

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld  
ASBI Congregation  
*Parashat Chaye Sarah* 5778

### Thoughts and Prayers

During the first year that I learned at Yeshivat Hamivtar, I took advantage of the pre-dinner break each day to exercise. Usually I went jogging alone along the security path that wended its way over and through the hills that surrounded Efrat, but I was convinced to join my classmates on a few occasions who played soccer each afternoon at that same time. It was a somewhat demoralizing experience. Our student body mostly comprised students from the United States and from England. We did not have comparable soccer educations. The British students referred to the way the Americans played soccer as “kick and chase.” More importantly and regretfully, we never managed to play a full game. Inevitably, arguments would break out between players and one by one the players - my yeshiva classmates - would storm off the field in anger until there were no longer enough players to field two teams. I quickly went back to running.

I spent some amount of time reflecting on the experience of playing soccer with my classmates and my thoughts were disturbing. We were a group of religious young men who had made the decision to study Torah full-time in a yeshiva in *Eretz Yisrael*. If we couldn't treat each other with sufficient respect to play a game of soccer, did that reflect poorly on our religious life-style, on our Torah study, on our worldview itself?

Fortunately, I had better sports-experiences later that same year when I had a chance to observe how one of the members of the yeshiva faculty played basketball with the same degree of ethical sensitivity that we would have expected from our interactions with him in the *beit midrash*. He passed the ball and didn't take all the shots himself. He was encouraging to his teammates and sportsmanlike with his opponents.

*Parashat Haya Sarah* opens with an encomium that serves as an overview of the life of our matriarch Sarah:

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וָעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

“And Sarah's life was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years - this was the span of Sarah's life.”

Rashi draws our attention to the superfluous repetition of the word “year” or שָׁנָה in the verse.

לְבַךְ נִכְתָּב שָׁנָה בְּכֹל כֹּלָל וְכֹלָל, לֹמַר לָךְ שֶׁכָּל אֶחָדֵנְדָרֵשׁ לְעֲצֻמוֹ בֵּת ק' כָּבֵת כ' לְחֻטָּא, מֵה בֵּת כ' לֹא חֻטָּאה, שֶׁהָרִי אֵינָה בֵּת עֹנָשִׁין, אִף בֵּת ק' בְּלֹא חֻטָּא, וּבֵת כ' כָּבֵת ז' לְיוֹפִי.

“Sarah was as innocent of sin at age 100 as she had been at age 20. She was as youthful and beautiful at 100 as she had been at age 7.”

I understand how impressive it is for an individual to reach age 100 with the same innocence from sin that she possessed at age 20. That is indeed an accomplishment. But why mention that her beauty endured from age seven onward? Why is that relevant? And what does it even mean?

I think this entire praise of Sarah, as Rashi formulates it, is a praise of consistency. Sarah was a child and young woman in Ur Casdim. She migrated to Syria as an older woman, and at an advanced age she moved to *Eretz Yisrael* with her husband and embarked on her life's greatest adventure. She was a wife, an aunt, an employer, a religious role-model and educator, and a mother. Throughout all of those years, in each of those contexts, and in each those roles, Sarah displayed consistency in the way that she lived her life.

We would do well to emulate that capacity. The same sensitivity and patience that we show to our parents should be shown to the stranger who inadvertently sits in our seat in shul. The same modesty and humility that characterizes our comportment in shul should characterize our comportment in the office.

This is a struggle for many contemporary Jews who inhabit two worlds, that sometimes have conflicting norms and values. This dynamic too is as old as this week's Torah portion. When Avraham initiates his negotiations for a burial cave for his family with his neighbors, he introduces himself as a "*ger v'toshav*." He's a stranger and he is a resident. He is both their neighbor and a consummate insider, and he is a foreigner at the same time.

Are we successful at work, at the expense of values we study when at shul?

Rav Hutner, the twentieth century rosh yeshiva and a profoundly creative thinker, in a letter to one of his students who had left the yeshiva to pursue a career in medicine, develops this theme with a powerful metaphor. There are those who maintain two homes, and if they do this for nefarious purposes they can be accused of living a "double life." In contrast, many of us are blessed to live in homes with more than one room. We can cook in a kitchen, dine in a dining room, sleep in a bedroom, and bathe in a bathroom. That isn't a double-life, it's a rich life with incorporates diverse activities that take place in diverse locations using diverse tools. Because the same person inhabits all of those rooms, albeit at different times, there is nothing duplicitous whatsoever in living in a home with multiple rooms.

But, we have to be sure that we are the same person when we pass from room to room to room. We need to cultivate the same religious piety, the same ethical excellence, the same interpersonal integrity, and the same humane sensitivity to others when we are in shul, in our homes, at work, in the supermarket, at the opera, or at a political rally.

Rav Hutner, in this same letter, provides an example of one of his own role models, a surgeon who was able to successfully exhibit that consistency as he lived a rich life. After scrubbing in for a surgery, just before he made the first incision, he would recite a *Misheberakh* on behalf of his patient. As a physician, he had trained diligently for many years to help his patients through the practice of medicine. And, as a religious Jew, he had cultivated a robust life of Torah and Mitzvot in which tefilah is an essential element of the mitzvah of *bikkur holim* and is a core component of caring for those who are sick.

As we become more consistent people, in the model of our matriarch Sarah, we can have an ever greater impact on our families, our community and the world at large. Our professional lives are enriched by the ethical commitments of our time in shul. Our prayer life is made more vital when it is inspired by our activism. Our friendships and most intimate family relationships are more warm and gentle when guided by our Torah study.

Sarah was not only consistent across the different contexts of her life, she was consistent across time. That is something we can strive for in our lives, but can achieve collectively as a community. I feel so fortunate that our youngest son is exposed to role models at shul with a 90 year head start on a living lives devoted to Torah and Mitzvot. Adults in our community can find encouragement in a rising cadre of young reinforcements who are being raised and educated here. If we can break out of the narrow circle of friends who are our ages, we can experience the power of a multi-generational community dedicated to the same ideals. This can strengthen our commitments whether we are seven, or twenty, or God willing, one hundred years old.