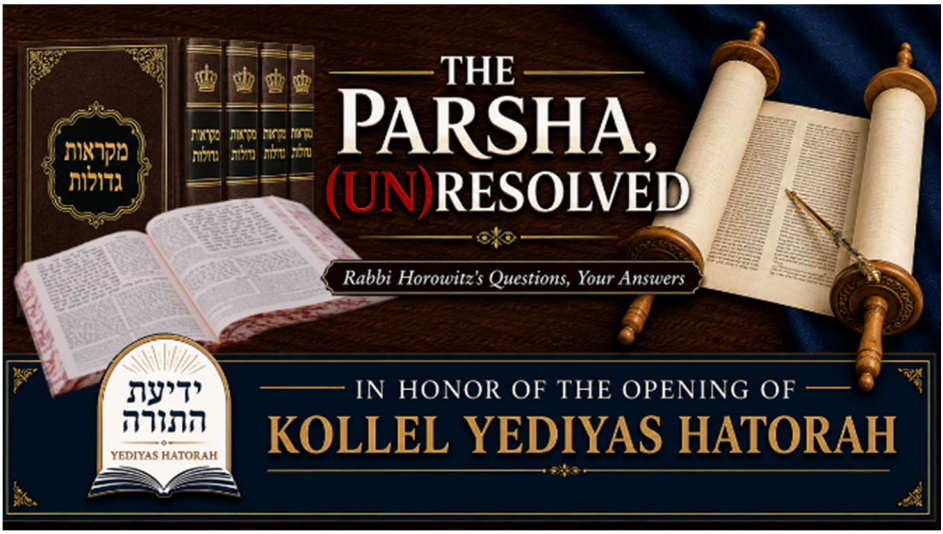


Parshas Chayei Sara

שנת תשפ"ז

THIS WEEK'S QUESTION

Seventy for Strength, Seven for Beauty?!

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THIS WEEK'S QUESTION

Seventy for Strength, Seven for Beauty!?

In this week's Parsha, we find two very similar interpretations in Rashi regarding the ages of Sarah and Avraham Avinu, both of which require explanation.

At the beginning of the Parsha, the Torah states (23:1):

"וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה"

"And the life of Sarah was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life."

Rashi explains that the word *shanah* is repeated with each number to teach us that each age is to be interpreted separately: At the age of 100, Sarah was as free of sin as she had been at 20, and at 20 she was as beautiful as she had been at seven.

At the end of the Parsha, the Torah states (25:7):

"וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר חָי מְאַת שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחָמֵשׁ שָׁנִים"

"And these are the days of the years of Avraham's life which he lived: one hundred years, seventy years, and five years."

Rashi similarly explains: At 100, Avraham was as strong as he had been at 70, and at 70 he was as free of sin as he had been at five.

What is the significance of these particular ages? Why were precisely these ages chosen to illustrate the exceptional qualities of Avraham and Sarah?

One of these comparisons is explained by Rashi himself: Just as Sarah at 20 was not subject to Heavenly punishment, so too at 100 she was free of punishment. The difference is that at 20 this was true by virtue of her age, whereas at 100 it could only be because she was entirely free of sin.

But what is meant by at 20 she was as beautiful as she had been at seven? Do we find anywhere that seven is a particularly significant age for beauty?

Had Sarah's age ended with a different number, would there have been no basis for a similar comparison? What makes the age of seven special?

Even more puzzling is Rashi's interpretation regarding Avraham: At 100, he was as strong as he had been at 70,. Where do we find that 70 is an age associated with strength? On the contrary, the Mishnah in Avos (5:21) teaches that thirty is the age of strength, while 70 is the age of old age! If the Torah wishes to praise Avraham's strength, would it not have been more appropriate to compare him to a 30-year-old?

Similarly, what is the significance that at 70 he was as free of sin as he had been at five? We have already seen that Rashi identifies 20 as the relevant age for freedom from Heavenly punishment. Alternatively, we might have expected a comparison to someone younger than 13, who has not yet reached the age of responsibility for mitzvos, or even younger than nine, since the Midrash Tanchuma (Bereishis 7) teaches that children do not sin until that age.

But what is particularly significant about the age of five, that Rashi chose it to illustrate Avraham Avinu's freedom from sin?

THE QUESTION: Rashi compares Sarah's beauty to that of a seven-year-old, Avraham's strength to that of a 70-year-old, and his freedom from sin to that of a five-year-old. Why were these particular ages chosen, when other ages would seemingly have been more appropriate?

Consider the question and send your approach before next week's issue.

LAST WEEK'S QUESTION

Parshas Vayera 5787

Wash First—or Later?

יח:ד יֻקַּח־נָא מְעַט־מַיִם וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשָּׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ.

"Please let a little water be brought, wash your feet, and rest beneath the tree."

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 86b) states:

"אמר רבי ינאי ברבי ישמעאל, אמרו לו וכי בערביים חשדתנו שהם משתחוים לאבק רגליהם, כבר יצא ממנו ישמעאל".

"R' Yannai bar R' Yishmael said: They said to him, 'Do you suspect us of being Arabs who worship the dust of their feet? Yishmael has already descended from him.'"

We see from the Gemara that there was a criticism of Avraham Avinu for insisting that his guests wash their feet. Although his intention was to be stringent and avoid any concern of avodah zarah, nevertheless, this involved *choshed b'ksheirim*, suspecting innocent people of wrongdoing. Thus, at Avraham Avinu's level, the proper balance of *chassidus* would have been not to insist that his guests wash their feet before entering his home.

On the other hand, Rashi quotes this Gemara and writes:

" כסבור שהם ערביים, שמשתחוים לאבק רגליהם, והקפיד שלא להכניס עבודת אלילים לביתו, אבל לוט שלא הקפיד, הקדים לינה לרחיצה, שנאמר ולינו ורחצו רגליכם ".

"He assumed that they were Arabs who worship the dust of their feet, and was careful not to bring idolatry into his home. But Lot, who was not so careful, placed lodging before washing, as the passuk states, 'Stay overnight and wash your feet.'"

Rashi seems to imply a criticism of Lot for not being as careful as Avraham Avinu regarding the concern of avodah zarah.

We are thus left with a rather puzzling dilemma: If we insist that our guests wash their feet immediately, as Avraham Avinu did, Chazal criticize us for suspecting innocent people. But if we delay the washing, as Lot did, Chazal criticize us for not being sufficiently careful about avodah zarah. Either way, we cannot seem to get it right! So what is a person supposed to do when welcoming guests into his home? When exactly should he have them wash their feet in order to earn the approval of Chazal?

THE QUESTION: When should one ask his guests to wash their feet, so as to avoid both the problem of suspecting innocent people and the problem of not being sufficiently careful about avodah zarah?

ANSWERS TO LAST WEEK'S QUESTION

Parshas Vayera 5787

1. R' Aryeh Black (a member of the Kollel) suggested that perhaps the proper approach would have been to first inquire, in a pleasant manner, whether the guests were indeed Arabs who worshipped the dust of their feet, and only then insist that they wash. It would not be appropriate to treat all guests with suspicion without first making any attempt to ascertain the facts.

Others added that Avraham Avinu, with his exceptional level of holiness, could surely have sensed the presence of idolatrous impurity in his surroundings, had he wished to do so. In my opinion, this suggestion is not convincing, but those who wish to accept it may do so.

2. R' Chanan Chaba (Beitar Illit) directed me to the **Ben Yehoyada** on the Gemara, who explains that even when there is no concern of avoda zara, it is

proper to offer guests water to wash their weary feet after their journey, for their comfort and enjoyment.

However, if this was Avraham Avinu's intention, why did he say, "Let a little water be brought", indicating that the water should be brought by others, rather than bringing it himself, as he did with the other needs of his guests? By doing so, Avraham demonstrated that his intention was not to provide water for the guests' comfort as part of his hospitality, but solely to remove the avoda zara from their feet.

We may add to this an explanation of the **Chasam Sofer** (Likutim, Vayeira), who writes that Avraham actually provided water for his guests to wash their feet twice. Initially, he offered only "a little water," sufficient to annul the avoda zara, but not enough for the customary washing of the feet of travelers. Only afterward did he provide them with all their needs, including sufficient water for a proper washing of their feet.

According to this explanation, it would indeed be appropriate to offer guests water to wash their feet immediately, but to do so respectfully, personally bringing a generous amount of water. This would demonstrate that the washing is intended for their benefit, rather than because they are suspected of avoda zara.

3. Mrs. Naomi Horowitz (wife of the Rosh Kollel) suggested that the angels' words were not recorded as criticism of Avraham Avinu at all. On the contrary, his conduct was entirely appropriate, as he was careful not to allow idolatry into his home. Rather, the angels complained as though they were difficult, ill-mannered guests. This served to demonstrate the extraordinary extent of Avraham Avinu's kindness, he extended his hospitality even to troublesome guests who complained about everything.

4. A Talmid Chacham who wishes to remain anonymous similarly explained that Avraham Avinu certainly acted properly, and the angels were not suggesting otherwise. On the contrary, they were reinforcing his extreme caution regarding avoda zara. This is the meaning of their statement, "Yishmael has already descended from him." Even in the household of Avraham Avinu, an idolater could emerge as a result of environmental

influences! Consequently, even someone as exceptionally strong in his faith as Avraham Avinu was entirely justified in taking every precaution to prevent even the slightest trace of idolatry from entering his home.

5. My father, **R' Ephraim Horowitz** (Baltimore), explained that a person sometimes faces a choice between two courses of action, neither of which is entirely desirable. His responsibility is to choose the less objectionable alternative. In fact, such a decision can be more difficult than choosing between good and evil, and a person's greatness is particularly evident in how he handles these situations. Yet even after he has chosen the better alternative, the Torah may still emphasize the negative aspect of his conduct.

He offered several examples of this principle, which we cannot elaborate upon here. One example is Rashi's explanation of the verse (Bamidbar 27:5), "And Moshe brought their case before Hashem." Rashi explains:The halachah was concealed from Moshe, and he was punished here for having assumed a position of authority by declaring, "Any matter that is too difficult for you, bring to me." Yet surely it was necessary for Moshe to provide clear instructions regarding the proper functioning of the courts and how difficult cases should be handled! Nevertheless, Chazal point out the arrogance that could be felt in such a statement.

The same principle may apply here. Had Avraham Avinu not required his guests to wash their feet immediately, he would have risked allowing idolatry into his home. On the other hand, by insisting that they wash immediately, he risked being guilty of *choshed b'ksheirim* — suspecting innocent people of wrongdoing. Thus, Avraham faced two alternatives, neither of which was entirely free of concern, and had to choose between them.

He chose to be stringent regarding idolatry, even at the expense of the concern of suspecting innocent people. It is entirely possible that this was indeed the correct decision. Nevertheless, Chazal still draw our attention to the problematic aspect of his conduct.

6. I had considered that the proper approach was actually to refrain from requiring the guests to wash their feet immediately, as Lot did, in order to avoid suspecting innocent people of wrongdoing. Had this been Lot's intention, he

would indeed have deserved praise for his conduct. However, Chazal reveal that this was not his reasoning at all. Rather, he simply did not care about the presence of idolatry in his home.

But I was still troubled: How did Chazal know that Lot was not motivated by a desire to perform the mitzvah of hospitality in the best possible manner? Although Chazal often interpret Lot's actions unfavorably, portraying him as a wicked man rather than a righteous one, this generally relates to his pursuit of wealth and improper desires. Regarding hospitality, on the other hand, Chazal actually praise him for continuing the practice he had learned from Avraham Avinu!

R' Aharon Shapira (Beitar Illit) answered that although Lot maintained the mitzvah of hospitality that he had learned in Avraham Avinu's home, it is hardly conceivable that he independently discovered a more refined way of performing this mitzvah than Avraham himself.

If Avraham Avinu required his guests to wash their feet immediately, without being concerned about suspecting innocent people, Lot would presumably have followed his example.

We must therefore conclude that Lot's departure from the practice he had observed in Avraham's home was not motivated by a greater sensitivity toward his guests. Rather, he understood that the sole reason for insisting on immediate washing was the concern of idolatry — and that was something he simply did not care about.

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