חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

LIZHENSK · CHAYYE SARA, NOAM ELIMELEKH

Why true beauty means every pleasure serves a higher purpose

Noam Elimelekh

Sarah's beauty at every age, read as equal to her youthful vigilance against sin, teaches that a person must maintain two lifelong disciplines: scrupulous avoidance of transgression, and the consecration of even permitted pleasures—like fine clothing or worldly enjoyment—entirely toward the service of Heaven rather than personal gratification. When intention is wholly directed toward Hashem in this way, one's life becomes true "life," marked by contentment and a sense of eternal purpose rather than constant lack. AI SUMMARY

"And the life of Sarah was..." Rashi comments: "A hundred years old like a twenty-year-old... like a seven-year-old for beauty." At first glance, what difference does it make that she was like a seven-year-old for beauty? It seems that Rashi, may his memory be a blessing, intended through his words to hint at two levels of behavior that a person is obligated to maintain all the days of his life.

The first is to be careful and extremely vigilant against every chet (sin) and avon (iniquity), that he not transgress, Heaven forbid, any mitzvat aseh (positive commandment) or lo ta'aseh (negative commandment). The second level is that even things which are permitted, such as eating, drinking, clothing, and the like, one must bring all of it into kedushah (holiness) and direct it toward Heaven. That is to say, a person who dresses and adorns himself with beautiful and fine garments and ornaments should intend thereby to adorn the diyokna (image/visage) of the King, as explained in the Gemara. So too in every matter, his intention should be for the sake of Heaven.

When a person conducts himself in this way, then whatever he has—whether money or clothing—will be sufficient for him; he will be content with what he has and rejoice in it, and "his life" will truly be "his life." But if his intention in all the above is not for the sake of Heaven, then he will always feel lacking, and he will never have enough or be satisfied; and thus it turns out that his life is not really life, and it is not his life.

Here is a simple remez (allusion): "a hundred years old like a twenty-year-old" — meaning that she had no sin at all regarding mitzvot aseh (positive commandments) and lo taaseh (negative commandments). And "a twenty-year-old like a seven-year-old in beauty" alludes to a second level, namely, like a child who adorns itself but does not know how to boast of itself or to desire to adorn itself with precious ornaments. So was Sarah when she was twenty years old — for that is the age when a person's main surge of desire comes, to beautify oneself and adorn oneself and pursue other worldly matters — yet all her intention in all her adornment and beautification was solely for the sake of Heaven.

Or one may say: "And the life of Sarah was," etc. — in line with what is stated in the Gemara: "A person is obligated to recite one hundred blessings every day, derived from the verse, 'What (mah) does the Lord your God ask of you,' etc. — do not read it as 'mah' but as 'me'ah' (one hundred)."

It may be said that the explanation is as follows: the essential root for a person is that he be in great hachna'ah (humility) and lowly in his own eyes, regarding himself as nothing — "and what (mah) are we accounted?" — and then he can accomplish through his deeds as in the time of the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple). This is the hint of the hundred blessings, corresponding to the hundred adanim (sockets) that were in the Mikdash. And this is the meaning of the Gemara, "Do not read it as 'mah' but as 'me'ah'" — that is to say, when you attain the level of "mah," of humility, you thereby also rectify the hundred adanim, so that you accomplish through your deeds as in the time of the Mikdash.

"And the life of Sarah was a hundred years" — and "Sarah" hints that when the tzaddik (righteous one) is at the level of nukva (the feminine/receiving aspect), he must in any case be lowly and humble. To this it alludes "a hundred years," corresponding to the hundred adanim (sockets), and "twenty years" (missing here), and "seven years" hints that he must rectify the seven days of the structure, for "shanah" (year) in gematria (numerical value) equals "sefirah" (sefirah/counting) — and understand this.

Rashi, of blessed memory, may be hinting in his words to teach a person the ways of Hashem. For there are two stages in the ways of people. One is that a person in his youth strengthens himself in his study and learns with diligence, and this study is called "beauty," for this is the beauty of the Creator, blessed be He. And when the person advances in years, that is, from twenty and onward, when a person's intellect grows stronger to know Hashem, then he begins to examine his deeds and sees whether they were done properly, truly for the sake of His honor, blessed be He.

And he sees and understands for himself that he did not fulfill his obligation at all in any matter of his Torah study and mitzvot (commandments) that he performed and learned until now, and he understands that he fell short and sinned in them — that is, that he learned with some ulterior motive, or to boast, or in some other way for his own benefit. And the man trembles and regrets the past, and he strengthens himself to correct himself in all his deeds and Torah study, so that everything will be equally for the good, for His Name, blessed and exalted be He, and not for his own benefit.

Now, it is known that it is stated in the holy book Chovot HaLevavot, "There is no piety like its beginning," for every matter, at its very first start, is done with great desire and great exertion, with all possible effort. This is what Rashi, of blessed memory, explained: "A hundred years old like a twenty-year-old in regard to sin" — meaning, just as when she was twenty, which is the way of a person at that age to examine her deeds and find in them sins, things she lacked in her service of Him, may His Name be blessed, and she grasps this path with great strength, this being the first beginning as mentioned above — so too when she was a hundred years old, she was still at this level. And "like a seven-year-old in regard to beauty" is also along the same lines, namely, that in learning as well, one's grasp must be abundant, to meditate upon His holy Torah just as one did in one's childhood, in one's tender years.

And this tzaddik (righteous person) who conducts himself in this manner, as mentioned above, merits eternal life. This is the meaning of "vayihyu chayei Sarah" (and the life of Sarah was) — an expression of Havayah (the Divine Name signifying eternal being) and a bond with eternal life. "The years of the life of Sarah, all of them equal for good" hints at another matter: that when the tzaddik merits this level, then everything becomes equal for him, for good.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)