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Imrey Noam

Chayei Sarah

Shabbat Shalom!

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A Warm Welcome Is Worth More Than Gifts



Rabbi Reuven Kuklin

Caring for others begins with attention to their feelings.

Eliezer asks G-d to help him find a wife for Yitzchak and proposes a sign: the young woman who, when asked for water, says, "Drink, and I will water your camels too," will be the one intended for Avraham's son (Bereishit 24:14).

Yet a careful reading raises a question: did Rivkah fulfill the condition completely? She answered Eliezer's request with only, "Drink, my lord." She mentioned the camels only after he had finished drinking. Events did not unfold exactly as he had asked. Why, then, did Eliezer recognize her as the woman he was seeking?



To answer, consider what lay behind his condition. Eliezer was not looking for a particular sequence of words, but for the character they revealed. He sought someone who would not merely respond to a request, but think of another person herself, notice his needs and care for him.

That is precisely what Rivkah did, in the best possible way. Surely she intended from the outset to water both Eliezer and his camels. But she did not say so immediately, for two reasons. First, out of respect, she did not wish to place him alongside the animals by offering water to all of them in one breath. Second, if he heard that she still had the camels to water, he might hurry so as not to keep her waiting. She therefore let him quench his thirst at ease before offering to care for the animals.

Rivkah did more than fulfill Eliezer's intention: she showed even greater sensitivity than he expected. She considered not only his needs, but his feelings. It is not enough simply to help; we should do so in a way that makes the other person feel cared for and respected.

Shammai teaches in Pirkei Avot (1:15): "Receive every person with a pleasant countenance." Explaining this, the Sages say: "If a person gives his friend all the finest gifts in the world with an unfriendly expression, it is as though he gave him nothing. But one who welcomes another warmly and pleasantly, even if he gives him nothing, is regarded as though he gave him all the finest gifts in the world" (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, chapter 13).

Rambam writes similarly about *tzedakah*: even someone who gives a poor person a thousand gold coins loses the merit of his gift if he gives with an unpleasant expression. Help should come with kindness, sympathy and words of comfort (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:4).

Rabbi Chaim Kreiswirth, who devoted himself to helping people in need, tried to visit them personally to deliver the money. Having to come and ask could cause them further embarrassment. When he could not visit, he paid for their taxi, explaining: "You are doing me a true kindness by giving me the opportunity to help you. Your journey should therefore be at my expense."

How Can a Field Be Elevated?

In the first chapter of Mesillat Yesharim, Ramchal explains that a person's spiritual level also affects the surrounding world.

Our parashah says: "And Ephron's field… became Avraham's possession" (Bereishit 23:17-18). The Hebrew word *vayakom*, translated as "became," literally means "arose." The Sages explain that becoming Avraham's property elevated the field: it would now serve a righteous person (Bereishit Rabbah 58:8).

A person can thus elevate more than himself. When he uses his possessions and surroundings to serve G-d and do good, the material world rises with him.

What Is a Life Truly Lived?

Adapted from Otzroteinu

We measure age in years. But how do we measure life itself?

How Many Years Have We Really Lived?

A parable tells of a sage who visited a distant town. In its cemetery, he noticed some startling inscriptions. One gravestone read, "Lived ten years and three months"; another, five years; a third, twelve. The oldest person buried there had apparently lived only thirty years.

The sage was alarmed. Did everyone here die young? Yet he had met many elderly people in the streets! He went to the head of the burial society for an explanation.

"We have long had a different way of counting," the man replied. "On a gravestone, we record not all the time between birth and death, but only the time a person devoted to good deeds. That is what we call real life."

A person might reach a ripe old age. Yet when all the hours filled with goodness were added up, they amounted to only a few years. An old man could thus turn out to be very young. He had lived the remaining years, but had not filled them with something that could stay with him forever.

The unusual custom in this parable makes us wonder: how many such days have we accumulated? Another story approaches the same question from a different angle.



The Unwritten Life Story

An elderly man sat on a bench outside his retirement home. "Why not write the story of my life?" he thought. "Perhaps someone would like to read it." He slowly returned to his room, switched on the desk lamp, took a sheet of paper and wrote a large heading: "My Life." His pen paused above the next line.

Where should he begin? He could not remember infancy. Childhood? Games in the yard, puddles, the bicycle his grandfather gave him for his birthday. School, lessons, yearly outings. It all seemed too ordinary. "What is special about any of that? Who would want to read it?"

Perhaps his youth? His coming-of-age celebration, presents and congratulations. Then exams, conversations with friends and plans for the future. The days flew by while he waited for real life to begin. He remembered the army: how much energy he had, how he wanted to change the world! Yet now those years, too, brought disappointment.

Suddenly he brightened: his wedding! That was worth describing. So much hope, joy and so many dreams! But everyday worries followed: work, bills, never quite enough money. The children were born, bringing more responsibilities. Again and again he put the important things off: once this rush was over, they would really begin to live.

The children grew up and left home. There was more time, but the couple increasingly looked back, recalled their youth, argued and waited for rare visits. Then came illness and trips to doctors. One day he accompanied his wife on her final journey. Some time later, he came here, to the retirement home.

He sifted through the years, only to dismiss each memory in turn. Beside him lay the sheet of paper. Apart from its heading, it was still blank.

The next morning, his room was opened from outside. The old man had died sitting at his desk. Before him lay his unwritten life story, just two words: "My Life."

Bringing All Our Days with Us

Our parashah begins: "Sarah's life was one hundred years, twenty years and seven years" (Bereishit 23:1). All her days were filled with serving G-d. Even everyday activities became part of that life.

Of Avraham, the Torah says that he was old, "advanced in days" (Bereishit 24:1). Alshich explains that he arrived with all his days: none had been lost; each was filled with meaning.

That is the message of both parables: do not put real life off until later. Fill today with Torah, mitzvot and good deeds, so that one day all our days will come with us.

Source: Otzroteinu, Chayei Sarah. Translated and adapted for imrey.org.