer proceeded with his test after witnessing the water rise toward Rivkah. Why wasn't he satisfied with the miracles performed for her? Rav Shach explained that the ultimate qualification for a suitable match in marriage is not whether miracles are performed for someone, but whether they possess proper middos.

When young men and women would ask Rav Shach what to look for in selecting a mate, he would always emphasize that the most important quality is good middos. Everything else is secondary.

Another valuable lesson can be derived from the stories in the parsha.

When Eliezer completed his mission and returned to Avrohom with Rivkah, Yitzchok brought her to Sarah Imeinu's tent and married her. At that point, the posuk tells us, Yitzchok was finally consoled over the loss of his mother.

Rashi explains that when Yitzchok brought Rivkah into his mother's tent, he saw that she was a worthy replacement for Sarah. As long as Sarah lived, three miracles occurred in her tent: a candle remained lit from Erev Shabbos to Erev Shabbos, the dough in her tent was blessed, and the spirit of Hashem hovered over the tent. When Sarah passed away, these three miracles ceased, but when Rivkah came to live there, they returned. Thus, Yitzchok found his nechomah.

Once again, we find a lesson hidden here for us. The lights we kindle before Shabbos are meant to foster shalom bayis, peace in the home. In a dark home, peace cannot flourish. For this reason, the Shulchan Aruch (263:3) rules that if a person can afford either wine for Kiddush

or candles for neiros Shabbos, they should purchase candles, as peace in a Jewish home is a supreme need, and there can be no peace without light.

Rashi's reference to the ner, the light, which remained doluk (lit) from Erev Shabbos to Erev Shabbos, signifies that a Shabbos-like peace reigned in the home of Avrohom and Sarah throughout the week. In tribute to this rarefied atmosphere, the onon, a Divine cloud, hovered over their tent. As Hakadosh Boruch Hu states (Medrash, Parshas Pinchos), "Lo motzosi kli machzik brocha ela hashalom"—the vessel for blessing is peace. Where there is peace, there is brocha.

When Yitzchok brought Rivkah to his mother's home and saw that the ner of peace was rekindled—and that it, in turn, generated the return of the onon—he was reassured that life in his home would reflect the shalom, brocha, and spiritual elevation of his parents' home. Thus, he was consoled.

We learn from this that we must always strive to ensure that peace reigns in our homes.

Perhaps we can understand Yitzchok's nechomah on a different level.

The Tur (263) states that there is a dispute among Rishonim regarding when kedushas Shabbos begins. The Behag is of the opinion that Shabbos begins when a person lights candles for Shabbos any time after the zeman tefillas Mincha.

The Gemara in Brachos states, "Tefillos avos tiknum," meaning that the avos were the originators of the three tefillos we daven each day. Avrohom established Shacharis, Yitzchok introduced the concept of Mincha, and Yaakov was the originator of Maariv.

Avrohom was the first to call out in Hashem's name, introducing the idea of beginning the day with tefillah.

Yaakov, as the first av to descend into extended golus, instituted Maariv, a tefillah recited in the dark. It signifies that even in times of darkness, we maintain our faith and can embody holiness. It also represents our ability to bring holiness into the darkness of exile.

Yitzchok originated the tefillah of Mincha. By interrupting our daily activities to daven Mincha, we demonstrate that it is possible to sanctify the ordinary. This tefillah teaches us to elevate our level of kedusha even while engaged in regular, everyday tasks.

With this in mind, we can better appreciate Yitzchok's consolation when he brought Rivkah to the home where Sarah had lived.

When Sarah Imeinu lit the Shabbos lights in her home on Erev Shabbos, she sanctified the ordinary day. She brought the holiness of Shabbos into her home, where it remained until the following Friday, when she once again lit the neiros Shabbos.

The kedushas Shabbos in her home began at Mincha time, when she kindled the lights. Yitzchok learned this avodah from her. He observed her example of bringing kedusha into a weekday. He saw how Friday afternoon was transformed into Shabbos, and how holiness could be added to the day and the home.

When Yitzchok brought Rivkah into the tent, he saw how she lit the candles on Erev Shabbos, just as his mother had, and he perceived how her act of kindling the lights brought kedusha into the home. Just as it had been with his mother Sarah, the holiness and light lasted the entire week. Yitzchok was reassured that with Rivkah, he could build his home, for she understood the avodah of Mincha—how to bring holiness to the mundane.

Perhaps this explains the Chazal that all of Sarah's days were "equally good." Since she harnessed the power of making the profane holy, all her days were imbued with holiness, as symbolized by the ner of Erev Shabbos remaining lit from Erev Shabbos to Erev Shabbos.

Sarah experienced days when good things occurred and days when less favorable events transpired, but no matter the circumstances, she worked to maintain her kedusha and belief in Hashem's goodness.

This may also explain why Eliezer conducted his test to see if Rivkah would not only bring him a drink, but would also water his animals. Eliezer sought someone who understood that spiritual elevation can be achieved even through menial tasks, such as providing water for camels and cattle.

A girl who is so pure in her middos that she understands this concept—caring for the animals as she cared for Eliezer—is a suitable life partner for Yitzchok, the originator of tefillas Mincha.

As we seek to find mates, to bring happiness into our homes, and to bring meaning to the daily grind we endure, we should keep in mind the lesson that Yitzchok Avinu taught when he instituted the tefillah of Mincha.

We should remember our mothers, Sarah and Rivkah, and the kedusha they brought into their homes every Friday, which lasted the entire week. We should remember that light—both physical and spiritual—brings peace, and without peace, there is no blessing.

Studying this parsha should encourage us not to look down on ourselves as we perform the seemingly mundane tasks that life demands. Cleaning, peeling potatoes, cooking, serving, carpooling, shopping, and the many other menial tasks we perform for ourselves and our families are also holy.

We mustn't focus only on the big, noticeable actions. Anyone can bring a drink to an important person, but the test of a baal middos is whether we are also kind to the "little people" who often go unnoticed.

Rivkah was tested with menial tasks. Would she appreciate that these small tasks shape who we are? The laundry, the dishwashing, the sweeping, and the serving are vital in creating a peaceful, functional, and nurturing environment for the entire family. Nothing we do is truly menial or inconsequential. Washing dishes, folding towels, taking out the trash, and wiping down the counters are acts of care that bring stability to the home.

It is the small, seemingly mundane tasks that form the backbone of our lives and homes. Keeping the lights on and doing whatever is necessary to maintain peace are holy tasks that infuse our lives with kedusha and bring us abundant blessings.

The parshiyos are full of these life lessons. We just have to want to find them.

May we all merit to follow in the ways of our forefathers and mothers and be zoche to the coming of Moshiach speedily in our day.