SLEEPY SERMON: PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH

Shira Smiles shiur – 2016/5777

Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Once when Rabbi Akiva was teaching his students, they appeared to be lethargic, almost as if dozing. Rabbi Akiva roused his students by referring to Parshat Chayei Sarah which begins by relating that Sarah Imeinu lived one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. He then said that Queen Esther merited later ruling over 127 lands of the Persian Empire because of her ancestress Sarah. Aside from the bloodline, what other connection can we establish that would explain why Esther merited such greatness?

First we must understand that these students were not ordinary students prone to boredom. Among these were the great Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah – giant figures whose work enabled Judaism to continue after the destruction of the Temple, reminds us Rabbi Druck in Dorash Mordechai. However, that was exactly the point. The period of Rabbi Akiva was a period of destruction and devastation for the Jewish people. Rabbi Pincus notes that both Sarah ad Esther were in essence founders of a new nation, Sarah at the point of our inception, and Esther at our rebirth from possible total annihilation, and each maintained their temimus, their wholeness and purity at every stage of their lives.

Rabbi Menachem Zion Sacks, a Holocaust survivor adds another dimension to our discussion by citing a complementary source from Shir Hashirim Rabba. Here too a great Rabbi’s students needed to be roused from their lethargy. Rabbi Yehudah told them that in Egypt one woman gave birth to 600,000 at once. Who was this woman? Yocheved, who gave birth to Moshe who, because of his role is saving the Jewish nation, is valued as equivalent to all 600,000 whom Hashem took out of Egypt under his leadership. Both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yehudah were dealing with the sense of despondency and hopelessness of their generation after the destruction of the Temple. By citing these models, Sarah Moshe and Esther, they were trying to infuse hope in their disciples and rouse them to rebuild, to fire up their brothers and bring the assimilated Jews back to Torah. That was their mission, and that is what they accomplished, as did our great post Holocaust Rabbis of the previous generation.

Rashi says that the Torah adds “these were the years of Sarah” to tell us that all the years were equally good. Why were they all equal and good? Rabbi Sacks continues by saying that in spite of her very difficult challenges, even imprisonment in a foreign king’s palace, Sarah never lost hope to do good. Similarly, Esther also went through challenges and trials, even being in a foreign king’s palace (albeit as queen), but she always remained as steadfast in her faith as she had been as a ward in the home of Mordechai. Rabbi Akiva could easily have given up, but by citing the examples of Esther and Sarah, he bolstered his own faith and spurred his disciples to action.

While Queen Esther ruled over 127 lands, Rabbi Alpert maintains that the connection between Esther and Sarah is stronger than external sovereignty, for Sarah, as her name suggests, also ruled. Both
maintained mastery over themselves and over their faith, in whatever circumstances they found themselves. They always believed that they were where Hashem wanted them to be at the moment and that Hashem was with them. In fact, the Netziv writes in Haamek Davar that although Hashem may have spoken to Sarah only once whereas He spoke to Avraham many times, more of the Divine Spirit rested on Sarah than on Avraham. While Avraham was out in the public domain, Hashem’s spirit could not rest upon him, but Sarah, alone in her tent, found many opportunities to interact with Hashem’s presence on a deep level.

The righteous ones are temimim, whole, complete, with integrity to their entire being. Hashem knows this integrity as it is intertwined with time. Time is itself a product of God’s creation, and just as each of us is recreated each day, so is time. Therefore, each moment is unique and must be used appropriately. Each moment needs to be integrated into one’s life toward fulfilling his spiritual potential. Otherwise one is in effect killing time rather than letting it live on to eternity. Both Sarah Imeinu and Queen Esther used their time fully, whether creating souls in Charan or maintaining Jewish identity during a time when Hashem hid His face from us, writes Rabbi Weinberger in Shemen Hatov. This was Rabbi Akiva’s message to his disciples. Just as Sarah Imeinu affected so many lives in her generation, so can you affect lives in this generation. Wake up from your lethargic despondency and make your time count.

Rabbi Reiss breaks the idea of the meaning of time down for us very nicely in Meirosh Tzurim. He offers that ruling over 127 different states must be extremely difficult. Each one is unique, with different needs and different cultures. Then, within each state there are multiple cities, again each with its own personality. Each city has different neighborhoods, and even each street can present a challenge. For each year Sarah, and subsequently Esther, maintained her truth, Esther ruled over one state effectively. For each month, she maintained proper control over each city. For each week, each day and each hour she was given the appropriate sovereignty over another segment of the overall empire. The years and days Sarah lived with integrity gave Esther the merit to be queen over a diverse empire with integrity. As Sarah was mindful of each moment, she could imbue Esther with the spirit to be mindful of each city and town.

It’s not easy to utilize each moment appropriately. The yetzer horo is extremely clever in manipulating us to waste and kill time. He sometimes makes us feel too lazy and at other times makes us too busy to use our time for spiritual and other proper pursuits, continues Rabbi Reiss. But Avraham Avinu, like Sarah Imeinu, knew the value of time and came with all his years.

Rabbi Asher Weiss gives us further insight into the value of time, the uniqueness of each moment, and the importance of integrating all our time into one fabric of service to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. Rabbi Akiva spent a continuous 24 years in the pursuit of Torah learning instead of breaking it up into two twelve year periods. David Hamelech asked in the past and continues to ask in the future only one thing, “To dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life … and to visit His sanctuary.” Although his needs may change from one stage of life to another, David wanted all his days to devote himself to serve Hashem. And although he wanted to dwell in Hashem’s House always, David wanted to feel each moment as if it were a fresh experience, as if he had just come for a visit.

Sarah and Esther each had the ability to be masters of time, as their names imply. Rabbi Akiva was telling his students it’s time to wake up, writes Rabbi Mordechai Ezrachi. If you are sleeping, you lose control over yourself and over time. Sarah’s mastery over self and over time was transmitted to Esther and translated into mastery over 127 provinces.

But Royalty is not a given, notes Rabbi C. Y. Goldvicht in Asufat Maarachot. It must be developed from within so you are master over yourself no matter what circumstances you find yourself in. King Solomon retained mastery over himself until he regained his monarchy even when he had lost everything
else. Sarah is the Mother of Monarchy, and kings and queens shall descend from her precisely because she has maintained mastery over herself. She has kept her soul connected to Hakodosh Boruch Hu at all times and was rejuvenated each day in that relationship.

Humans have a constant drive for newness and change, unlike the animal world, writes the *Tallelei Chaim*. From children wanting a new toy and being bored with the old in a short time to adults eagerly awaiting the newest technology, we seek renewal and excitement in the material because we don’t feel it in our spiritual lives. Our souls are looking for connection and newness. While we are awake, our neshama is always giving. During sleep, the neshama is open to receiving; it is when we give our spirits over to Hashem, as we say in *Adon Olam* before sleeping. The *Tallelei Chaim* continues, the students of Rabbi Akiva wanted to sleep to receive new spiritual energy. But Rabbi Akiva was telling them that waking life offers continuous moments of connection to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. They must create newness and satisfaction during the wakeful moments of life. They must fill their days with meaning as Sarah Imeinu did.

Rav Dessler understands that perhaps Rabbi Akiva was teaching very difficult concepts and his students were tuning out. But he was telling them that they have to look for role models to elevate themselves, as Queen Esther did in emulating our Matriarch Sarah. When we bless our daughters to be like our Matriarchs, we are providing them with role models to emulate. The Matriarchs did not sleep through life, but made every moment count in striving to reach wholeness and perfection in their service of Hakodosh Boruch Hu. When we wake up every morning and thank Hashem for returning our souls revitalized and refreshed, we should breathe that energy in deeply so that we can go forth and fill the gift of that day Hashem has given us with holiness.