



A Life Lesson

By Rabbi Jake Berman

There are two types of people: the learners and the complacent. Learners like to learn; they find things to discover and even things within that they've learned - there is always more to learn! The opposite is true as well; some people don't like to learn; they feel as if they've amassed enough knowledge to get them through: "I'm an expert!", "I know this already!" "I've heard this before!"

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (Sichot HaRan Sichot 3) teaches "Ki Tachlit HaYidiah, Asher Lo Ne'idah," "The goal of knowledge is to understand that you've just scratched the surface of whatever it is you're learning." In other words, the more we know about a subject, the more that subject is shrouded in mystery. To a child, the body simply works, but to a biologist, the body is a wonderment. Therefore, there is no end goal to knowledge, for the more we know, the more there is unknown.

Similarly, there is no end goal in Avodat Hashem, for the more we grow, the more we understand how much more we can grow. If we spend our whole lives chasing the end goal of being "there," we are pursuing something nonexistent, for at every level you reach, there is always an opportunity for more growth.

The Torah tells us that "Avraham Zakein, Ba BaYamim," The Ropshitzer Rebbe (Rav Naftali Tzvi Horowitz) in his Sefer Zerah Kodosh explains that this Pasuk means that although Avraham Avinu was old, it always appeared to him as if he was just beginning to serve Hashem. This idea is also alluded to in the Sefarim (Oheiv Yisrael, the Apta Rav Parashat VaYeira) that Avraham was a "Yosheiv Petach Ha'Ohel" - That within Avraham's own Avodat Hashem, he viewed himself as if

he was still at the entrance, only scratching the surface of Avodat Hashem.

Rebbe Nachman also warns (Sichot HaRan 51) that it is "Asur LiHiyot Zakein," "It is forbidden to become old." Rebbe Nachman obviously knew that people age; what then is Rebbe Nachman talking about? He was talking about our mental state; people should never become old in their ways of thinking. Be a learner, someone who is constantly growing. The only way to do that is to understand that you are always just a beginner, and there is always more to learn and grow! Live your life, appreciate where you are now, love where you are now, and be happy where you are now. Yet desire, yearn, and challenge yourself for more growth; never chase or settle for being "there" because "there" does not exist.

Burial - A Fundamental Part of Emunah

By Ariel Kryzman ('23)

Parashat Chayei Sarah begins with the episode of Avraham Avinu's mourning of Sarah and buying a burial place for her. When describing Avraham's buying of the land, even though Avraham bought it from Ephron, Avraham's conversations with Bnei Cheit consist of most of the episode. Why does the Torah emphasize Bnei Cheit even though their conversations with Avraham seem unnatural?

Rashbam, in his classical Pashtanut, states that Avraham Avinu had to get approval from the city before building a burial plot in a place that wasn't a cemetery beforehand. It wouldn't be enough just to ask Ephron; Avraham needed consent from the people. This works well per ancient practice, as there were legal restrictions on burial plots for outsiders. This explains why Avraham explains that he is a "Geir VeToshav," "A resident foreigner" (ibid.). Avraham explained that he is kind of a

citizen, so he would like the right to create a burial plot on the land. In accordance with ancient law, Bnei Cheit agreed.

Malbim explains the repeated mention of Bnei Cheit in accordance with one of Avraham's main missions throughout his life: educating the people around him about Hashem. Malbim argues that part of the purpose and meaning of burial is that the body will return in Techiyat HaMeitim. Therefore, burial offers dignity to the dead and their eternal souls. Avraham Avinu's desire to respect Sarah even after death by buying her an ideal burial location seemed strange to Bnei Cheit. They didn't believe in Techiyat HaMeitim, so they only buried corpses to eliminate the putrid smell. The idea of paying respect to the dead was foreign to Bnei Cheit. Therefore, Avraham was willing to spend a large sum of money on a suitable burial place for Sarah to educate Bnei Cheit about Techiyat HaMeitim and the everlastingness of the soul.

The Yalkut Eliezer also views this episode as an example of Avraham teaching the Oneness of Hashem to those around him. However, while the Malbim explained the purpose of burial as a sign of the soul's immortality, the Yalkut Eliezer views the purpose of burial as a sign of man's mortality. Since man dies and has an end, man must also have a beginning, and if man has a beginning, then he must have been created by the Creator, Hashem. Therefore, Avraham was educating Bnei Cheit of the same principle that Rambam expresses in the first of his Ikarei Emunah: Hashem is the Creator.

The Avnei Neizer states that there are 30 Mitzvot that Bnei Noach initially accepted on themselves, but they only keep 3, one of which is that they don't weigh the flesh of the dead in butcher shops. Out of all the Mitzvot that they accepted, why would they choose this one? Rav Avraham Aharon Price suggests that the Avnei Neizer's insight works excellently with the Yalkut Eliezer as it shows that by refusing to disgrace the dead, they are upholding burial and God as the Creator of the world.

Even in times of sadness and grief, we should all be Zocheh to have Emunah and understand that Hashem, the Creator of the world, is holding our hand and watching over us.

The Greatness of Sarah Imeinu

By Gavi Kilimnick ('24)

Parashat Chayei Sarah begins with the Pasuk: "*VaYihyu Chayei Sarah Mei'ah Shanah Ve'Esrin Shanah VeShevah Shanim Shenei Chayei Sarah*," "Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years" (BeReishit 23:1). From this we ask, why are we dividing her life and not just saying, she lived for 127 years? Rashi (ibid. s.v. Shenei Chayei Sarah) answers this by saying her years were "*Kulan Shavim LeTova*," equal in goodness. He says that the word "years" is used after every number given because this shows that all the years Sarah lived were equally good.

However, Sarah faced many challenges in her life. One example is how her maidservant, Hagar, had a child, Yishmael, with Avraham, her husband, when Sarah could not have children. And at the age of 90, when she finally had a child, she was told that he was to be given as a Korban! Furthermore, she faced these challenges and still made her life purposeful by helping others. For example, she opened her home's doors to anyone in need of hospitality.

Throughout all her challenges, Sarah Imeinu never gave up, and it made her life worthwhile. She always did the right thing, which makes her a role model. Sarah facing obstacles in life shows us never to give up because somewhere you can find greatness.

Does the Torah Reject Democracy?

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Superficial Torah Criticism

Critics argue that the Torah rejects the institution of democracy, thinking that since the Torah (Devarim 17:14-20) commands us to appoint a king, and the fact that a king ruled us for centuries, the Torah precludes the option of democracy.

This critique, as is true with most arguments against the Torah, stems from a superficial understanding of the Torah. A more sophisticated examination reveals that democracy is a Torah option.

A Contradiction

The Torah does not clearly instruct us to appoint a king. Devarim 17:14 indicates that it is a Mitzvah to nominate a king only if we wish to do so. However, the next Pasuk states, “Som Tasim Alecha Melech,” “thou shalt surely appoint a king” (17:15), indicating an obligation to appoint a monarch. The Rishonim differ as to the resolution of this seeming contradiction.

Three Opinions of the Rishonim

Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 1:1) and Ramban (to Pasuk 14) understand that it is an obligation to appoint a king, based on Pasuk 15.

Rav Sa’adia Gaon (to Pasuk 15) and Ibn Ezra (to Pasuk 15) argue that it is not an obligation. They understand that the Torah merely permits us to appoint a king, based on Pasuk 14.

Abarbanel (in his commentary to Devarim Perek 17 and Shmuel I Perek 8) argues that it is a horrible idea to have a king, but if we insist, then Hashem begrudgingly allows it.

Abarbanel bases his opinion on four points: 1) Shmuel HaNavi was infuriated when we asked for a king; 2) Abarbanel endured terrible experiences with corrupt kings in Portugal and Spain in his tenure as finance minister in these lands; 3) The Torah (Pasuk 14) presents appointing a king as mimicking a pagan practice, indicating its toxic nature; 4) Hashem imposes many restrictions on a king, limiting his wealth, army size, and marriages, and making him carry a Torah wherever he goes¹.

Abarbanel argues that these restrictions parallel the many restrictions imposed on a soldier considering marrying an Eishet Yefat To’ar, a beautiful captured woman (Devarim 21:10-14). The Torah presents many limitations on such a marriage to demotivate the soldier from creating such a union. Abarbanel understands the many restrictions regarding a king as intended to convince us not to appoint a king.

Compromise Approaches – Seforno and Netziv

Seforno argues that Pasuk 14 refers to a hereditary kingship. Such an arrangement is deeply problematic since the sole qualification of the king is his being the eldest son of the prior king. We see in Sefer Melachim

that even the Davidic dynasty, which had many good or excellent kings, still had many “rotten apples,” such as Achaz, Menasheh, and Yehoyakim.

On the other hand, Seforno argues that Pasuk 15 refers to a king who rules for only one generation, such as the leaders of Sefer Shofetim. It is an obligation, in his opinion, to appoint such a leader so that we do not become like sheep without a shepherd² (BeMidbar 27:17). Such a leader need not necessarily be a king; it could also be a democratically elected official because a nation with a democratically elected official is not unlike sheep without a shepherd.

Thus, according to Seforno, democracy is entirely compatible with the Torah.

Netziv develops this idea even further. He believes that there is a Mitzvah to appoint a king, as indicated by Pasuk 15. However, following Pasuk 14, he argues that there is a Mitzvah to nominate a king only if we want a monarchy. If we wish for another form of government, such as democracy, that is also acceptable. The king's authority comes from the people, so whatever government the people want is entirely satisfactory³.

The Rav’s Explanation of Netziv’s Idea

The basis of Netziv’s approach is that the ruler's authority stems from the people. Pasuk 14 supports this idea as it conditions the appointment of a king on a nation’s willingness.

In a personal conversation, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik told me that the Social Contract Theory - the notion that the ruler's authority stems from the people - fits with the Torah viewpoint. He noted that the Torah's authority stems from us willingly accepting it, as recorded in Shemot 19. Rambam (in the introduction to his Mishneh Torah) similarly notes that the authority of the Talmud stems from its universal acceptance among the Jewish People

This idea was not just a theoretical approach for Rav Soloveitchik, as demonstrated by the following story. Once a community voted not to renew their rabbi's contract, and the rabbi came to Rav Soloveitchik for help.

² In this context Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem to appoint a leader to succeed him. Moshe Rabbeinu felt it untenable for us to be without a leader.

³ We may add that the same seems to apply to a nation's financial system. A nation, for example, has the choice as to whether it prefers a capitalist or socialist financial system or a combination of both.

¹ When visiting Brooklyn’s Living Torah Museum in January 2020, my family was shown a tiny kosher Sefer Torah that one could hold in his hand. It is feasible for a king to hold such a tiny Torah scroll wherever he goes.

Rav Soloveitchik responded that he could not help him since a rabbi's authority came from the people; the rabbi cannot force his authority on a community that no longer wants to employ him as its Rav (Nefesh HaRav page 267).

Practical Application – Choice of a Rabbi

Every Jew should have a rabbi. Every couple needs a rabbi⁴. Pirkei Avot 1:6 clearly states, "Asei Lecha Rav," "Ensure that you have a rabbi." Avot 1:16 adds, "appoint a Rav for yourself and remove yourself from doubt." Based on Netziv's insight, a Rav cannot impose his authority upon you; it is your choice as to whom to choose as a Rav. One might even choose multiple Rabbanim and bring different types of issues to each one. The option is yours. However, the bottom line is that a Jew without a Rav is like a sheep without a shepherd.

Conclusion

Not every modern-day concept is compatible with Torah thought. Moreover, just because the broader contemporary society accepts certain values as axiomatic, such as gender egalitarianism, it does not mean we must force such ideas into the Torah and Torah life.

However, the idea and basis of democracy are naturally compatible with Torah, without the need for forced or contrived interpretations and applications. While the Torah does not demand democracy, it is an option for a society that wants to conduct its government in such a matter.

⁴ In my experience as a Get administrator, I find a common problem for observant couples experiencing marital problems is that they lack a Rav and Rebbetzin to approach for help with their problems.

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