

Parsha Ponders

Chayei Sarah | November 11, 2020 | 24 Marcheshvan 5781

Late night preparations¹

ויהיו חיי שרה מאה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים שני חיי שרה

The life of Sarah was 127 years. [These] were the years of Sarah's life²

ותקם בעוד לילה ותתן טרף לביתה וחוק לנערותיה

She would get up late in the night, and provide nourishment³ for her household and food⁴ for her children⁵

A story is told⁶ about the legendary scholar Rabbi Akiva. He was sitting and expounding a lengthy and complex sermon to his myriad of students. He raised his head from his book and noticed that a significant amount of the crowd was dozing off. In an attempt to arouse them from their sleep, he said the following: Why did Queen Esther choose to rule over 127 countries? The reason is because she is a descendant of Sarah, who lived 127 years. That's all we're told of the story. What message was Rabbi Akiva trying to convey? More than that, how was a statement like that supposed to wake them from their slumber?

When the Torah describes someone's "life", חי, it often refers to their good deeds. A life full of good deeds can truly be called living. Furthermore, a righteous person is called living due to their good deeds⁷. As such, when the Torah says that חיי שרה, Sarah lived 127 years, it's a bit perplexing. It would imply that every one of her 127 years were filled with good deeds. Is that something that can really be true? If we take into account her childhood, how can all her years be equal⁸? Her youth couldn't have been as full of good deeds as when she was an adult⁹.

¹ Based on Chasam Sofer's Toras Moshe II to Genesis 23:1

² Genesis loc. cit.

³ Targum, Rashi, and Malbim to Proverbs 31:15

⁴ Ibn Ezra ad. loc. See Rashi and Malbim loc. cit. who say that this refers to a set amount of food (thus using the word חק, usually translated as law or decree)

⁵ Proverbs loc. cit.

⁶ Bereishis Rabbah 58:3 and Esther Rabbah 1:8. See Torah Sheleimah to Genesis Chapter 23 § 8 for variant versions of this *Midrash*

⁷ The Chasam Sofer says this appears in the *gemarra*. Perhaps his intent is Berachos 18b with Rashi s.v. אלו צדיקים

⁸ Cf. Rashi to Genesis loc. cit. s.v. שני חיי שרה

⁹ The Chasam Sofer seems to focus on her good deeds, but makes no mention of the fact that she wasn't necessarily raised monotheistic. Indeed, we are taught that Avraham didn't discover Hashem until he was either 3 years old (Nedarim 32a; Bereishis Rabbah 64:4), or even 48 years old (Bereishis Rabbah loc. cit.; see Kesef Mishneh to Mishneh Torah Hilchos Avodas Kochachim 1:3, who points out the Rambam seems to have had the number 40 in his version of *Midrash Rabbah*). Sarah should be similar. Nevertheless, I found that Rabbi Akiva Eiger (the Chasam Sofer's father-in-law) makes the amazing claim that Sarah knew Hashem her entire life (Drushei VeChidushei Rabbi Akiva Eiger Al HaTorah parshas Chayei Sarah, from a student's notebook). He says this explains why Sarah lived less years than Avraham. Even though Avraham lived 175 years, he didn't discover Hashem until he was 48. That means he only had 127 years of meaningful living. We see then that they both lived the same number of meaningful years. Although, he invokes Yevamos 22a, which says שנתגייר כקטן שנוולד דמי, which sounds like he's saying a convert's years of living start anew when they convert. This is surprising, because we don't assume a convert has the status of a child until it's been 12 or 13 years since they converted. The *sefer* also cites Yad Shaul Yoreh Deah 244:2, who discusses if one has to stand up for an elder who converted, since their years are counted from when they converted. וצ"ע

Shlomo HaMelech describes¹⁰ a woman of valor as being one that gets up late at night to provide nourishment for her household and food for her children. Our Sages tell us¹¹ that these praises can be referring to Sarah. However, what does the double expression mean? What's the difference between providing nourishment for her household and food for her children?

The answer is that a truly righteous person will try all they can to rectify and perfect any defect from their earlier years. There may have been years lacking in good deeds, but those years can be fixed. How so? Sarah would stay up late at night, doing good deeds. When everyone was sleeping, she would make sure there would be delicious food waiting and ready for everyone in her household. She would withhold sleep from her eyes until all those years were rectified.

This is alluded to in Shlomo HaMelech's praise. "She would get up at night" and withhold sleep. This was in order to "provide nourishment for her house". The house here is a reference to the World to Come, which is a person's main living space. Her good deeds were "building" the reward awaiting her in the future. She would also provide "food for her children". The word used here is נערותיה, which could also be translated as her childhood, i.e. her years of נערות. She would use this time to perfect those years gone by which weren't as full of good deeds¹².

Now we can understand Rabbi Akiva's intent. His students were falling asleep, and he shared with them an interesting fact to wake them up. He pointed out the connection between Queen Esther's kingdom of 127 countries and Sarah's 127 years. What he was saying is that Esther merited to such greatness because of Sarah's 127 years of good deeds. If a person were to ask: how could she have 127 years of good deeds? Her childhood couldn't have been as great as her adult years. The answer is that she used her evenings as well. As an adult, she rectified her past and stayed up late at night, performing good deeds. With this, Rabbi Akiva was rebuking his students. Not only are they not staying up late performing good deeds, but they're even sleeping during the day! This sharp lesson surely woke them up from their slumber.

Good Shabbos

¹⁰ Proverbs *loc. cit.*

¹¹ See Midrash Tanchuma Chayei Sarah § 4; Tanchuma Yashan Chayei Sarah § 3

¹² See the Chida's comment in Yosef Tehillos 42:9 and Midbar Kadeimos Daled § 6, where he says that since Dovid HaMelech stayed up all night learning, it's as if he lived two lifetimes