

PARASHAS CHAYEI SARAH

The Edges of the Postcard

If old people could live their lives over again, would they do things any differently? Would they once again expend so much time and energy on building castles and mansions in which to pass the fleeting moments of their brief sojourn on this earth? Or would they instead turn away from material pursuits and focus on the great treasures of the spirit?

Most likely not.

When the Torah, in this week's portion, sums up Sarah's life, we are told, "And the days of Sarah's life were one hundred years and twenty years and seven years, these were the years of Sarah's life." What is the meaning of the repeated phrase "these were the years of Sarah's life"?

According to the Midrash, the Torah is telling us that all Sarah's years were equal in their goodness. She did not awaken to righteousness in her ripe old age. She was good from the very beginning, and remained good consistently throughout her whole life.

This is considered extraordinary praise for Sarah, a very uncommon achievement. Most people, however, are not like that. They spend their youth in an oblivious daze, often without even a passing thought about their inevitable mortality. Why is this so? Why do people behave as if they are going to live forever?

The commentators explain that it is a simple matter of denial. Coming to terms with the reality of all our existence, that life is but a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more, would require making some hard and difficult choices. It would require a reduction in material indulgence and a heightened awareness of the spiritual side of life. But our desire for physical pleasure is too strong to be denied, and therefore, we refuse to think about our ultimate responsibility and accountability. We refuse to acknowledge the inevitable end of all journeys until it is staring us in the face. But by then, we have missed the best opportunities of our lives.

Sarah's greatness lay in the clarity of vision that led her to cherish every year of her life as if it were her last.

A young man was living an aimless life in a sleepy seaside town, whiling away the hours with all sorts of frivolous activities. It happened once that a great sage arrived in the town for a short stay. One day, the young man saw the sage walking with his disciples.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said. “Can I ask you a quick question?”

The sage peered at him for a few moments, taking his measure.

“Ask your question, young man,” he said

“Could you tell me the meaning of life?” asked the young man.

“Life, my young friend, is like a postcard,” the sage replied. “Did you ever notice that the edges of the postcard are always crammed with text while the beginning has a lot of space. At first, people do not realize how limited they are in space, but when they get near the end they suddenly try to cram everything in. Just as a postcard is limited in space, life is limited in time. Unfortunately, young people like you have a tendency to waste it.”

In our own lives, we often stop and ask ourselves where the years have gone. We are so busy getting settled and established that we do not have the time to really live. Worse yet, when we do have a little spare time, we lack the emotional and spiritual stamina to spend it in a way that will bear long term rewards. Instead, we indulge ourselves with physical pleasures that vanish by tomorrow, leaving nothing of value behind. But let us stop and reflect for a moment. None of us will live forever. So what will be the sum total of our lives when it is time to go? The decisions we make now will determine the answer. Material pleasures and indulgences will not appear on that bottom line, only the accomplishments of the spirit.