

Parshas Chayei Sarah

The story of how Avraham appointed Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak begins with an introductory pasuk.

ואברהם זקן בא בימים וה' ברך את אברהם בכל

Avraham was old, with many days, and Hashem blessed Avraham with everything.

This pasuk is unclear – what is it referring to? What is 'bakol' everything? What does 'Bah Bayamim' mean? Rashi writes that the word 'bakol' is gematria 'ben' meaning Yitzchak. Why would the pasuk refer to Yitzchak as 'bakol,' everything?

The Medrash says a fascinating thing on this pasuk which sheds light on the purpose of this pasuk, and how Avraham lived his life.

אמר רבי יהושע בר נחמני מפני ארבעה דברים הזקנה קופצת על אדם מפני היראה, ומפני כעס בנים, ומפני אשה רעה, ומפני המלחמות. מפני היראה, מדוד... אבל אברהם, אשתו מכבדתו וקוראתו אדני, שנאמר ואדני זקן, ועליה נאמר: אשת חיל עטרת בעלה לפיכך כתיב ביה, וה' ברך את אברהם בכל.

Rav Yehoshuah Bar Nachmeini said, there are four things which cause premature aging to come upon a person. One, because of fear, because of difficult children, because of a difficult wife, and because of wars with enemies. Because of fear as we see by Dovid... but Avraham, his wife respected him and called him 'My master,' as it says, 'My master is old,' and about her it is said, a woman of valor is the crown of her husband, and therefore it was said about Avraham, Hashem blessed Avraham with everything.

This is an amazing Medrash. Let us attempt to understand it. Avraham had an unusually difficult life. Let's begin with his childhood. He realized at a very young age that everything his father was teaching him and had taught him was patently false. When he confronted his father – his father did the ultimate betrayal and handed him over to Nimrod to be murdered – and he was only saved literally by a miracle. He was then forced to hide in a cave for years – or he was imprisoned, depending on different versions in the medrash. His childhood was a train wreck in every way possible.

Did Avraham have wealth? Yes – but only much later in life. He was at least 75 when Hashem told him Lech Lecha and you will merit great wealth, and Rashi says that on his way to Mitzrayim he had to borrow money to pay for his lodging! He was in the red for those first 75 years – half his life! He didn't have children for 86 or 99 years, between Yishmael and Yitzchak.

It's true he had nachas from Yitzchak, but as people who struggle with this know, one difficult child destroys the whole home, and Avraham had tremendous struggles and hardships with Yishmael, until he had to do the worst thing any parent could do – he had to cast him out of his home. He didn't merely send him away – he sent him up the creek without a paddle. He sent him sick, into the desert, without sufficient water and food – to die! Rashi says that at that point he hated him! What a terrible struggle and nisayon.

Avraham certainly had Shalom Bayis between him and Sarah, but Sarah and Hagar were not at peace. As we know from Jewish history and world history, the destruction that can be brought on by two wives warring, is epic.

How did Avraham survive and keep growing through all this hardship? That is what the pasuk is coming to explain to us by saying that Avraham was old, but he was 'bah bayamim,' and Hashem blessed him with everything. As the medrash explains, being old in the Torah, often isn't a literal reference to age. When we daven to Hashem 'אל תשליכני לעת זקנה', we don't mean literal old age – because we are going to get old no matter what! What we mean is figurative old age, the loss of desire, of motivation, of inspiration, and of hope. As we continue to say, ככלות כחנו אל תעזבנו – when we lose our strength don't abandon us. What causes a person to become old in this way? All the things that Avraham suffered through, fear, difficult children, difficulty with his wife, and enemies that wage war with him! How then did Avraham avoid 'becoming old,' as his 'ziknah,' was of a different sort, it was 'bah bayamim,' literal old age, with many days accompanying him?

The answer is, says the Medrash, Avraham had a wife who respected him! Sarah called him my master, although she was saying something negative – 'אדני זקן', nevertheless she referred to him with the greatest respect. That's why it says 'Hashem blessed Avraham with everything!'

What does this mean? Avraham suffered many different things. After he passed through a nisayon and overcame it, he used the experience to give him chizzuk for the next nisayon. This is the concept of 'bah bayamim,' he came with his days. The Zohar says:

כשאדם נפטר מהעולם אזי באין כל יומין לחשבון לפני הקב"ה להראות מעלות הצדיק שלא עבר יום אחד משנותיו מתורה ומצות ומעשים טובים. משא"כ רשעים ימיהם מתחבאין ובושין להתקרב לפני הקב"ה.

When a person passes away from this world, all his 'days' come with him to be accounted for in front of Hashem, if he was a tzaddik, those days want to demonstrate that none were wasted, and were used for Torah and Avodas Hashem, but an evil person, his days hide themselves – they are embarrassed to be seen by Hashem!

Avraham came with all his days. He looked back at his nisyonos and understood that every single one was necessary, every single one yielded growth and greatness. This gave him the strength and inspiration to move forward with the next and greater nisyonos. Look at what happened – Yishmael should have broken off all ties and terminated his relationship with Avraham! After what happened to him – it was more than enough for them to want to never ever see Avraham again. Yet, Yishmael returned and became part of Avraham's household once again, as did Hagar! This demonstrated that it was all the right thing, it was what Hashem wanted, and ultimately caused Yishmael to do teshuvah, as Rashi says in the end of the parshah.

But this assisted him after the nisayon passed. But how did he survive the nisayon itself? The answer is – Hashem blessed him with everything. Which means, as the medrash explains, he had only one thing he could focus on – that his wife Sarah respected him greatly – but that was enough! In Avraham's eyes Hashem had blessed him with everything! As Rashi explains as well, 'bakol' is the numerical equivalent of 'ben' meaning Yitzchak, that this also was for Avraham everything – he focused on Yitzchak and didn't allow anything else to drag him down! He felt he was blessed with everything possible.

These are the two tactics that Avraham employed in order to live a life where 'ziknah' couldn't affect him, he didn't lose his hope, his motivation, or his inspiration. He looked back and appreciated the value of each of his nisyonos, his days of difficulty, and he focused on the great blessing that Hashem was showering him with – and that was 'everything!'

Avraham never lost his inspiration and growth. In the end of the parshah, the pasuk says, ויסף אברהם ויקח אשה ושמם ויקח אשה – Avraham continued and married a woman named Keturah, who Chazal say was Hagar. Now, if you think about it, why would Avraham do this? He had already accomplished his mission in life. He had Yitzchak, he knew that Yitzchak was the only son truly destined for greatness, the father of Klal Yisrael, he got Yitzchak married – so now he can just live out the rest of his life in peace! Why would he go through the trouble of more children, who knows what they were like, living again with Hagar? For what?

The Medrash addresses this as well, and shares a fascinating insight about tefillah:

ויסף אברהם ויקח אשה ילמדנו רבנו, כמה תפלות אדם מתפלל ביום? רבי שמואל בר נחמן אמר, לפי שהיום משתנה ג' פעמים בכל יום לפיכך צריך האדם להתפלל ג' פ' בכל יום... רבי עקיבא כשהיה מתפלל עם הצבור היה מתפלל כדרכו וכשהיה מתפלל בינו לבין עצמו אדם מניחו בזוית זו ומוצאו בזוית אחרת מפני כריעות והשתחויות. ומה ראו לתקן ג' תפלות? כדי שיהא אדם מוסיף בתפלתו, ולא בתפלה בלבד, אלא אף בתורה יהא מוסיף והולך, ולא בתורה בלבד, אלא אף בבנים, אם נשא אשה ומתה ישא אחרת ויעמיד ממנה בנים, תדע לך שהרי אברהם שמתה אשתו לא ישב לו, אלא לקח אשה שנאמר: ויוסף אברהם

Avraham continued and married a woman. Teach us our master, how many tefillos do we daven a day? Rav Shmuel bar Nachman said, since the day changes three times, therefore we have to daven three times a day... When Rabbi Akiva would daven with the tzibbur he would daven normally, but when he davened alone, he would start in one corner and end up in another because of all the bowing and prostrating. Why did Chazal create three tefillos, because a person has to add in his tefilah. Not only in tefillah, but in Torah as well, one has to add, and not only in Torah but in children as well, just as Avraha, did when he lost his wife he didn't just sit, he went and married Keturah.

To us, when we daven three times a day, it has the effect of making tefillah more habitual and lessening our kavanah. But Chazal instituted three tefillos because we are meant to add to our kavanah with each progressive tefillah. That's what the medrash is bringing the story about Rabbi Akiva to prove, that he added to his tefillah every time, and had so much kavanah that he started in once corner and ended up in another. We always have to add! We have to improve and grow. That was what Avraham was doing when he married Keturah – he was continuing to grow, to

accomplish more. Avraham never ever reached 'ziknah'! He always was motivated to try something new and become greater!