



## **Chayei Sara: Aging Gracefully**

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

*“And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah (Genesis 23:1).”*

It was the end of an era. The death of the matriarch Sarah brought with it change on many levels. Avraham, now a widower realized that he must ensure generational continuity by finding a suitable spouse for Yitzchak. Yitzchak, now orphaned had to find a way to rebuild the breach and fill the void left by his beloved mother’s passing.

Rashi points out that the last phrase in the above mentioned verse seems to be extraneous. Why must the Torah conclude by saying, *“these were the years of the life of Sarah”* after the verse just told us Sarah’s life-span? Rashi gives a simple answer, *“kulan shavin l’tova, they (her one hundred years, twenty years and seven years) were equally good.”* Sarah’s entire life was infused with meaning, purpose and holiness. Often we “wake up” later in life, realizing that we have limited time on this earth and we must make something of ourselves. Sarah lived her entire life, from childhood to her last breath with an awareness of the need to infuse meaning in every moment of life.

The lifetime of a person can be divided into three stages; childhood, youth and adulthood. Rav Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik zt’l explains that each of these stages has unique characteristics:

*“The child is endowed with a capacity of an all-absorbing faith and trustfulness; youth bursts with zealotry, idealism, and optimism; the adult, mellowed with years, has the benefit of accumulated knowledge and dispassionate judgment. Each age is physically and psychologically attuned to particular emphases, but the superior individual can retain and harmonize the positive strengths of all three periods during his entire lifetime. Sarah was such a person, “the goodness of her life was equally distributed,” kulan shavin l’tova. She was at the same time a child in her total faith, youthful in her exuberant idealism and an adult in the maturity of her judgment (The Covenantal Role of Sarah, 88).”*

This was the greatness of Sarah. She took her life stages with her every step of the journey. She maintained her childlike, simple faith and trust. When Avraham was told, *“Lech Lecha, Go for yourself,”* leave everything you know and travel to an unknown, alien land – Sarah went along. Sarah never heard from God, Sarah never received a direct command nor was she given any explicit promises, yet, she believed, she trusted in God and she embarked on the journey. Sarah put her faith in a loving God whom she believed would protect, nurture and guide her every step.

Sarah maintained a constant sense of idealistic optimism. After years of marriage without children, Sarah turned to Avraham and urged him to marry her maidservant, Hagar. The Ramban (16:2) comments, *“ki Sarah lo nit’ya’asha me’Avram, v’lo hirchiyka atzma me’etzlo, ki hi ishto v’hu isha, Sarah did not give up on Avraham, nor did she distance herself from him, for she was his wife and he was her husband.”* One might have thought that by giving Hagar as a wife to Avraham, Sarah was withdrawing, giving up, admitting defeat and retreating to the shadows. Instead, she says to her beloved Avraham, *“I am right here by your side. Life hasn’t worked out the way I had hoped – but I am not giving up – we will realize our life dream of building a people and a destiny together.”*

Sarah was able to make the difficult decisions that needed to be made. After the birth of Yitzchak, Sarah very quickly understood that to raise a true Abrahamitic heir required an atmosphere of holiness and dedication. Yishmael’s life stood in contradistinction to these values and as such, Sarah felt he had to be sent away. Sarah’s keen judgment, sharpened sense of purpose, profound life experience and acquired wisdom gave her the courage to do what had to be done despite the fact that it hurt.

We often view life as a progression requiring us to grow out of one stage as we progress to another. While this is true in many respects, it would perhaps, be more accurate to view life as a pyramid with each stage building on the one before it. As we get older we must bring the ideals of our past into our present in an effort to build our future. No matter how old we get we must learn to find our inner child. Although we have been hurt and wronged by others we must learn to trust. Although at times we may feel let down by God, we must try to cultivate a strong sense of faith. We must remember how to believe like a child, in our God and in ourselves. No matter how many times we fall and fail we must maintain an ever-present sense of optimism that things will come together. We must remain idealistic even when so many around us are not. We must use our heart, mind and life experiences to make wise life decisions.

We must allow our inner child, young adult and wise elder to walk hand in hand throughout life.