

# Peninim On The Torah

*Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum*

## *Parashat Chayei Sarah*

*Sarah's life was. (23:1)*

The theme of Parashas Chayei Sarah - from its opening episode concerning the burial of Sarah Imeinu until its conclusion with the marriage of Yitzchak Avinu to Rivkah Imeinu - is chesed, acts of loving kindness. In a very inspiring shmuess, ethical discourse, Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, relates how our attitude can transform a common act of courtesy into a holy act of chesed, which will earn us incredible Heavenly reward. He related that many years ago, when one of his younger children was ill, he took his older children to his mother's house to protect them from contracting the same illness and also to ease the load on his wife. As he walked down the street with his children in tow, he met Horav Isaac Sher, zl, "Good morning, Reb Sholom," the venerable sage greeted him. "Where are 'we' going?" he asked.

Rav Sholom explained his situation at home, relating why he was taking the children to his mother's home.

"So, why are you going?" Rav Isaac asked - again.

Rav Sholom once again explained where and why he was going, to which Rav Isaac once again asked, "Why are you going?"

This went on for a number of minutes, as Rav Isaac asked the same question and Rav Sholom reiterated his reply. When Rav Isaac saw that Rav Sholom did not grasp what he was suggesting with his question, he said, "In other words, you are on the way to perform an act of chesed with a Jewish child who just happens to be yours!" They bid each other "good day," and Rav Sholom continued along the way. Suddenly, the depths of Rav Isaac's words dawned on him. He was not simply going to his mother's house with his children; he was involved in carrying out an act of chesed! He now realized that every mundane act of assistance, if focused properly and with the correct intention, is exactly that: an act of chesed. It is up to us to elevate our activities, to give them the spiritual substance and focus.

We have no idea of the value of everyday, routine activities, because we do not give it any thought. This lack of cognition blurs the distinction between the mundane and the spiritual, between the common and the sublime, between assistance and chesed. While a woman/wife/mother is raising her children, she performs countless acts of chesed daily. Does anybody give it a second thought? Does she? This is pure chesed. The fact that it happens to be her own children does not diminish its

significance. The significance is reflected in her attitude.

Rav Sholom relates that he was once walking with Horav Elya Lopian, zl, as they chanced upon a Jewish street worker fixing a crack in the pavement. Rav Elya said, "See! A Jew is involved in the mitzvah of Yishuv Eretz Yisrael, settling Eretz Yisrael, and he does not realize it. If his kavanah, intention, would not simply be to earn a living, but to help the land be settled, so that people can be more comfortable, he would have an incredible mitzvah. Alas, his attitude circumvents him from realizing his true achievement.

Life is about little things. We do them all of the time. When we greet someone with a smile, it is an act of chesed. When we go out of our way to assist someone with a minor favor, it is an act of chesed. The way we act in our homes defines our chesed. It all depends on our attitude. We can either elevate our actions or leave them in the mindless realm of trivial activity.

*May You arrange it for me this day. (24:12)*

Eliezer realized that he was the beneficiary of Hashem's siyata diShmaya, Divine assistance, so he offered his gratitude. He also asked for future favors in finding a wife for Yitzchak Avinu. We note that while he thanked Hashem for the past, he kept on praying for the future. Horav Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach, zl, explains that one should not take the future for granted just because he has benefited from siyata diShmaya in the past. There is no guarantee for the future. Prayer is an essential prerequisite for all siyata diShmaya. When one is makir tov, shows his appreciation for past favors, he should also offer his prayer for future Heavenly assistance.

Often, we become so wrapped up in the excitement of our success that we forget that, if it is to continue, we must pray for it. Rav Shlomo Zalmen explains that this is the reason that our Matriarch, Leah, ceased giving birth after Yehudah was born. She neglected to pray for the future. Children are a gift, not something to take for granted or to expect blindly. While she certainly offered her gratitude for her gift, she should have immediately entreated Hashem for her future fertility. Her preoccupation in offering gratitude for the present distracted her from petitioning for the future. This is why Eliezer prayed for continued blessing. The past notwithstanding, he now had to look forward to the future.

We take too much for granted. This is especially true when one has been the recent beneficiary of Hashem's favor. His first-hand experience in being spared from disaster can affect his judgment. He may be so excited about his good fortune that he might expect it to continue. After all, does not one miracle beget another miracle? This is a time when he offers his appreciation for the past and supplicates Hashem for continued Divine assistance. As there is no "lock" on the future, there is also no guarantee of siyata diShmaya.

*Unless you go to my father's house and to my family and take a wife for my son. (24:38)*

Eliezer is relating what Avraham, his master, had instructed him to do. Interestingly, he deletes Avraham Avinu's actual words. Avraham had said, "And you shall take a wife for my son, for

Yitzchak." For some reason Eliezer did not repeat verbatim that Avraham had specified a wife for his son, Yitzchak. Why did he neglect to repeat Yitzchak's name? The Bais HaLevi explains that saying, "My son, Yitzchak," implies that Avraham was looking for a girl that would be appropriate for his son, a wife that would be suitable as the daughter-in-law of Avraham Avinu, as well as a wife for Yitzchak, one that was appropriate for someone of his spiritual stature.

There is a difference between these two criteria. Indeed, while Rivkah's family might be enthusiastic about sealing a match between their daughter and Avraham, they might not be as acquiescent to having Yitzchak enter the family. The actions of many people who do not value spirituality, are regrettable. They seek a distinguished mechutan, father-in-law. They would like their daughter to join into an eminent family. They do not, however, want a rav or rosh yeshivah for a son-in-law. Their daughter deserves a "better" life than to be a rebbetzin!

Many people appreciate and respect the Torah and its disseminators - from afar. They support and express their praise, as long as the Torah is ensconced somewhere else - not in their home. A talmid chacham who devotes himself to Torah study is someone to revere, someone who should serve as an example of ethicality, erudition and devoutness - but not one to take for a son-in-law. This was Eliezer's concern. If he would add "Yitzchak," thereby implying that the chassan was an individual of unique character, whose life would be devoted to expanding his knowledge of Torah, not increasing his portfolio, the shidduch might be eschewed. He, therefore, only mentioned that it was Avraham's son. After all, who would not want to be mechutanim with Avraham?

*And I said to my master, "Perhaps the woman will not follow me?" (24:39)*

The word, ulai, perhaps, is usually spelled with a vov. It is spelled here without the vov, so that it could easily be read as eilai, which means, "to me." The Midrash explains that the Torah is alluding to Eliezer's personal hope: He had a daughter whom he would have loved to marry off to Yitzchak Avinu. He was actually hoping that he would not find a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Avraham, however, set him straight and explained, "My son is baruch, blessed. Your daughter, a descendant of Canaan who was cursed by Noach, is an arur, accursed. The accursed cannot unite with the blessed." He had put an end to Eliezer's dream. The two could never unite in matrimony.

Horav Avraham Schorr, Shlita, explains that Chazal are revealing to us the key to Eliezer's spiritual shortcoming: He was an arur. Why? Because he had negios, vested interests, and they dominated his mindset and actions. In order to be included in the baruch group, one must be willing to defer and abnegate his ani, "I." He no longer plays a role. Everything is for others. In order for Eliezer to succeed in his mission for Avraham, he had to be mevatel, nullify, his ani, totally subjugating himself to Avraham.

When Hashem called to Avraham requesting him to sacrifice Yitzchak, the Patriarch's immediate response was hineni, "Here I am." The Sefer Orach V'Simchah explains that the advantage of hineni is that one demonstrates instant preparedness and total negation of oneself. Only when one neutralizes the ani, I/himself, can he stand in total readiness to serve Hashem.

The ani plays a critical role in raising children. Often the demands we make of our children are really for ourselves. When our children look good; we look good. It is all part of the wider picture: nice house, successful business, good kids. After all is said and done, however, the only one we really care about is ani, myself. Rather than recognize that everything in life - including children - is a gift on loan,

a deposit from Hashem, which He entrusts in our care, we think that it is all ours to keep and to do with whatever we want.

To serve Hashem correctly, one must divest himself of the ani. To be a proper parent, one must divest himself of the ani and think only of his child. To be a good spouse, one must divest himself of the ani. It all boils down to living for others and not for oneself. After all, why would Hashem have created us merely to live for ourselves?

*"The matter stemmed from Hashem! We can say to you neither bad nor good." (24:50)*

Rivkah's father, Besuel, and her brother, Lavan, expressed their realization that Hashem had been dominating the entire proceedings concerning her match to Yitzchak Avinu. They could intervene neither negatively nor positively. Horav Aizik Ausband, Shlita, cites Horav Yosef Pogremonski, zl, brother of Horav Mordechai Pogremonski, zl, who offers an insightful analogy to explain this. As a large locomotive speeds past us, we would never dream, even for a moment, that if we ran behind the caboose and pushed with all our strength, it would make one iota of a difference in the speed of the train. Our efforts would be meaningless, both from behind and certainly from the front, if we attempt to stop the speeding train. The gesture would be ludicrous.

This is what Lavan and Besuel said to Eliezer: our efforts concerning this match are inconsequential. It is totally in Hashem's hands. All we can do is remain on the sidelines and be spectators as the "train" goes by. This is a remarkable and penetrating lesson for life. If we would only take the time to think cogently about these words. Hashem guides the world. We can watch and, in fact, we should observe and learn from what He is doing. As the old adage goes, "If you are not going to follow, then get out of the way."

Rav Pogremonski adds that we derive another valuable lesson in human nature from this incident. Lavan and Besuel had just expressed their inability to either approve or disapprove of this match. They voiced their acquiescence that everything has been orchestrated by Hashem. Yet, we see that the very next day, they quickly shed their facade of righteousness and donned their true colors. Lavan and his mother wanted Rivkah to "remain home for a little while." Besuel attempted unsuccessfully to poison Eliezer. Incredible! Last night, they were believers, and, in the course of one night, they changed their minds and reneged everything that they had said. Last night, it was, "Take and go," and today, it is "Stay a little bit." This indicates that once an individual has achieved a level of spiritual ascendancy, he should immediately concretize and strengthen his commitment. To dawdle is to challenge the ability of the yetzer hora, evil inclination, to undermine everything that he has accomplished. One either moves up or falls down. Status quo is not a viable option.

*And Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother; he married Rivkah, she became his wife, and he loved her; and, thus, Yitzchak was consoled after his mother. (24:67)*

The love that Yitzchak Avinu had for his wife was one that was inspired by his appreciation of her sterling character, piety and moral rectitude. One wonders how this phenomenon occurred. Rivkah was raised in a home that represented the nadir of depravity. Her father was evil; her brother was the master of deception. She observed guile and cunning being used to cheat and steal. All of this was

carried out under a veil of righteousness and morality. Lavan, her brother, redefined the concept of dishonesty. When he gave his daughter to Yaakov Avinu in marriage, he switched one daughter for another, all under the guise of a caring father who was sensitive to his daughter's feelings. He changed the terms of Yaakov's hire many times - always finding a way to justify his lies. Lavan was not born or raised in a vacuum. He had a father who must have served as a good rebbe to teach him how to raise deception to the level of an art. How did Rivkah survive in such an environment? How was she not influenced?

Horav Yisrael Belsky, Shlita, makes a noteworthy observation. Rivkah was influenced! Indeed, as a young girl, she was impressionable and probably absorbed everything that she saw. When we think about it, what did she really see? She saw a father and brother who were deceivers, but who obscured their corruption behind a mantle of innocence and probity. They were chameleons, but all she saw was their righteousness, morality and piety! It was precisely their deception that concealed the truth about them. Thus, Rivkah saw Lavan's refined and respectable surface, his external persona of integrity and trust. She thought this was her brother's essential character. How was she to know that he was a crook? She saw a kind, benevolent man, who, for all intents and purposes, was someone to respect and emulate. She was young and, as such, had no reason to dig below the surface of the facade that she saw. Lavan's cunning shielded his sister from the truth. She saw good - not bad; kindness - not corruption; refinement - not vulgarity. Lavan taught her well.

*And Avraham expired and died at a good old age, mature and content. (25:8)*

Avraham Avinu had a long and productive life. All good things, however, come to an end. While our first Patriarch's soul passed on to a better world, where it would now experience the reward for a life lived well, those who remained were left bereft of their mentor, leader and life's guide. In the Talmud Bava Basra 91, Chazal relate the eulogy that was expressed by the gedolei olam, leaders of the world, as their great leader had passed on to eternal life. They mourned, "Woe is to the world that lost its leader, and woe is to the ship that has lost its captain!"

These are words that are often echoed by maspidim, various eulogizers, upon expressing their sorrow and concern at the passing of a gadol, Torah leader. What is the underlying meaning of this statement, and what is its relationship to the passing of a gadol? In his hesped, eulogy, for the Steipler Rav, zl, Horav Yaakov Galinsky, Shlita, gave the following explanation:

When a king dies, the country either follows a line of succession or crowns a new king. In any event, someone is available to assume the previous king's position, so that the country will not remain leaderless. In the event a captain of a ship passes away while the ship is voyaging on the high seas, it creates a much greater and more serious problem. There is no one to assume leadership while the ship is floundering in the sea. There is no way to locate a new captain in the middle of the ocean. This is the approach that David Hamelech took when he eulogized Yonasan. David lamented, "How did the mighty fall?" He then added, "How did the mighty fall during the war?" He supplemented his eulogy, "How did the mighty fall, and the weapons were lost?"

When a general dies, it is a great loss; a vacuum is created in the army's leadership. If the general dies during times of peace, we search for a replacement and give him time to establish himself in the position of leadership. During a war, when the missiles are flying and there is danger all around,

when every minute counts and every decision is of crucial importance, the general's passing is of greater significance. It is difficult to replace him at this critical juncture. Yet, if the army has sophisticated weaponry, then, at least, the soldiers are not completely at a loss. They know how to use the available weapons, so that they might continue to fight. If, however, the general dies and access to the weapons is suddenly cut off, the tragedy has greater and more serious ramifications. The army now has no leadership and no weapons with which to wage war.

This is the meaning of "woe to the ship that has lost its captain." When a ship's captain dies during its journey on the seas, there is no one to replace him. There is no one who is proficient in the multitude of switches and dials for maintaining the ship's course, so that it may continue its safe passage.

"Klal Yisrael is in the midst of a raging war between the spiritual and the physical/material dimensions," Rav Galinsky cried. "We have lost our captain. The Steipler led us for so many years, as he guided us through the treacherous seas. What will we do now?"

*Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years. (23:1)*

Rashi explains that the apparent redundancy of "years" divides Sarah's life into three distinct periods, each with its own uniqueness, yet each sharing the particular characteristics of its neighbor. In other words, at one hundred she was as sinless as a twenty year old who does not receive Heavenly punishment. At the age of twenty, she still had the wholesome beauty of a seven year old. Indeed, man's lifespan is divided into three eras: child, teenager, and adult. The Torah is teaching us that throughout every stage of her life, Sara Imeinu lived life with tochen, purpose, value and meaning.

Life has supreme value but, unfortunately, to some it holds little meaning. Everybody wants to live, but not everyone is able to live with purpose. Horav Yechiel Michel Tikuchinsky, z.l., the author of the Geshet HaChaim, tells the story of the condemned man who was taking his last walk to the gallows. The noose was placed over his head, and, just as he was about to say his last words, a large beam loosened and fell in his proximity. Instinctively, he jerked his head sideways to protect himself. Why? Was he not about to die momentarily anyway? This shows us that regardless of the situation, no one is prepared to die. As futile and lost as the situation seems, one still maintains that last hope that he will survive. Nobody really believes that he will die.

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, z.l., relates the incredible story of a man on death row who was scheduled to die on a designated day, at a specific time. Apparently, they did not take into consideration the change of clocks that occurs in the spring. Hence, when they said six o'clock, the prisoner was prepared to die in the sixth hour. Due to the time change, he would instead be executed in the fifth hour past noon. He complained bitterly until the state deferred to his motion and granted him one more hour to live.

Imagine, this man refused to leave this world one minute earlier than necessary, even though that extra hour would only be filled with anxiety as he waited for his appointment with death. No one wants to die, but many of us do not learn how to live.

Adam HaRishon was originally destined to live one thousand years. When Hashem showed him a panorama of the future with all of its distinguished leaders, he was distressed that David HaMelech

was to be allotted only three hours of life. Adam then "contributed" seventy years of his life to David. At the last minute, shortly before his death, he regretted his actions and wanted to continue living. Hashem told him to keep his word. Nine hundred and thirty years is considerable longevity, but as a person confronts his mortality, every minute is a lifetime that no one wants to give up.

The value of time is immeasurable, since we never know how much we might be able to accomplish in that extra minute. Indeed, a minute wasted is a minute lost forever. A wise man once attended the funeral of a ninety-year old man, who, regrettably, had wasted much of his life. His accomplishments were self-serving; his relationships were similarly egocentric. His children and grandchildren were walking behind the funeral cortege and weeping. The wise man asked, "Why is today different than the day before? Why are they weeping for him today? Considering the way he lived, they could have already mourned him yesterday. Yesterday, ninety years minus one day of his life had died. Today - only one more day has died." It sounds a bit callous, but, when we think about it rationally, it is regrettably true of so many people.

When the sea surrounding the ship carrying Yonah HaNavi was storming, he suggested that the sailors "lift him up and throw him overboard." Was it necessary to lift him up in the air? Could he not have simply jumped into the water? Horav Yehuda Leib Chasman, zl, explains that Yonah wanted to savor every possible moment of life. During the precious moments that it would take to lift him and throw him over, he could introspect and confess whatever "misdeeds" he might have done in his life. The value of a moment!

The story is told that when Horav Naftali Trop, zl, became ill, the students of the Yeshiva in Radin, where he was Rosh Yeshivah, sought every avenue to secure his recovery. They decided to "donate" days, weeks, and even months of their own lives as a merit for his recovery. They even went to the Chofetz Chaim, zl, and asked how many hours he would contribute. The venerable sage thought back and forth for a few moments and said, "I will give up one minute of my life."

When the students heard their rebbe's reply, they developed an acute appreciation of the value of time, of every single minute of time. Indeed, the hasmadah, diligence, in Torah study in Radin became so intense as a result of the Chofetz Chaim's remark, that it was noted that the yeshivah had never had such hasmadah from its inception.

Horav Shmuel Pinchasi, Shlita, cites a meaningful analogy from the Baalei Mussar, Ethicists, to underscore this idea. A man goes out to purchase a calendar. He has two choices: either he buys the kind that has each day on a separate page which he tears off at the end of that day; or he can pick a desktop planner on which he can write notes on a daily basis. Both calendars are functional. There is one difference between the two, however: the former is thrown away empty at the end of the year, while the latter can be reviewed and even studied.

Every day that we live is the first day of the rest of our lives. We are born into this world and, with the passing of every day, we get one day closer to our last day on earth. What we do with our life is in our hands. When we take positive action, we can make a difference. Shlomo HaMelech says in Koheles, 12:1, "So remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come." In the Talmud Shabbos 151A, Chazal interpret the "evil days" as a reference to old age when a person's physical capabilities are curtailed. When a person seeks to repent when he is aged, his overtures are not as readily accepted. This is compared to a number of soldiers of a certain country who went AWOL and, due to fear of retribution, escaped to another country. A number of years later, a new king ascended to the throne, and he was prepared to offer amnesty to all those who would return immediately to active duty. One old man also came forth and requested amnesty. The officers listened

to his offer to return, but upon looking at his weakened body, he was told that it was too late: he was of very little use to the military.

It was this parable that Horav Yitzchak Blazer, zl, otherwise known as Rav Itzele Peterburger, the famous disciple of Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, related to the students of Yeshivas Slabodka during the High Holy Days. He looked at the students and cried, "You are so fortunate to be young! You have the opportunity to grow spiritually and excel. Do not waste your time!" He then burst out into bitter weeping as he screamed, "My brothers! Take pity on an old man who has wasted his time worthlessly! Pray with me the words of the Psalmist (71:9), *Al tashlicheini l'eis zikna*, 'Do not cast me off in time of old age.'" That is how the saintly Rav Itzele viewed life. What should we say? Perhaps it would serve us well to remember the famous words of Rav Yisrael Salanter, "As long as the candle still burns, it is possible to fix something." It is all in our hands, as the Chovos HaLevavos writes, "The days (of one's life) are as long sheets of paper. Write on them how you want to be remembered."

*Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years ...Sarah died in Kiryas Arba ...  
And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. (23:1,2,3)*

The narrative concerning Sarah Imeinu's passing is enigmatic. First, why does the Torah present the redundancy of the "years" of Sarah's life? In fact, the ages of the other Imahos, Matriarchs, is not mentioned when the Torah records their deaths. The "chaf" of the word *u'livkosah*, and to bewail her, is written in miniature. The Baal HaTurim explains that since Sarah was very old, the weeping over her passing was diminished. Is this necessary for the Torah to note? Regarding Avraham's eulogizing Sarah, Rashi explains the juxtaposition of Sarah's death upon the Akeidas Yitzchak. He cites Chazal who explain that this is done to indicate that she died as a result of that event. The Satan told her that Avraham had actually slaughtered her precious Yitzchak. She cried out in grief and died. We wonder why Rashi does not cite this exegesis on the pasuk that records Sarah's death. Rather, he mentions it concerning Avraham's eulogy and mourning for her. Last, Sarah Imeinu was a woman of impeccable spiritual ascendancy. How is it that the Akeidah catalyzed her death? How could such a *nisayon*, test, that became the benchmark of Avraham Avinu's distinction, be the ruin of Sarah, who was even greater than he in the area of *nevius*, prophecy?

The Nesivos Shalom offers a novel interpretation of the proceedings of Sarah's death which elucidates and illuminates the entire narrative. We entreat Hashem daily to *v'haseir Satan milfaneinu u'meiachareinu*, "Please remove the Satan from before us and from behind us." This indicates that there is a Satan that challenges us in front as we are about to perform a *mitzvah*. There is also another Satan, one who attempts to undermine the success and inspiration that we derive upon successfully carrying out a *mitzvah*. The *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination, does everything within its power to sabotage whatever inspiration we might derive from our *mitzvah* observance. If it does not succeed in preventing us from performing the *mitzvah*, then it will go to all lengths to frustrate and disenchant us after we have discharged our duty.

The Satan employed every gambit to ensnare Avraham and thwart the successful completion of his mission. When he saw that Avraham had withstood the test, that he had stood there prepared to sanctify Hashem's Name until he was halted by the Angel, he decided to change courses and become the Satan *mei'achareinu*, the Satan from behind us. How did he do it? The Satan knew that Sarah was destined to die that day. The Heavenly decree from before her birth was that her lifespan would end on the day that happened to coincide with the Akeidah. With this information in his bag of tricks, the Satan

told Sarah about what happened to her only son. She immediately died, but not as a result of the shock as the Satan would have everyone believe, but because it was her time. When Avraham heard about the tragedy that had befallen him, and the part that he played in "shortening" Sarah's life, he regretted the Akeidah. That was exactly what the Satan planned. If he could not influence Avraham prior to the Akeidah, he would attempt a subterfuge afterwards.

Of course, the Satan failed in his ruse. We now understand why the Torah repeats Sarah's years. This underscores the fact that she lived precisely how long she was destined to live. She did not die "accidentally." Also, we now understand the juxtaposition of Sarah's death upon the Akeidah. The Satan wanted everyone to think that she died as a result of Avraham's mission. This is why Rashi emphasizes this exegesis on the pasuk that relates that there was decreased mourning for Sarah. She died an old woman. She did not die prematurely. Her time had come, and the mourning was commensurate with this type of loss. It was all maaseh Satan, the work of the Satan, who was once again foiled in his attempt to impede Avraham Avinu's spiritual progress.

There is a powerful lesson to be derived herein. We recognize the Satan that confronts us as we are about to do a mitzvah. We often ignore him, however, when he comes up from behind. The Chazon Ish, zl, was wont to say that there is a special yetzer hora that challenges us following a miracle. This is the Satan mei'achareinu. We now have a new "perception" of the meaning of the term, "hindsight."

*Now these are the days of Avraham's life which he lived. (25:7)*

Avraham Avinu died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five, which certainly seems to be a ripe old age. He lived a productive and successful life. He was supposed to live longer, however, but his life was cut short. In his commentary to Parashas Toldos (25:30), Rashi cites the Talmud in Bava Basra 16b that relates that Avraham Avinu died five years earlier than he had originally been designated to die, so that he would not see his grandson, Eisav, go out l'tarbus raah, bad ways. In citing this Rashi, the Chafetz Chaim, zl, added that everything that occurs is in some way alluded to in the Torah. Even the fact that Avraham dies prematurely is hinted at in the Torah. Upon relating Avraham's passing, the Torah writes, "These are the days of Avraham's life which he lived." The last few words - asher chai, "which he lived," are not used to describe Yitzchak Avinu's or Yaakov Avinu's passing. Why? This teaches us that, in reality, Avraham was supposed to have lived longer. His life was cut short, so this is all "which he lived." Likewise, concerning the passing of Adam HaRishon, the Torah writes "which he lived." Adam was supposed to live seventy more years, but he chose to contribute those seventy years to David HaMelech. Thus, this is the years "which he lived."

I think the lesson to be derived from Rashi is compelling. Let me first cite an intriguing Midrash, Lekach Tov at the beginning of this parsha. Concerning Sarah Imeinu's passing, the Midrash states that "all righteous women precede their husbands in death, so that their dignity not be impugned in the new unfortunate circumstances of widowhood. Incredible! Chazal open up before us a new vista of understanding concerning death and dying. What we think is a tragedy would conceivably be a favor. We cannot make this determination, but Hashem can - and does.

Avraham Avinu died before his time. One would lament this great loss - both to Avraham and to the world, but Hashem viewed this from a totally different perspective. He was acutely aware of the pain Avraham would sustain knowing that his grandson was to adopt a lifestyle of immorality and murder. Hashem is aware of the pain and loss of status associated with widowhood. He understands and

weighs the emotions and heartbreak, the humiliation and travail, of being alone. We do not understand His decision, but we now have a glimpse into the factors behind that decision.

Bearing the above in mind, perhaps we can take the Midrash's lesson to heart and do something to ease the plight of those who are alone. At one time, each of them walked with pride, their heads held high - together with a spouse. Now each is alone, having lost not only a partner in life, but also in many ways access to recognition and tribute. Hashem takes their emotions into consideration. Should we not emulate this attribute?

I had occasion to write the following story a number of years ago, which is so powerful that I find it worthy of repeating. The story was originally told by Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, and later related by Rabbi Paysach Krohn in "Around the Maggid's Table." It was the early twentieth century and a certain Reb Nachum was the baal tefillah, leader of the services, for the Mussaf prayer on the High Holy Days in the shul where Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, was the rav. Obviously a shul which had such a venerable rav was filled to capacity during these special days when prayer is so important and effective. The baal tefillah has an awesome function, one that goes beyond the mere ability to chant the service in a melodious voice. He must inspire the congregation with impassioned service. Needless to say, Reb Nachum lived up to his position.

One year, shortly before Rosh Hashanah, Reb Nachum took ill and suddenly passed away. After mourning a dear friend, the shul's leadership prepared for the task of filling the void and finding a baal tefillah for the upcoming holidays. When they approached Rav Yosef Chaim, he told them not to be concerned. He would see to it that a worthy replacement would be present in time. The weeks went by quickly, and soon it was a few days before Rosh Hashanah. There was still no baal tefillah in sight. When the members again approached the rav, the answer was the same: Do not worry.

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the members were beginning to become nervous, since there still was no baal tefillah. When they once again turned to Rav Yosef Chaim, he assured them that he had the situation in hand and there would be a baal tefillah at the podium for Mussaf.

The next day, there was a sense of anxious expectation in the air. The Shacharis service was completed. The Shofar was blown. It was now "crunch" time. Where was the baal mussaf? All eyes were on Rav Yosef Chaim, as he arose from his seat, walked over to Reb Nachum's son, and said, "You are to be the baal mussaf. Go up and pray just as your late father did."

The young man was taken aback. He never imagined himself as the one to fill his father's shoes. He began to protest, "I cannot. I am not prepared. I did not look over the prayers before Yom Tov."

Rav Yosef Chaim was not taking no for an answer. In his calm voice, he assured the young man that he could and would be successful in leading the prayers, "Go up there and do your best. You will be fine."

Understandably, one does not argue with Rav Yosef Chaim. The young man acquiesced and led the service. After Mussaf, a group of the members respectfully approached the rav and questioned his choice for baal tefillah. "After all," they reminded him, "the halachah clearly states that a mourner may not lead the congregation in prayer during the High Holy Days."

Rav Yosef Chaim looked at the group with loving eyes and responded softly, "Do you know who was sitting and praying in the women's section of the shul? Reb Nachum's widow. Surely you can imagine the grief and sorrow that she is feeling, especially on the very day that she would have listened to her husband leading the service. Now, imagine the pain she would have felt if just anybody had ascended the podium to lead the service. She would have surely broken apart, and her sorrowful

weeping would have been heard and felt by us all.

"In order to minimize her pain, I sent her son up there. The Torah admonishes us a number of times to be sensitive to the needs of a widow. Halachah dictates that if there is no one else available, a mourner may lead the services. I felt that in this case, for the sake of the widow, there was no one else."

This was the benchmark of a gadol b'Yisrael, Torah leader. He carried the pain and concerns of all Klal Yisrael - both collectively and individually - on his shoulders.

*Grant me an estate for a burial site among you. (23:4)*

The Torah dedicates a considerable amount of space to detailing the meticulous care and devotion which Avraham Avinu demonstrated in searching for a suitable gravesite for Sarah Imeinu. He spared no expense in finding the proper place. This teaches us that the soul of the departed hovers over the grave. Therefore, it is appropriate to locate a place suitable for the neshamah, soul. Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, comments that this means that one should not bury a person who was spiritually deficient next to someone who was pious and virtuous. His reasoning for this statement gives us something to consider.

When Rav Shternbuch first arrived in South Africa to take a position as rav, he was astonished to learn that there was no exclusive burial site for shomrei Shabbos, those who observed Shabbos. Everybody was buried side by side, regardless of his level of observance. Rav Shternbuch spoke in shul that Shabbos, declaring that it was prohibited by Jewish law to bury a Shabbos-observant Jew next to one who was not observant. Understandably, when word of his speech got out, the city was in a state of outrage. "How dare he issue such a rule? It is bad enough that there is no harmony among Jews when they are among the living! Do they have to be also separated in death?" This went on to the point that some people started a movement to have Rav Shternbuch recalled. Editorials in the liberal press declared that South Africa was not a place for religious fanatics.

Rav Shternbuch announced that he was inviting the community to assemble in his shul, where he would publicly address the issue in order to validate his statement. The shul was packed, as a large crowd came to hear what the famous rav had to say. Rav Shternbuch ascended to the lectern and began, "When a person leaves this world, his soul ascends to the Heavenly Tribunal for judgment. One will be questioned about why he did not observe Shabbos. The answer will be that in South Africa it is difficult to observe Shabbos. Immediately, when the Tribunal hears this, they will point to the soul that is buried near you and ask, "Why was your neighbor able to observe Shabbos? He also lived in South Africa." You see, when an individual who was not observant is buried in the proximity of one who was, it can be a condemnation against him. He no longer has any excuses for eschewing Jewish ritual. When one is buried in an area where the lifestyle of his neighbors paralleled his own, then he can possibly seek to justify his non-observance."

Rav Shternbuch suddenly raised his voice and declared, "I am here to help you, and you attempt to castigate me! It is for your ultimate good that I rendered the halachah that those who had not yet been observant should be buried in an area with others who had maintained a similar level of observance."

We do not realize, writes Rav Shternbuch, that when those who have the wherewithal to purchase burial plots near great, pious Jews, exercise this option, they are making a serious error. A

person should be buried near his own kind, people who have lived and acted in a manner similar to his own. That is why Avraham first eulogized Sarah, so that people would have an inkling of her distinction. They would then realize why her burial site had to be on ground which was unique and revered, such as the Me'oras ha'Machpelah.

*And take a wife for my son for Yitzchak. (24:4)*

There is no dearth of stories concerning shidduchim, but I recently came across what seems to be a well-known story, which I think conveys a powerful, but practical, message. The Divrei Chaim, popularly known as the Sanzer Rebbe, Horav Chaim Halberstam, zl, was a brilliant talmid chacham, Torah scholar, and patriarch of many of the greatest chassidic dynasties. Even as a young man his fame grew throughout Europe. The most esteemed families sought to have him included as one of their own, through marriage. There was a problem, however, a physical flaw, which prospective wives did not dismiss as casually as did their fathers. He had been born with one leg shorter than the other, which produced a limp when he walked. Despite all of his wonderful qualities, his parents soon realized that it would not be as easy as they had thought to marry off their son.

One day, his parents notified him that, regrettably, another young lady, the daughter of a great rav, had declined a match with him. The Sanzer was interested in this shidduch, and, consequently, asked the young lady's father if he might argue his case with her.

The meeting was arranged. He began by citing Chazal's statement that forty days prior to a child's conception, a decree comes forth from Heaven saying, "So and so will marry so and so." "Before I was born, my neshamah, soul, asked to see my destined wife. When my soul beheld you, it sang because you were so perfect. There was, however, one physical flaw."

"What was that?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"A limp. You had a noticeable limp, because one leg was shorter than the other. I had such pain when I saw this, because otherwise you were the picture of perfection. Knowing that outward appearances play a greater role for women than for men, it troubled me that you would have to live a lifetime with this impediment. I, therefore, asked Heaven if I could be afflicted with this physical imperfection instead of you.

"Heaven listened. They saw how concerned I was for you and they gave me the limp instead of you. I have a limp today, so that you do not. I took it upon myself, so that you would not suffer."

When the young woman heard these words, she became very still. After a short while, she rose from her chair and left the room. A few hours later, she approached her father and said that she had changed her mind. She now wanted to marry Chaim Halberstam. They were married shortly thereafter, and the beginnings of the famous Sanzer dynasty was established. I guess each one of us will - and should - derive his own individual lesson from this story.

*Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, "Please tip over your jug so I may drink," and who replies, "Drink and I will even water your camels," her will You have designated for your servant, for Yitzchak. (24:14)*

Parashas Chayei Sarah revolves around a number of themes, the most predominant being the concept of shidduchim, matrimony. Avraham Avinu instructed his trusted servant, Eliezer, with guidelines for selecting a wife for his son and spiritual heir, Yitzchak. The Chasam Sofer explains why chesed, the character trait of kindness, plays such a critical role as the primary criteria in the selection process. He cites the pasuk in the beginning of Sefer Bereishis (2:18), which describes the creation of woman: "I will make for him (Adam) an eizer k'negdo, a helper against him." This seems somewhat paradoxical. To be a helper is not to be against him. One either helps or contends. The idea is, that if the woman's nature is different from that of her husband, then she complements him. She is his helper. If, however, their personalities are similar, if their character traits are alike, then they will end up maintaining the same weaknesses and, in all likelihood, their opportunities for individual growth will be stunted. In a marriage, the ideal is for two people with contrasting or differing characteristics to join together and build upon one another's strengths, very much like a puzzle where each of the pieces fit into place to form a complete mosaic.

Avraham Avinu exemplified the middah of chesed, while Yitzchak symbolized the attribute of din, strict justice. His strength lay in his Divine service and prayer. Thus, it was fitting that his wife be a person who embodies a trait that would augment and enhance him. Rivkah exhibited a sublime sense of chesed which impressed Eliezer, so that he understood that this girl was sent by Hashem to be Yitzchak's wife, with whom he would forge another link in the chain of Klal Yisrael.

*When she finished giving him drink, she said, "I will draw water even for your camels until they have finished drinking." (24:19)*

Eliezer did not ask Rivkah to give drink for his animals. She did it on her own because she understood that chesed goes beyond that for which one asks. An act of chesed fulfills a need. In this circumstance, the animals also had to be given drink. There are "do gooders" who tend to fulfill one's requests, but they do not necessarily fulfill their needs. They hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. Yes, they perform acts of loving kindness. If you are going to do it, you should do it right. We should try to listen between the lines and look beyond what seems to be. We should take into consideration that someone in need quite often wants to maintain an element of their self-esteem, and is, therefore, hard-pressed to ask for what they really need. The following story, related by Rabbi Yechiel Spero in "Touched By A Story 2," demonstrates what it means to listen and to see.

The legendary menahel of Yeshivas Eitz Chaim in Yerushalayim in the early 1940's was Horav Arye Levine, zl. His love for all Jews, regardless of background and religious affiliation, was well-known. To his students, he was both mentor and father, expressing his heartfelt love to each of them individually. His love and respect were reciprocated by all who came in contact with him.

As menahel, he had to deal with boys from all walks of life and financial levels. He was meticulous about orphan boys and cared for them like a loving father. One day, a young orphan boy whom we will call Eliyahu was walking around the playground as the other boys played. It was a wintry day, cold and wet, and the boys were either warming themselves by playing or by drinking a glass of hot tea which they had purchased from the caretaker for a few pennies. Rav Arye noticed that Eliyahu was neither playing nor drinking tea. He approached the young boy and asked him why he was not warming himself as the other boys were doing. Eliyahu gave the impression of not caring, saying that he did not really like the tea. This attitude might have fooled someone else, but not Rav Arye. He understood that the young boy had no money and was too embarrassed to concede that he could not

afford a cup of tea. Rav Arye instructed the caretaker to give the boy a cup of tea and put it on his bill. When the boy received the cup of tea, he smiled in gratitude to Rav Arye. The caretaker, who apparently was not as astute, turned to Rav Arye and asked, "Did he not say that he does not like tea?"

Rav Arye replied, "Is that what you heard him say? Well, I did not hear that. I heard a completely different response from the boy. You see, he is an orphan who lost both his parents as a child. He lives at the Diskin Orphanage and goes to school with these boys. He has no money whatsoever. The reason he said that he did not like the tea was that he did not have the money to pay for it. You must learn to listen with more than your ears. You must listen with your heart."

This is a moving story with an important lesson. If I may use my writer's license, I would like to extend this idea a bit further. There is a colloquium that is commonly used as a cure-all for a number of uncomfortable situations: "no problem." When we insult someone and ask forgiveness, we receive a response of, "No problem." When we ignore someone or are late for a meeting, forget to do something, say something we should not have said: "No problem." These two words seem to be a panacea for everyone's concerns. After all, it is "no problem." If we were to look with our hearts, however, instead of our eyes, we might sense that there really is a problem, that the person really is hurt or upset. He simply covers up his pain by responding "no problem."

Let us look back at some of the conversations we have had in the presence of those who replied, "No problem." For instance: lauding the success of our son in yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael (it does not matter which one) in front of a father who is going through a difficult "parsha," chapter, in life, with his son; talking about the various shidduchim that are being offered to our daughter, or discussing our imminent wedding plans in front of someone who cannot find a shidduch for his child; discussing our vacation cruise to Alaska in front of someone who cannot find the tuition to pay for his children in school; discussing our children or grandchildren in front of someone who has yet to be blessed with either one. The list goes on and, when we apologize for acting without sensitivity the answer will invariably be, "No problem." We all know, however, that there is a problem. We have hurt another Jew, albeit inadvertently, but the hurt is still there. Let us take a lesson from Rav Arye and listen with our hearts. Then, there will really be "no problem."

*Then Lavan and Besuel answered, "The matter stemmed from Hashem." (24:50)*

After Eliezer related all that had transpired, suggesting that Rivkah was destined to be Yitzchak's mate, her father and brother agreed. Their response, "The matter stemmed from Hashem," is used by Chazal as proof that Hashem ordains a man's proper mate. Although the comment originated from two idolators, the Torah would not have included it had there not been some halachic basis for this statement. Yet, we must endeavor to understand the depth of its meaning. Does not everybody originate from Hashem? What is unique about a shidduch that Chazal must emphasize, *me'Hashem yatzah ha'davar*, "the matter stemmed from Hashem." Moreover, the Midrash goes so far as to assert that man's zivug, match, stems from Hashem, substantiating this statement with a pasuk from Torah, Neviim and Kesuvim.

Harav Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, explains that Chazal are teaching us a profound concept. Even if a person believes that everything stems from Hashem, that there are no chance occurrences in this world; even if a person knows that everything originates from Hashem, one does not always observe the reality of what he believes or even what he knows. Yet, in regard to shidduchim, it is different - one

sees that it stems from Hashem. A person feels that his bashert, predestined mate, was brought to him by Hashem. This means that if it is a Torah-oriented shidduch, then one has tangible proof that it stemmed from Hashem. He does not just believe or know it. He sees it! One must be objective and open his eyes, and he will see clearly that the chain of events that preceded the discovery of his bashert could only have been ordained by Hashem.

I would like to suggest that one should go to the extent to "see" the "Hashem factor" in every match as a way of substantiating his shidduch. Nonetheless, signs from Heaven are not the criteria upon which a shidduch is to be concretized. The fact is, that despite all the Heavenly signs that Rivkah was destined for Yitzchak, it was not until Yitzchak brought her to his tent and - he saw that Rivkah's actions paralleled those of his mother - that he agreed to the shidduch. What about all of the signs? Apparently, says the Brisker Rav, ז"ל, a shidduch is not based upon Heavenly signs. It is the middos tovos, positive character traits, that determine a spouse's suitability for marriage. All too often, we interpret occurrences as signs from Heaven, which, in reality, are not. One must be intellectually honest with himself and look for the signs after everything else has fallen into place.

I recently read a story which did not have the proverbial "fairy tale" ending. There was once a Yeshivah bochur who went to Tzefas for a Shabbos. While he was there, he chanced upon a young lady who was attending one of the more distinguished seminaries in Yerushalayim. He was so captivated with her personality and character traits that he wanted to approach her and ask her name. Realizing this was inappropriate, he resisted. The next day, he went to Amukah, to the gravesite of Yonasan ben Uziel, which is a legendary place for one to pray for a shidduch. Lo and behold, whom does he see there but the same girl that he "met" on Shabbos. She was also praying for a shidduch. What could be a greater sign from Heaven? Before he looked around, she seemed to have left. On the wall outside the area, he found the siddur she had been using. When he opened it, he noted her name, address and phone number. He now felt that he was practically being served the shidduch on a silver platter. For what more could he ask?

Arriving back at his apartment, he listened to his messages and heard from two different people who had called him concerning a shidduch. Yes - it was that same girl - twice! He could not believe his luck. After all, Hashem was speaking to him. He enthusiastically pursued the shidduch and, within a few months, they were engaged. Regrettably, the marriage did not last more than a few months. One must be intellectually honest with himself, or the signs from Heaven might be not much more than a figment of an overactive imagination.

*Sarah's lifetime was...the years of Sarah's life. (23:1)*

There is an element of redundancy in repeating the phrase, "the years of Sarah's life," at the end of the pasuk. Obviously, these are the years of Sarah's life; the pasuk began, "Sarah's lifetime was." In the sefer Shevus Yehudah, it is explained that since Chazal teach us that Sarah Imeinu's neshamah left her as a result of hearing the news of the Akeidas Yitzchak, one might think that Sarah died before her time. The Torah, therefore, reiterates that Sarah died at her predetermined time, the time of death that had been designated for her prior to her birth. In other words, Sarah would have passed away from this world when she did, regardless of Akeidas Yitzchak. Hashem provided her with a death integrated with a mitzvah: the seminal event of Akeidas Yitzchak.

This thesis can help a person who has caused harm - or even u"j death - to another - to cope with the experience and the feelings of guilt that are intrinsic to it. A person must recognize that all that occurs in this world is part of a Divine plan. The individual merely serves as a vehicle in the plan, an agent of the Almighty.

In the sefer Yeshuah u'Nechamah, the author cites an episode that occurred concerning one of the distinguished roshei yeshivah of our generation. When he was a young man, he heated up a large pot of water and carried it across the room. By tragic mistake, he spilled the burning contents on his young daughter. The child was burned over most of her body and, after a short while, she succumbed to her injuries and died.

One cannot imagine the grief and guilt sustained by the father. Overcome with depression, he could not function. He could not continue his studies. He drew into himself, as his deep melancholy prevented him from eating and sleeping. In short, he lost his will to go on. When word reached the Chazon Ish regarding the rosh yeshivah's condition, he immediately sent for him. He told him the following: "Man thinks that he is in control of the world. He is wrong. Chazal teach us in the Talmud Chullin 7b, "A person does not prick his finger in this world unless it has been originally decreed (to occur) in Heaven." Everything that happens is the result of a Heavenly decree. You should, therefore, forget everything that occurred. Remove it from your mind as if it never took place." The rosh yeshivah took heed of the Chazon Ish's words and went back to a life of normalcy.

We cannot go through life second-guessing everything that we do. The "what if I did not do that or go there" syndrome distresses people. We have to live our lives as it is handed to us. We all have our roles in the Heavenly script. Our problem is that we think that our roles go beyond merely being supportive roles.

*Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life.  
(23:1)*

Rashi explains why the term shanah, years, is written after each category: to teach that each one is expounded on its own. When Sarah was one hundred years, she was so pure that she was like twenty with respect to sin. When she was twenty years old, she was like seven years old with regard to beauty. Last, all of her years were equal for goodness. At the beginning of the pasuk, we establish some insight into the amazing personality of Sarah. The end of the pasuk, however, does not seem to be conveying any significant message to us. What praiseworthy attribute do we find in the fact that all her years were equal for goodness?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, explains that from an outsider's point of view, Sarah's life can be divided into two parts: before she conceived Yitzchak and after Yitzchak's birth. By her natural condition, Sarah Imeinu was not able to conceive. As she approached old age, the chances of her ever having a child became even more remote. At the age of ninety years, when she probably should have reached the point of depression and hopelessness, she conceived and gave birth to Yitzchak. Can we imagine the unparalleled joy and excitement that suddenly became a part of her life? Everything had changed. She was now like everyone else. She was a mother!

Two lives: before she was ninety and afterwards. That is what would be expected of a lesser person. Not so, Sarah - kulam shavin l'tovah, "they were all equal for goodness." Her entire life was filled with goodness and joy. There was no difference. There was no "before" and "after." She did not

sense any deprivation before she became a mother, because she understood that the greatest tov, good, for a tzaddik in this world is the knowledge that he is fulfilling the ratzon, will, of Hashem. Sarah understood that if she was an akarah, a barren woman, it was Hashem's will that she be so. If this is what Hashem wanted for her, then so be it. She accepted His decree with joy. When Yitzchak was born, it was a continuation of her joy, because she was serving as a vehicle of Hashem's will. This, indeed, was the matarah, sole purpose, of each of the Imahos, Matriarchs: to serve Hashem in accordance with His will.

Rav Sholom points out that while Sarah accepted the Divine decree with complete equanimity, she nonetheless yearned for - and did everything possible to conceive - a child. Man's obligation in this world is to be mishtadel, endeavor, to act accordingly. At the same time, we are to accept that, at times, the answer is no. It is not that Hashem does not listen to our entreaty. He definitely does listen. The response does not always consist of what we would like to hear.

Sarah Imeinu exemplified greatness and perfection. On the one hand, she entreated Hashem, doing everything in her power to bring a child into this world. On the other hand, she acquiesced to Hashem's decree that she remain barren. It was His will, and she saw only goodness in Hashem's will. The years of her life were all on the same level of goodness, because she was always carrying out the will of Hashem.

*And Sarah Died. (23:2)*

The Midrash on Megillas Esther relates that when Haman conceived his diabolical plan to kill the Jews, he employed a series of lots to determine the most propitious month to execute his decree. He began with Nissan, but discarded it due to its merit in "hosting" the festival of Pesach. He excluded Mar Cheshvan because of the merit of Sarah Imeinu, who died in this month. When he reached Adar, he noted that Moshe Rabbeinu died during this month. It would be the perfect time to issue the decree against the Jews. He erred, because Moshe also happened to be born in the month of Adar. We wonder why Moshe's death represented a bad omen for the Jewish nation, while Sarah's did not. Indeed, her death served as a great merit for Klal Yisrael.

Pri Haaretz explains that Moshe Rabbeinu's demise after Hashem completed his days did not incur any benefit for Klal Yisrael. Indeed, Chazal state that on that day the Jewish people forgot three hundred halachos. Sarah's death, in contrast, epitomized a Jewish mother's conviction and dedication to the point of self-sacrifice. She was prepared to give up her only son for whom she had waited and yearned for, for so long, in order that he go study Torah - or at least that is where she thought he was going. The entire night before he left for the Akeidah, Sarah Imeinu stayed up embracing, caressing and kissing Yitzchak. "Who knows if I will ever see you again?" Yet, she was prepared to send him off, because she understood true mesiras nefesh, dedication, to Torah. Her death reflected a paradigm of commitment and dedication to Torah. Hence it is a zchus, merit, for Klal Yisrael.

Haman understood that to select the month during which Sarah died would be foolhardy. He understood that Sarah's death symbolized the self-sacrifice of a Jewish mother, a devotion that has withstood the test of time. Both Avraham and Sarah imbued in their descendants an inexorable sense of dedication to the ideals of Torah and mitzvos. They taught us how to set our priorities. It was this deep faith and conviction that has given Jewish fathers and mothers throughout the millennia the strength to overcome adversity, trial and tribulation.

It has been over sixty years since the beginning of the Holocaust, and we still read and hear stories of the superhuman, spiritual strength that the Jewish People demonstrated. Horav Yehoshua Moshe Aronson, zl, a rav in Poland, kept a diary in which he recorded the events of the Holocaust that he and members of his ghetto experienced. He writes that never did his faith in Hashem ever waver, nor did his spirit become depressed. He did not question the Almighty's decree. He was even able to inspire many people with his belief in Hashem. In his diary, he describes everyday life in the ghetto and how the Jews survived emotionally and spiritually, despite the persecution and deprivation to which they were subjected. What impressed him most was the sense of camaraderie that was evidenced in the ghetto. Everyone agreed to care for one another, understanding that not only was this the correct way to live, but it was also the only way they would survive as human beings.

Rav Aronson writes that in the beginning, most Jews did not realize what was happening. They believed the ruse that they were being sent away to "work" camp, where they would receive proper food and care. Little did they know the real function of these camps. Rav Aronson was acutely aware of the German's real intentions, and he did everything within his capabilities to publicize this. He sent a letter to his rebbe, the Chasdei David of Sochatshov, employing a Jewish boy who had the appearance of a German peasant, as a messenger.

He wrote the following note: "Aunt Esther from Megillah Street, number seven, apartment four, has arrived." To the German censor, the letter was innocuous. To his rebbe, it was a reference to Megillas Esther, perek zayin, seven, pasuk daled, four, which reads, "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, slain and annihilated." Rav Aronson was alluding to the real purpose of the German ghetto: to annihilate Jews. After he had begun writing the first letters of his note, his pen ran out of ink. He continued writing, using blood collected from the wounded Jews as ink! Not only did the note convey a message, but the ink emphasized its meaning.

The Chasdei David responded with a similar message when he wrote, "David from street number twenty three, apartment four, is with me." This alluded to Sefer Tehillim, perek twenty-three, pasuk four, "Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

Jewish resiliency is a character trait that is intrinsically Jewish. We live with the fear of attack in Eretz Yisrael in much the same way that the Jew has always been the unwanted neighbor wherever we have lived. Our history is marked with pogroms and persecutions. It is part of our heritage. We risk our lives because being Jewish means just that - risking one's life due to his belief in Hashem. This is the legacy of Avraham, Sarah and Yitzchak.

We do what is demanded of us. If we get dirty, we shake off the dirt and continue. Indeed, the tribulations spur our growth as a nation of Hashem.

There is a story told of a farmer whose donkey fell into a well. The animal cried piteously for hours, as the farmer tried to figure out what action to take. Finally, the farmer decided that since the donkey was old and the well was not producing that much water anyway, it was not worth freeing the donkey to remove the obstruction in the well. So he called together his friends and neighbors to help him shovel dirt into the well. At first, as the donkey realized what was happening, it cried out in horror. A few minutes later, when the farmer no longer heard the donkey's cries, he looked into the well to observe the most astonishing sight. With each load of dirt that hit the donkey's back, the donkey shook it off its back and took a step up. As they continued to shovel dirt into the well, the donkey continued to step higher and higher until he was able to climb out of the well.

Life is always throwing us a curve. It is a test from Hashem. We just need to shake it off and

take another step forward and upward towards spiritual perfection. Alternatively, we could stay in the well buried by the dirt - and complain. We would be just one step behind the donkey.

*Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son after she had grown old. (24:36)*

Why was it necessary for Eliezer to add that Yitzchak was born to Sarah after she had aged way beyond her child-bearing years? Did it make a difference when Yitzchak was born? The Brisker Rav, zl, explains that Eliezer was alluding to the fact that in regard to Avraham, Sarah and Yitzchak, everything was carried out and lived l'malah min ha'teva, above the course of nature. Their lives were conducted in such a manner that they transcended the laws of nature. Therefore, if Rivkah's family acquiesced to the shidduch, match, between Rivkah and Yitzchak, it would be good. If not, it would make no difference. She would become his wife in a manner outside of the laws of nature. In other words, it was not in their hands. Rivkah was going to marry Yitzchak whether they agreed to it or not, because Hashem wanted it so - and He had the only say in the matter. Rashi (24:55), implies that when Besuel, Rivkah's father, sought to interfere with the shidduch, Hashem dispatched an angel to kill him! Nothing stands in the way of Hashem's plan.

The Brisker Rav was wont to say that hishtadlus, endeavoring, does not really make a difference in regard to a shidduch. One's own effort only serves to calm his nerves so that he feels that he is taking action. In truth, the shidduch will take effect at its predetermined time.

The Steipler Rav, zl, posits that the fulfillment of bas ploni liploni, the predetermined decree that "the daughter of so and so will wed so and so," is basically in the hands of man. If he seeks those attributes and virtues that will promote and enhance his ability to carry out Torah and mitzvos, then the decree will remain intact. If, however, he is foolish enough to make stipulations for the sole purpose of satisfying his own personal needs, such as money and other such superficial criteria, he may conceivably lose his predetermined match. Indeed, a young man once came to the Steipler and asked for a blessing to find his zivug, match. The Steipler told him, "You were once offered your correct zivug, but, regrettably, you pushed it aside, because the young lady did not meet your criteria." We must remember that in shidduchim, as well as in everything else, we must reckon with the "Hashem factor."

*Sarah's lifetime was... (23:1)*

Life is a gift, a precious gift from Hashem. In the Talmud Gittin 64a, Chazal teach us the signs for determining a young child's maturity level. If one gives a child a stone and he proceeds to throw it away, but he keeps a nut which he has been given, it indicates that his mind is beginning to develop. If one gives him an object which he is prepared to return to its owner after a while, it is a clear sign that he is mature. In other words, the ability to distinguish between what is a gift and what is not; and the awareness that one must return the gift when it is demanded, are clear indications of a growing mind.

Horav Avraham Pam, zl, explains that life is a gift, a gift which we return after a while. One who does not understand this idea behaves as if he will live forever, not caring that he has no purpose in life, acting like an immature child. On the other hand, even a young person is capable of understanding the

transitory nature of life and appreciating the unique gift granted to him by the Almighty. Thus, this young person who values every minute of this precious gift, is, despite his age, a mature person. Furthermore, one who does not value and appreciate the gift of life repudiates his Benefactor.

The Chafetz Chaim, zl, was a person who valued the gift of life. I recently heard that his nephew, Horav Chaim Yitzchak Pupko, zl, who served him for twelve years, once got up his nerve and asked the Chafetz Chaim, "How old is the uncle?" The Chafetz Chaim seemingly ignored the question. A few moments later, the Chafetz Chaim took an envelope of coins and handed it to his nephew. "Here, take this," he said. A moment went by, and the Chafetz Chaim asked, "Are you not going to count what I gave you?" "No," he responded. "It is not proper to count a gift." "You are right," countered the Chafetz Chaim. "Life is a gift from Hashem. It is not proper to count it." What an incredible thought, but that is why he was the Chafetz Chaim.

Life is a gift and must, therefore, be cherished. Every minute is special, every minute an opportunity that should not be wasted. Alas, some people realize this only when they have almost lost it. The following story demonstrates how a person who realized that he had almost died spent the rest of his life with this memory firmly entrenched in his mind. The story is about two very famous brothers, both multi-millionaires, Nathan and Isidore Strauss, considered to be among the greatest philanthropists of their day.

They, together with their wives, took a trip to Europe in 1912. After enjoying all the cultural sights and sounds of the continent, they decided to go to what was then called Palestine. When these two philanthropists arrived in Eretz Yisrael, they were given the royal treatment wherever they went. The holy places, shuls, yeshivos, all received their attention. While Nathan was captivated by the pure holiness of the land, his brother Isidore was getting bored. "How many camels and how many schools and hovels can you see? Once you've seen one, you've seen them all," he complained. "It is time to go." Nathan Strauss and his wife refused to leave. For some reason, he was overcome by the sight of so many people living in abject poverty, yet remaining committed and filled with inner joy. He just could not pull himself away.

The brothers argued. Finally Isidore said, "You are intractable. I am leaving. Stay here if you insist. I am going back to America."

They parted. Nathan stayed in Eretz Yisrael, traveling throughout the length and breadth of the land. Wherever he went, he contributed. He gave money for the creation of a city on the shores of the Mediterranean. Being its major benefactor, the city was named for him. Hence, the city of Netanya, after Nathan, was established.

Isidore did not stay. He rushed and got to his ship just on time. You see, his connection was very important to him. He wanted badly to sail back to the United States on the most famous ship of the day. In fact, it was just taking its maiden voyage. Yes, Isidore and Ida Strauss made the connection in Southampton, England, on the ill-fated Titanic. Five days later, they were among the 1500 who went down with the ship that "would never go down."

Nathan Strauss lived for the rest of his life with the acute awareness that, if not for the grace of the Almighty, he would have been on the Titanic too. He realized that he could have died and that he was saved for a reason: He had a mission to perform. For the rest of his life, he continued to give of his means and his time and energy to promote acts of chesed.

While an encounter with our own mortality is certainly a sobering motivator, we should not wait for the reminder. We are here for a reason. Life is short. Let us live it to its fullest - by making every

minute count through serving Hashem.

*Sarah's lifetime was... (23:1)*

Sarah Imeinu is not the first person to have died. The Torah does, however, devote considerable "space" to her passing - the passing of the first Matriarch, the first Jewish mother. Thus, I feel it appropriate to address the subjects of death, Olam Habah, and Techias HaMeisim, resurrection of the dead.

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, Shlita, writes that one of the most difficult tasks facing people in contemporary times is developing a firm belief in the World to Come. We talk about it, yearn for it, work for it, but do we really believe in it?

Techias Ha'Meisim is a very remote concept for us. The concept of death in itself sends a sense of shock through us, because a living person adamantly refuses to believe that he will eventually leave this world and that he will no longer be with his body, which is how we conceptualize life. It takes a great deal of cogent thought and spiritual development to internalize the idea that one's soul will continue to exist in a totally spiritual sense, completely divested of its earthly "container." He must then accept the notion that his body will completely disintegrate, leaving not a trace of its previous physical encounter with this world.

I think it is simply a matter of confronting the inevitability of death and the fear of the unknown. Once we begin to accept the inevitable and understand what takes place when the soul leaves its earthly abode, we might easier begin to relate to "what follows." Horav Yechiel Michel Tikuchinsky, zl, in his magnum opus, the Gesher HaChaim, writes a brilliant essay that lends meaning to the essence of life and death. I take the liberty to present the ideas of this essay.

Life is really a bridge, a passageway leading from the womb to the grave. It begins at a point which we refer to as birth, and ends at death. The person that traverses the bridge known as life knows of no other form of life. He imagines this sojourn as being the entirety of life; he has no recollection of his past and has no idea of the nature of his long future. He, consequently, cannot grasp the notion of life before birth and life after death. Likewise, if a fetus could think like an adult, it would ostensibly conclude that the only world is the narrow one it knows. Similarly, to think that our world is the only world of life is equally absurd.

Rav Tikuchinsky expands on this idea with a penetrating analogy. Imagine unborn twins who have never seen the light of day. One believes the tradition that there is life after the womb. The other is "enlightened" much like our "progressive" brethren, who believe only what their limited intelligence can grasp. The believer shared with his brother the vision of a new world, a new life filled with people, creatures that would walk upright in a spacious planet filled with oceans, mountains and planets. Stars would fill the sky; clouds would deliver rain to nourish the soil, etc. The non-believer laughed and derided his brother's naiveté. "One would have to be an utter fool to believe this," he said.

"There is only one end to this world in which we live," the non-believer told his naïve twin. "When we leave this world, we will fall into a dark abyss from which we will never return. When we leave here - we are gone forever!"

Suddenly, in the midst of this conversation, the mother's birth pains began heralding the beginning of the end of their stay in their little world. The "ground" beneath the believing twin

disintegrated -- and in a flash -- he was gone. His brother was broken-hearted over the terrible tragedy that had taken place. His brother, his friend, his only companion in his little world, was tragically stricken. He began to cry and bemoan his brother's fate. "Where have you gone?" he cried. "If only you would have listened to me. In your utter foolishness you believed that there would be a birth, and, therefore, you did not hold on to keep from falling into the abyss. You would not listen, and now you are gone!"

Between the sobs and tears, the remaining brother heard his brother's cries, the cries of a newborn infant. "Woe is me! That must be the final cries of my lost brother!" He did not realize that while he was bemoaning the fate of his "lost" brother, sounds of joy, "Mazel tov, mazel tov!" filled the delivery room.

What a powerful analogy. Truly, everyone understands the message that is being conveyed to us. Just as the nine months of gestation are nothing more than a transitional period, a prelude to a spacious and breathtaking world, so, too, the temporary life in this world is only a bridge to the eternal world of Olam Habah. We seem to have no problem understanding the enormous disparity between the narrow and cramped world of the womb and our wonderful world. Yet, we have great difficulty in accepting the vast difference between our world and the World to Come. Are we that much different than the "non-believing" twin who could not fathom a world beyond his cramped quarters in his mother's womb? Anyone who thinks that his physical body is the only place life can exist -- and who believes that when that body returns to dust life ceases to exist -- is as unknowing and obtuse as the non-believing twin.

When we leave the womb, we are born into the temporary world of Olam Hazeah, this world. When we leave this world in the process called death, we are really going through a metaphysical experience which for the soul is called birth. Pregnancy is the prelude for physical life, while life is the preparation for Heavenly, spiritual life.

Hence, birth, life and death are interwoven. Birth leads to life on this world, which is actually a preparation for our ultimate destination: life in the World to Come. Death is no longer something to fear, unless one has not prepared himself for everlasting life.

*Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, "Please tip over your jug so I may drink, and who replies, "Drink, and I will even water your camels," her will You have designated for Your servant, for Yitzchak. (24:14)*

The Bais HaLevi submits that Eliezer tested Rivkah in two areas. First, he sought to ascertain if she was a *gomeles chesed*, would perform kindness, by giving drink to someone whom she did not know. Of special interest to Eliezer was the fact that she did not have a cup for him. He would have to drink directly from the pitcher. Who knows if he had germs that would contaminate her pitcher. Would she offer him to drink or not?

Second, of extreme significance, is what she would do after Eliezer drank from the pitcher. What would she do with her left-over water? Would she spill it out, thereby embarrassing the man to whom she had given water; or would she take the pitcher home and share the water with her family, who might become ill as a result of drinking "contaminated" water?

The optimum for which he could hope was what ultimately occurred. She demonstrated her

kindness by extending the pitcher to Eliezer. She also showed common sense when she took the left-over water and poured it for the camels.

The Bais HaLevi alludes to a very important principle, one that we often seem to ignore. Middos tovos, good character traits, such as pursuing chesed, going out of one's way to help another, are all wonderful and essential for one's spiritual development, but they go hand in hand with seichel, common sense. One who has no seichel will accomplish very little with his chesed. Sooner or later, he will do something foolish or hurt the feelings of the person he is trying to help. He means well; he wants to help; he regrettably does not know how. Common sense is a prerequisite for success. Seichel is more than a good idea; without it, one is lost!

*Hashem before Whom I have walked, will send His angel with you. (24:40)*

Avraham Avinu's expression discusses his relationship with Hashem in terms of one "before Whom I have walked." Rashi, in Parashas Noach (6:9), distinguishes between Avraham and Noach, about whom it is written, "Noach walked with Hashem." Noach walked with Hashem, requiring Hashem's support to uphold him in his righteousness, while Avraham drew strength from within himself and walked in his righteousness by himself. Horav Nosson Wachtfogel, zl, explains the depth of Avraham's "walking by himself" in the following manner.

He cites the pasuk in Yeshayahu 51:1, where the Navi speaks to the righteous Jews, "Listen to me, O pursuers of righteousness, O seekers of Hashem... Look to Avraham your forefather and to Sarah who bore you, for when he was yet alone did I summon him and bless him and made him many." The Navi seems to be implying that Avraham's distinction was in the fact that he was called "echad," one. Furthermore, we note the Talmud Pesachim 118a, which cites Hashem Yisborach saying that He spared Avraham from the kivshan ha'eish, fiery cauldron, because "I am a Yachid, one (individual) in My world, and he (Avraham) is also a yachid, in his world. It is only appropriate that a yachid save a yachid."

Avraham's distinction was in his being a yachid, an individual. Rav Nosson submits that this does not mean that it was Avraham's independence that distinguished him, because independence is not necessarily a virtue. One must be willing to listen, to be inclined to "bend" a little and defer to others who might be more knowledgeable or more experienced. Rather, the advantage of being a yachid lies in one's ability to take the initiative, to take a stand and not always be a follower. Avraham Avinu taught us a significant lesson: one must be prepared to learn, to take his own initiative - when necessary. This does not preclude the importance of following. It is just very important to know whom to follow.

*Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life. (23:1)*

Rashi explains that the apparent redundancy of the "years" of Sarah's life divides her life into three parts, each with its own distinctiveness. At the age of one hundred, her level of sin was equal to that of a twenty-year old - an age when a person does not yet suffer Heavenly retribution. At the age of twenty, she still possessed the wholesome and natural beauty of a seven-year-old. As an aside, Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, adds that the Torah is not glorifying Sarah's unusual physical beauty. Rather, it is

expressing the idea that just as the beauty of a seven year old is pure and innocent and is never used to cause others to sin, Sarah's breathtaking beauty as an adult manifested similar purity and innocence. All who beheld her felt a sense of reverence and awe.

Sarah is not the only righteous woman whose life and death is recorded in the Torah. Yet, she is the only one whose age is divided into three groups. We wonder why the Torah repeats itself when it says, "shnei chayei Sarah," "the years of Sarah's life." This question is especially significant concerning Avraham Avinu, for whom the Torah does break his age into three groups - alluding to his purity from sin throughout his life - as the Torah does not end the narrative with the words, "shnei chayei Avraham," "the years of Avraham's life," as it does with Sarah. Apparently, this "closing" has special meaning in the context of Sarah's life.

In a homily regarding the concept of *yesurim*, suffering, the Piazesner Rebbe, zl, cites chassidic tradition: While a moderate degree of suffering may benefit an individual's spiritual development, excessive tribulation is beyond endurance and, hence, unacceptable - and may even be harmful. His point of reference is the famous Chazal that questions the juxtaposition of Sarah's death upon the Akeidah, Binding of Yitzchak. Chazal say that she died as a consequence of the Binding of Yitzchak and her son's near-death. This trauma was too much for her to handle.

One might argue, suggests the Rebbe, that Sarah's taking the Akeidah so much to heart to the point that it killed her - was a deliberate act she performed on behalf of Klal Yisrael. It was her intention to supplicate the Almighty that her descendants would not be able to endure an excessive amount of suffering. For even if, by the grace of G-d, an individual were to endure the tribulation and live, nevertheless, a part of his strength, mind and spirit would be broken and forever lost. This is consistent with the Talmud in Bava Kama 65a which inquires, "What difference does it make if one is killed outright or beaten halfway to death?"

This concept explains the Torah's repetition of the phrase, "these were the years of Sarah's life." Her life was unique. Every aspect of her life was exemplary. From her pristine physical beauty to her lofty spiritual purity, she stood out as the example of righteous womanhood. When one considers her sudden death and its underlying cause, it appears that Sarah might have sinned by shortening her own life span. Perhaps, had she not taken the Akeidas Yitzchak so much to heart, she might have continued to live. Since her action was taken on behalf of Klal Yisrael, the Torah reiterates, "These are the years of Sarah's life," Thus, the Torah is conveying to us that all the years of Sarah's life were equally good - even those years that she might have lived beyond age 127. Even the willful sacrifice of those years was good.

This is a powerful statement, one that only an individual of the spiritual stature of the Piazesner Rebbe can present. He understands Sarah's death as a quasi-suicidal protest against excessive suffering. Accordingly, he feels that the Torah ratifies this protest specifically because it was taken on behalf of Klal Yisrael. This explains why Sarah Imeinu succumbed to the shock of almost losing her only child, while Avraham Avinu, who was on a lower level of *nevuah*, prophecy, withstood the test. The statement is that of an individual who, as Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto, was privy to the suffering and grief that goes beyond human endurance. In his merit and in the merit of all of those who have suffered throughout the millennia, may Hashem in His infinite compassion take pity on us and all of Klal Yisrael, speedily bringing about our spiritual and physical salvation.

*And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who controlled all that was his. "Place now your hand under my thigh." (24:2)*

Chazal tell us that Eliezer was not an average servant. He was "z'kan baiso," defined by Chazal as having similar ziv ikunin, facial features, to Avraham. He was also "ha'moshel b'chol asher lo," "ruled over everything" - even his yetzer hora, evil-inclination, just like Avraham. Others contend that he ruled over the Torah of his rebbe, Avraham. He was called Damesek Elizer, because he was doleh u'mashkeh, drew up the waters of Torah and gave others to drink. The Midrash goes so far as to state that Eliezer was one of nine people who did not die, who, rather, ascended to Heaven - alive.

In short, Eliezer was a special person. He was a scholar, pious and virtuous. Yet, Avraham felt the need to make him take an oath that he would assure that Yitzchak did not marry a pagan. Could he not just have simply asked him? Did he have to make him swear? Moreover, why does the Torah emphasize, specifically in reference to seeking a wife for Yitzchak, that Eliezer was a man of noble, saintly stature?

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, explains that essentially Eliezer was truly an individual of exemplary spiritual repute. Avraham Avinu trusted him with everything - well, almost everything. His son was a different story. He was to be the link to the next generation. Avraham was not simply looking for a shidduch, match, for his son. He was building the future of Klal Yisrael! Eliezer was to be believed in regard to all physical/mundane areas. When it pertained to the spiritual dimension of the future of the Jewish People, however, there was no room for error or compromise. It had to be a perfect match. Eliezer had to submit to an oath that he would execute his master's request to the fullest extent.

Rav Sholom cites a practical analogy he heard from the Brisker Rav, zl: A person comes to a town in search of a place to stay. He stops at an inn whose owner also has a little restaurant. Hungry for a good meal, the traveler first must ascertain the kashrus of the restaurant. He goes out to the street to find a passerby and inquire if he knows his host. Is he trustworthy? As soon as he hears a positive response, he immediately returns to the inn and has a large meal. After all, the Rabbinic dictum of "eid echad neeman b'isurim," "one witness is sufficient regarding prohibitions," i.e.: kashrus, apparently applies in this circumstance.

If we think about the situation, we note an apparent inconsistency in this individual's "blanket trust." Imagine if his host were to offer him a business deal whereby he must invest a sizeable sum of money, he would certainly not rely on the "man on the street" to check out his host's integrity. He would probably spend days checking him out before investing his hard-earned money with him. Yet, when it involves his neshamah, soul, he has no compunction about trusting his kashrus, because the man on the street verified his reliability.

Interestingly, a similar incident occurred with Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, when he was on a trip. He stopped in a community and was immediately asked by someone if he was proficient in the laws and practice of shechitah, kosher slaughtering. Rav Yisrael did not immediately respond. A few moments later, he asked the person if he could borrow five rubles from him. "How do you expect me to lend money to someone whom I do not know?" was the immediate response. Rav Yisrael looked at the person and said, "Listen to what you are saying. You are willing to let me shecht your animals, but when it comes to lending me money, you do not know me! Is this not a double standard? You seem to be more concerned about your wallet than your neshamah!" Avraham Avinu was different. When it came to matters of the household, he relied totally on Eliezer. He was his trusted servant and confidante, but only in the realm of gashmius, the physical/material aspects, the mundane matters of his life. When it concerned ruchniyos, spiritual matters; when the future of Klal Yisrael was at stake, Avraham did not simply "rely"; he demanded an oath from Eliezer to insure that his request would be

executed to the letter. Selecting a wife for Yitzchak would determine the course of generations. The right wife would enhance Yitzchak's spirituality. The wrong one would destroy him, undermining the foundation for the future of his descendants.

Avraham Avinu had his priorities - just as we all do. His spiritual dimension dominated everything else. Regrettably, many of us are far from this perspective. True, the world of spirituality has an eminent position in our lives, but it is secondary to our "other" interests. Rav Sholom cites a story that has become a classic: the story of Meirka. This narrative should underscore how we view things and their prioritization in accordance with what is important to us. One day Rav Sholom was sitting in his home in Yerushalayim. Suddenly, he heard a scream from the alleyway outside his window. In a moment, his rebbetzin ran into the house yelling that little Meir, the grandson of the gabbai, sexton of the shul, had fallen and was bleeding profusely from a gash over his eye. They both ran outside, Rav Sholom scooping up the child while his wife held a wet towel over the cut to stop the bleeding. Rav Sholom began running with the child in his arms through the alleyway to the main street, rushing as fast as his legs could carry him, on the way to get the child to a doctor. As they rushed up the hill, a pious elderly woman who was walking toward them called out in Yiddish, "Rav Sholom, Rav Sholom, ess iz nisht doh vos tzu daigin," "There is nothing to worry about. You need not rush." "Der Eibeshter vet helfen," "The One Above will take care of him." As soon as Rav Sholom and his wife passed directly in front of the elderly woman, however, she looked down and realized that the bleeding child was none other than her own grandson. She began to shriek uncontrollably, "Gevalt! Meirka! Gevalt!" And she fainted!

In his lectures over the years, Rav Sholom transformed that scream of "Meirka" into a catchword lesson. He would often say, "If it is not my Meirka, it is easy to say do not worry. Nothing is wrong. Hashem will help. When it is my Meirka, however, when the problem affects me personally, it is an altogether different story."

People act similarly when it comes to their personal issues. For some, their spiritual dimension takes preeminence over everything. For others, regrettably, it does not.

*And thus was Yitzchak consoled after his mother. (24:67)*

Yitzchak Avinu could not be consoled over the loss of his mother, Sarah Imeinu. This is a remarkable tribute to the relationship between a son and his mother. He did not feel the void, however, because he missed her as a mother. If he had, Rivkah, the wife, would not have been able to replace Sarah, the mother. Rather, he intensely missed the unique virtues and attributes, the exemplary character traits and moral refinement for which Sarah, the Matriarch of the Jewish People, was known. Rivkah Imeinu manifested a moral/spiritual identity that replicated the virtues Yitzchak experienced in his mother. The void was filled and now Yitzchak could be consoled.

When an individual sustains the loss of a loved one, the duration and intensity of the grief is usually relative to the deceased: his age, and his relationship to those whom he has left behind. At times a grievance, and even anger, is coupled with the grief. For the most part, these emotions are undirected and unfocused. If the tragedy is especially great, some will lose themselves and unknowingly direct their criticism at the Almighty. Perhaps the following narrative might help ameliorate that criticism.

Due to his incredible brilliance and high moral/spiritual plateau, the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, had little tolerance for the mundane. His sterling character set the standard for emes, truth/integrity. Thus,

he could not brook anything or anyone who deviated from the absolute truth. At first, for a number of years, he remained secluded, spending his days plumbing the depths of Torah and delving deeper into the profundities and secrets of the mystical and spiritual aspects of Torah. Yet, he found time to reach out, to guide, to respond, and to comfort those that came to benefit from his unique blend of practical advice and spiritual guidance.

Once, Rav Menachem Mendel, the rav of Zedunska/Walle, came to him, brokenhearted and forlorn over the tragic death of his young daughter. He could not reconcile himself with the terrible loss and he had a difficult time accepting the bitter Heavenly decree. The Kotzker gave him shalom, welcoming him to his home, and immediately proceeded to share with him a difficulty he had with a passage in the Talmud. Rav Menachem Mendel was quick to respond and elucidate the words of Chazal. The Kotzker then asked him a compelling question on Rashi's exegesis. Once again, Rav Menachem Mendel presented a brilliant response to his query. The Kotzker then questioned Tosfos, which Rav Menachem Mendel continued to resolve.

When Rav Menachem Mendel concluded his explication of the entire passage of Talmud, Rashi and Tosfos, the Kotzker Rebbe looked at him with penetrating eyes and said, "If the Talmud is correct, and Rashi's explanation is validated, and Tosfos' comment is satisfactory, then surely Hashem is justified."

Rav Menachem Mendel understood the profound message and was comforted. We are able to justify everything in life because we want to. It serves our needs. Why should we not do the same for Hashem? We should also give Him the benefit of the doubt, trusting that He knows and does what is ultimately for the good.

*Sarah died in Kiryas Arba. (23:2)*

Rashi attributes the name of this city to the four giants that lived there. Horav Meir Schwartzman, zl, in his sefer, "Meir Einei Yesharim," offers an alternative explanation for this name. He states that Sarah Imeinu possessed four unique traits. First, she was a good wife, who was devoted to her husband and supportive of his spiritual endeavors, standing by his side throughout their lives together. Second, she was an exemplary mother who supervised her son, Yitzchak, dedicating herself to his spiritual advancement. She was devastated to observe Hagar's son, Yishmael, expose Yitzchak to the immorality that was endemic to his life. Sarah took immediate action by demanding that Avraham send Hagar and her son away from their home. We should note that this is the same person who opened her home to all strangers, in order to care for their physical and spiritual needs. Third, Sarah was involved with her community, pursuing acts of loving kindness and charity to help those in need. We infer this from the fact that everyone left his/her place of work to attend her funeral. Fourth, she was the spiritual Matriarch, setting the standard for Jewish motherhood. She was the paradigm of the "eim b'Yisrael," mother in Yisrael. She reached out to the pagan women to bring them closer to the Shechinah. She embodied all four models: an exemplary wife, a devoted mother, a woman of valor in her community; and the mother of Klal Yisrael. When Sarah passed away, these four attributes died with her. Her passing left a void. The giants implied in the name, "Kiryas Arba," represent her characteristics.

Sarah died in Kiryas Arba...and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. (23:2)  
When we think about the Avos, Patriarchs, we relate to them as people outside of the normal human

dimension. This is not correct. We do not ascribe to the notion that our leaders were angels or some kind of quasi-spiritual entities. They were human beings - special human beings who worked to refine their unique spiritual attributes to become holy and virtuous, to achieve purity of mind and soul. They were, however, human beings with sensitivities and emotions over which they maintained control. This is the reason that, one who reads the story of Sarah Imeinu's death and Avraham Avinu's search for a proper site for her burial, should be overcome with emotion for our holy Patriarch.

Avraham and Sarah were an elderly couple who miraculously are blessed with a son. We cannot begin to imagine the intense love that existed between these parents and their only child. It was a terrible tragedy that this mother died before she accompanied her only child to the chupah. Do we think about Avraham as an old, feeble father, left bereft of his eishas chayil, woman of valor -- his eishas neurim, wife of his youth? Do we think about their "feelings," or do we just read the parsha and assert, "Avraham Avinu was different."

Can we imagine the old Patriarch, alone without his wife and son, who was forced to deal with pagans in his quest to obtain a burial plot for his wife? Here was a man who was world-renowned, but did not own a piece of land.

Do we understand Avraham Avinu's nisayon, test? Hashem wanted to see if Avraham could manage. Did he have the fortitude to follow it through? He did - but he suffered just like anybody else - because he was human. He felt the pain; he was broken-hearted with sorrow. Yet, he went on. He dealt with the people and provided a meaningful funeral for his beloved wife. He was human. He taught us how to grieve. He endured. He showed us the way. Otherwise, why would the Torah go to such great lengths to describe his acquisition of Sarah's burial plot? He gives us hope and the courage to go on. The Torah's narratives are lessons in how a Jew should act.

Sarah died in Kiryas Arba...and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. (23:2) B'chi and mispeid, weeping and eulogy, are two distinct components of the grieving process. One sheds tears; one weeps at the loss of a close one. These tears are instinctive. They are responses to an emotional, welled-up heart, an expression of hurt and pain. Eulogy is an intellectual appreciation, a profound understanding of the deceased and the vacuum generated by his demise. Eulogy is thought-out; weeping is spontaneous. It would, therefore, make sense for b'chi to precede mispeid. The Torah writes the converse regarding Avraham; He first came to eulogize Sarah, and then to bewail her. Indeed, in halachah we find that the first three days of Shiva are "designated" for weeping - to let oneself go, to open up and pour out one's heart in grief and tears. The next four days are reserved for hesped, eulogy, reflecting upon the character and accomplishments of the deceased, the meaning of his loss and its profound effect upon the surviving family. Why did Avraham Avinu reverse the natural order? Furthermore, how did he control his emotions, so that his eulogy could precede his emotional expression of grief?

In his hesped on the Maharil Diskin, zl, Horav Yaakov Orenstein, zl, distinguishes between b'chi and mispeid in the following manner: When one weeps, he weeps for himself - his pain and sorrow at the loss of his relative. Mispeid is for the deceased. One eulogizes the accomplishments of the departed, bemoaning how much more he could have accomplished. We eulogize the various attributes of the deceased and reflect upon the significant goals that he will no longer be able to achieve. Indeed, when we think about it, eulogy should precede weeping because the loss of the deceased himself is far greater than one's personal loss, as expressed by a display of emotion. Furthermore, the deceased will no longer be able to serve Hashem through Torah study and mitzvah observance. Why then are the first three days of Shiva designated for weeping? It is because we are not supermen. We are not angels.

When a tragedy occurs - one cries. His personal pain overwhelms him. His grief springs forth and clouds his ability to think intellectually. Only after he has let his emotions go is he ready to begin his hesped. Avraham Avinu is the paradigm of the middah of chesed, the attribute of loving-kindness. He was able to transcend his personal loss, his own pain, in order to focus instead upon Sarah's hesped. He told about her virtue, her greatness, her holiness. He described death as a loss to the world, and to Torah and mitzvos. Afterwards, he wept for himself, for his own loss -- as a husband -- of his partner in his life's endeavor.

In an alternative explanation, Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita, notes that when a great person takes leave of this world, his loss engenders two types of grief. First, is the communal loss, the pain suffered by the tzibur, the people who have looked to this person for guidance and inspiration. This form of grief is not necessarily emotional in nature. People speak of his greatness, how he touched their lives, what they have learned from his life, and the effect of his passing upon the community. Another loss takes place that we very often ignore: the loss to his family. This leader had been a husband, a father, a brother, a son who will be sorely missed. While they will relate stories of his virtue, they are emotionally broken as well. When they weep, they cry for the loss of their loved one.

Sarah Imeinu was a great woman. As the first Matriarch, she set the standard through her actions and virtues for what a wife and mother should be. She was a klal person, a woman devoted to the community. Avraham recognized this. Avraham, however, was sensitive to another side of Sarah: She was his wife; she was his eishes neurim, wife of his youth, with whom he founded Klal Yisrael through their son, Yitzchak. Avraham wept for his wife, the mother of his son. They finally had a son from whom they had such nachas. They had so much to which to look forward - together. It was not meant to be. Sarah would not walk Yitzchak to the chupah. Do we ever think about the personal feelings that Avraham Avinu must have experienced? He transcended his personal b'chi, for the sake of the world. They should hear about Sarah's virtue and holiness. Let them be inspired by her life. Avraham placed the public eulogy before his personal mourning. This reflected the salient character which rendered Avraham a leader.

*Avraham rose up from the presence of his dead, and spoke to the Bnei Cheis. (23:4)*

Avraham Avinu mourned the passing of his wife. He was overwhelmed with grief at the loss of his life's partner. Amid weeping and eulogy, Avraham stopped to meet with the people of Cheis to discuss the sale of a burial plot for his Sarah. The Torah emphasizes that he "rose up." It is not obvious that he left the presence of the dead to arrange Sarah's burial. Horav Yerucham Levovitz, zl, says that the Torah is teaching us a profound lesson with the expression, "Avraham rose up." Avraham Avinu left his mourning state to go to meet the people of the community. He "rose up." He took himself completely out of his state of grief, wiping his tears and preparing to meet the people. He was going "outside." Out of respect for the people he "put on a new face" and relegated his grief to privacy. He exerted incredible self-control over his emotions due to kavod habrios, respect for human beings.

The Torah is not stressing Avraham's physical departure from his home. It is calling attention to an emotional parting, an uplifting of one's character and spirit. Avraham Avinu put his grief aside, delaying his own pain and sorrow. Why? What was so overwhelmingly important that it took precedence over Avraham Avinu's aveilus, mourning? It was kavod habrios, respect for people. It was not proper kavod to speak to others with tears running down his face. He had to change clothes, transform his appearance, psyche himself up to meet a group of pagan businessmen. This was Avraham

Avinu - and that is why he was a Patriarch. The fortitude to transcend personal grief out of respect and deference to others is a character trait imbued in us by Avraham Avinu.

Why did Avraham do this? Is kavod habrios so significant that one must drop everything - even personal grief - out of respect to others? Avraham did. Thus, it is expected of us. Why? Avraham Avinu loved Hashem and, by extension, His creations - regardless of their background and religious persuasion. This love carried on 365 days a year throughout his periods of joy and grief. He would not impose his personal "mood" upon others. People were created b'tzelem Elokim, in the image of G-d. Unless they defaced that image, they deserved his respect.

How different is Avraham's attitude and behavior from ours? The average person brings his "mood" wherever he goes. If one has a conflict or problem at home, he brings it to the office, classroom or bais medrash. After all, if things are not well in my personal life, why should not everyone around me also suffer with me? Why should I be the only one who is going through a stressful period? Avraham Avinu taught us that this is not the way a Jew is to act. We respect others; we care about others; we are sensitive to their feelings. Avraham Avinu was different physically and spiritually from the pagan populace that surrounded him. He was referred to as "Nesi Elokim," a Prince of G-d. His respect for human beings earned him the respect that he received. It might serve us well to emulate his relationship with Hashem and his fellow man.

*And Yitzchak brought her (Rivkah) into the tent of Sarah his mother. (24:67)*

Rashi says that Rivkah manifests a similarity to Sarah, Yitzchak's mother. When Sarah was alive, a lamp burned from erev Shabbos to erev Shabbos; a blessing was to be found in the dough, and a cloud hung over her tent. When she died, these three phenomena "departed" with her.

When Rivkah entered the tent as Yitzchak's wife, they all returned. Sarah Imeinu set the standard for the Jewish home. What were these qualities that set the paradigm for the Jewish home?

There is another home, the Mishkan, the place where the Shechinah reposes in the midst of Klal Yisrael. Chazal cite three supernatural phenomena that were present in the Mishkan: First, the Ner Maaravi, western-most lamp of the Menorah, burned continuously, outlasting all the other six lights; second, the Lechem Ha'Panim, twelve loaves of shewbread which were placed weekly upon the Shulchan, Table, remained fresh and warm all week. A special brachah, blessing, rested on the bread, in that even a small piece of it gave a Kohen incredible satisfaction; third, the Divine Cloud of Glory rested over the Mishkan.

The Shem Mishmuel notes the parallel between the miracles that took place in Sarah's tent and those occurring in the Mishkan. The light that burned from Shabbos reflects the type of Shabbos, its quality and holiness, experienced by the Avos. Indeed, its influence carried on into the following week. Each Shabbos they added to the holiness they had absorbed the previous week. In this manner, they increased their spiritual ascendancy every week. This correlates with the Ner Ha'maaravi which continued to burn even after its "companion" lights had expired. Each day the lights were lit from the Ner Ha'maaravi, transferring the previous day's light to the day ahead. This symbolizes ascending a spiritual ladder - every day - beginning each day where one has left off the previous day, integrating yesterday's holiness with today's.

The Lechem Ha'Panim, which remained warm and fresh from week to week, and which satisfied the eater even in small quantities, signifies Hashem's ability to provide food for the entire world. The warm, fresh bread was alive with the Divine blessing, indicating that Hashem will spread His beneficence throughout the world. This brachah, blessing, was present in the Mishkan where Klal Yisrael expressed their service to the Almighty with vigor and life, holding dear the moments spent in the Mishkan infused with Divine blessing. In essence, this was typical of Sarah's life - alive - never complacent or stale in her avodas Hashem, service to the Almighty. This was indicated in her dough, as well as in the Mishkan.

Last, the Cloud of Glory that descended upon the Mishkan manifests Hashem's presence to Klal Yisrael in an almost perceptible sense. This was probably the same Divine Presence that descended upon Sarah's tent. Sarah Imeinu's home was a microcosm of the Mishkan. Her home was the hallmark of what a Jewish home should be - styled after the Mishkan, the place where the Shechinah resides. Indeed, every Jewish home should be prepared for the Shechinah's Presence.

*And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. (23:3)*

Rashi cites Chazal, who teach us that the narratives of Sarah's death and the Akeidah follow one another in order to demonstrate that Sarah died as a direct result of the Akeidah. The Satan told Sarah that Avraham had slaughtered Yitzchak. When she heard this shocking news, she cried out in grief and died. The commentators offer various explanations for this Chazal. Interestingly, Rashi mentions this juxtaposition - in regard to the pasuk detailing Avraham's reaction to Sarah's death, his eulogy and mourning. He does not mention this Chazal at the onset of the parsha, which begins with Sarah's death. Why does Rashi wait?

Horav Zeev Weinberger, Shlita, explains this approach by adding a new understanding of Avraham's test at the Akeidah. He contends that Sarah's death was actually part of the nisayon, trial, of Akeidas Yitzchak. When Avraham returned from the Akeidah to discover the tragic effect of his actions on Sarah's life, he could momentarily have regretted his actions. Perhaps he was to blame for her premature death. Retroactively, he perceives that he should not have been so quick to consent to offer Yitzchak as a sacrifice. The Torah attests that Avraham did not flinch for a second. He returned from the Akeidah and proceeded to eulogize Sarah immediately. He suggested no regret, no refrain, just positive confirmation of his actions.

A remarkable and timely lesson can be derived herein. One should not be distressed or regret his actions, even if after he has fulfilled a mitzvah or followed the halachah, he is confronted with a reality which does not validate his behavior.

*And Avraham was old, well on in years. (24:1)*

The Midrash distinguishes between ziknah, old age, and ba ba'yamim, getting on in years. They maintain that some people attain ziknah, but do not have their "days." Others have their yamim, days, but do not have their old age. Avraham Avinu had both; he was well-on in years, and he also achieved ziknah. What is the meaning of this Midrash? How does it apply to Avraham? Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, explains that ziknah is a reference to the past, to what one learned as a youth, to the Torah and yiraas

Shomayim, fear of Heaven, which he has attained. Yamim is an analogy for the present, being attuned to the "day", to the occurrences of the times, to society's constant changes in culture, perspective and values.

There are people who are "with it", attuned to the present. They acknowledge the changes in lifestyle which modernity engenders, and they react to them. These individuals however, have divorced themselves from the past. They perceive the Torah and the yirah they had achieved in the past to be ancient relics. These people have yamim, but no ziknah. There are yet others who have successfully maintained their spiritual stature throughout the changing scenery of the years gone by. They are erudite and deeply religious, actually presenting themselves in an image of a different era. They, too, present a problem - they live in the past. They have ziknah, but no yamim. They have not yet learned how to harmonize the present with their glorious past. They cannot relate to today's youth or establish any form of dialogue with them, because they live in a different world.

Avraham Avinu was zakein u'ba bayamim; he maintained the traditions and observance of the past and was able to integrate them into the present. He had the capacity for presenting the Torah to a society alien to its teachings and precepts. He understood their psyche, teaching in accordance with the people's level of understanding. He taught a world, because he was not divorced from it. While he maintained his distance from their way of life, he did not disassociate himself from understanding their perspective.

*And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who controlled all that was his...that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaani. (24:1,3)*

The Torah places great emphasis upon Eliezer's position in Avraham's household. Certainly it was a high status position, considering Avraham's great wealth. Horav M.D. Soloveitchik, Shlita, comments that Avraham Avinu placed incredible trust in Eliezer, appointing him to direct and control all of his material assets. When it involved spiritual pursuits, however, he exacted an oath from him. He did not simply rely upon his proven integrity and devotion. He sought a promise that would bind him to his word. Marriage was a spiritual endeavor for Yitzchak. He and the woman he would marry were to become the progenitors of Klal Yisrael. Avraham could not afford to chance that Eliezer might not carry out his mission.

Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl, related that he once read in a sefer a parable that addresses the Torah's emphasis on Eliezer's position. A man had entered a city starving, after travelling for a number of days without adequate food. He saw a restaurant that displayed a "Kosher" sign. He immediately entered to order a meal. It goes without saying that an individual who is more scrupulous regarding kashrus will not enter an establishment until he knows who the owner is. A greater yarei Shomayim, G-d fearing person, will surely investigate the kashrus standards of that restaurant thoroughly. There are those who will not be satisfied until they have spoken to the local rabbi and received confirmation that the restaurant is unequivocally kosher.

On the other hand, if someone were to come to this community with the intention of making a

business deal, the story would be quite different. They would investigate every aspect of the deal, demand guarantees and be completely confident that nothing would go wrong with their money. This is, regrettably, human nature; when it comes to money, people are uncompromising and demanding. When it comes to spiritual matters, they leave frumkeit for the next person.

Avraham Avinu's standard is the converse. In regard to his material possessions, he was confident that Eliezer would suffice. When it came to selecting a wife for Yitzchak, he recognized that it was a spiritual endeavor. This woman would be responsible for continuing the matriarchal tradition which began with Sarah Imeinu. A simple assurance was not sufficient. He exacted an oath, signifying the overwhelming importance of his endeavor.

*And Avraham was old, well on in years...and Avraham said to his servant...that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaani. (24:1,3)*

Nowhere in the Torah is so much space devoted to one incident, as it is to Avraham's initial command to Eliezer, his servant, followed by the eventual securing of a wife for Yitzchak. Indeed, the Ten Commandments occupy only fourteen pesukim, while the story of Yitzchak and Rivkah take up sixty seven pesukim! We infer from here the overwhelming significance of Jewish continuity. Avraham's mission in life, together with that of Sarah Imeinu, would die with them if there were to be no one faithful to carry on their legacy. Without a secure family, devoted and committed to the faith that he preached, what would Avraham really have accomplished?

Let us look at the beginning of the parsha, which recounts Sarah's death and Avraham's search to find a suitable burial place for his eishas chayil. The fact that Avraham seemed to have been alone is striking. What happened to all of his students, the converts that he had brought into the fold? Avraham and Sarah travelled everywhere to bring people closer to the monotheistic belief. Where were they?

Where was Lot, his "devoted" nephew, who actually repented before he died? How was it that Avraham is left with Sarah - alone?

The answer is that while the others either converted or repented, it was not a complete, internal, all-encompassing experience. When Avraham needed them, they were not present. We infer this from the fact that there is no memory left of them. They did not transmit their conviction to their children, either because it was too late or because they did not care enough. When one believes with great conviction, it is passed on to his children. When one's belief is external - or at best fleeting - it dies with him.

Avraham Avinu fully understood the importance of choosing the suitable mate for Yitzchak. The future of Klal Yisrael hinged upon this union. This is underscored by the many pesukim devoted to this story. Without a future family of committed Jews, what good would the Torah be? Sarah had died and left a single child - Yitzchak. He represented the hope and future of their life's work. Without him, their work would be wasted, Klal Yisrael would never be. Yitzchak could not transmit his parents' legacy, however, unless he was also blessed with a special wife with whom he would carry on the Abrahamic mission. A present with no future quickly dissipates into the past.

*Do not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaani in whose land I dwell. (24:37)*

Avraham Avinu rejected the Canaani as potential mechutanim, people from whom he was willing to take a wife for Yitzchak, because of their moral degeneracy. While his "family" were idol-worshippers, their iniquity was basically in the intellectual realm. Philosophic sin can be cured without leaving a blemish upon the individual's character. A lack of morality and ethics affects the entire psyche of the person. Such a person was disqualified from being a mate for Yitzchak. We see that the Torah presents a picture of Lavan and Besuel, Rivkah's brother and father, Avraham's "family" who were acceptable for a shidduch for Yitzchak, as decent people who "happened" to be idol-worshippers. Is this true? Lavan was a scoundrel, a thief and a crook, who lusted for money. Besuel was no different. These people were far removed from being the paradigms of integrity. Why would Avraham overlook their lack of ethical behavior just because they were not moral degenerates? Are there different levels of morality?

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, lends insight towards understanding the anomaly of Avraham's family, i.e. Lavan, etc. Living among idol worshippers while not believing in their idols, is difficult. Lavan was no fool; he knew that the idols were worthless pieces of stone. Yet, one cannot live in a community that worships a stone as god and not acquiesce to their practice - at least publicly. This is what they did. Lavan and his family lived a life of sham, publicly serving idols, while secretly realizing their folly. Even Terach, Avraham's father, was in the idol business; surely he knew that these idols which he fashioned had no supernatural powers. Business is business, however. In short, these people lived a lie. When someone lies long enough, it becomes part of his nature. He becomes accustomed to lying. He sees nothing wrong with it. He enjoys it. Indeed, he no longer knows how to tell the truth. They became crooked out of necessity - but were crooks, nonetheless. Rivkah, on the other hand, was a little girl who had no opportunity to be inculcated into the family way of life. She was still pure, untainted by their lack of integrity. Thus, she was acceptable to become Yitzchak's wife.

*And Yitzchak went out to supplicate in the field towards evening. (24:63)*

Chazal infer from this pasuk that Yitzchak initiated Tefillas Minchah. The afternoon prayer, Tefillas Minchah, is different from the morning prayer, Tefillas Shacharis, and the evening prayer, Tefillas Arvis. In the morning, a person arises rested after a night's sleep. He has not yet become involved in the hustle and bustle of his daily endeavor. His thoughts are still peaceful, his emotions are relaxed. He can supplicate Hashem with a relaxed, peaceful frame of mind. He can have the proper kavanah, concentration and intention. Likewise, at the end of the day, regardless of the day's trials and frustrations, business is now complete. He can relax, because nothing is going to change. Tomorrow is another day. Tonight he can pray to Hashem relaxed and at peace. Thus, Shacharis and Arvis are both tefillos that are prayed at a time when one's frame of mind is attuned to prayer.

Tefillas Minchah is different. Because Minchah is recited in the middle of the afternoon, at a time when one must invariably take time out from his hectic schedule, it is difficult to maintain the proper concentration. One must block his thoughts regarding a favorable business deal, rid one's mind of his daily business affairs, in order to daven with total kavanah. Horav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, zl, explains that this is the reason for the uniqueness of Tefillas Minchah. It is, indeed, a difficult prayer to daven. Minchah is a prayer in which one sanctifies the material, one transcends the "field," the symbol

of material pursuit, in order to consecrate his thoughts to serve Hashem. Yitzchak instituted Minchah while he was yet in the "field." He sanctified the field with Tefillas Minchah. Thus, Minchah is recited during the time of day which offers us the opportunity to reach further with our prayers, if we are able to transcend the physical/ material world in which we are currently involved.

*And Sarah died in Kiryas Arba....And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her. (23:2)*

Rashi explains that the narrative regarding Sarah's death is juxtaposed upon the previous parsha, which relates the story of Akeidas Yitzchak, because her death is intrinsically related to the Akeidah. When she heard the news that her only child was about to be slaughtered, "parchah nishmassah," her soul "flew out" and she died. We may question why Rashi discusses Sarah's death and its connection with the Akeidah while commenting on the pasuk which mentions Avraham's eulogy. He should have raised this issue in the beginning of the parsha, when the Torah says, "And Sarah died." Second, it is difficult to grasp that Sarah, who was even greater than Avraham in prophecy, died as a result of an act that was the paragon of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice. The news should have moved her to the ultimate heights of nachas.

The usual pshat, explanation, given by most commentators, is that Sarah was an "alteh mommeh," old mother, who simply could not handle the shock of losing her only child. The mere thought of Yitzchak being taken to the Akeidah was enough to kill her. In another few minutes, however, she would have found out that he had been spared. Are we to accept that such a noble soul was so overcome with anxiety that she could not wait a few minutes to ascertain whether her son had died or not? It is difficult to accept that Sarah Imeinu died of fright. Horav Shlomo Carlebach, Shlita, offers a novel insight into Sarah's sudden death.

Sarah's primary focus in life was that her offspring would maintain the same lofty relationship with the Almighty that she and Avraham had nurtured. What criteria would clearly demonstrate their resolve? What would constitute undisputed proof that her progeny would sustain their commitment to Hashem? The test would be - and has always been - the ability to die Al Kiddush Hashem. Klal Yisrael's readiness to sanctify Hashem's Name, even if it means giving up their lives, has been the litmus test of our faith and loyalty to the Almighty. Anyone who is willing to relinquish life in this temporal world for eternal bliss in the World-to-Come is truly worthy of his share in Olam Habah.

As soon as Sarah heard the exciting news that her only child had been privileged to be a sacrifice to Hashem, she was overcome with rapture and joy. The mere fact that her son was willing and ready to offer his life Al Kiddush Hashem caused her neshamah to be uplifted. The words "parchah nishmassah," which is traditionally translated as, "her soul flew off," now has an entirely different meaning. "Parchah" can also mean "it bloomed," as a flower blooms. When Sarah was assured that her son had attained the sublime level of kedushah which she had aspired for him, her soul "bloomed"; it flowered and radiated as it reached the height of nachas. When Sarah saw that everything she hoped for had been achieved, she died. Her neshamah departed this world--not in fear, but with joy and satisfaction. Sarah did not die like an "alteh mommeh," but like the Matriarch of Klal Yisrael, leaving this world secure in the knowledge that she had accomplished what she had set out to do.

*I have given you the field, and as for the cave that is in it, I have given to you....bury your dead. Land worth four hundred silver shekels; between you and I--what is it? Bury your dead. (23:11,15)*

What made Efron change his mind so radically? At first, he appeared to be a wonderful, refined gentleman who opened his land to Avraham. He granted him a place in which to bury Sarah without asking any compensation. Suddenly Efron showed a different side to his personality, when he "intimated" that he would be inclined to "give" the property to Avraham for a mere four hundred silver shekels, which constituted an outrageous amount of money. Something must have transpired that catalyzed this sudden change. What was it?

Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl, cites the Alter M'Kelm who responds to the question by applying a famous story that occurred concerning the Rambam. The Rambam had a dispute with a group of secular philosophers who contended that cats can be trained to act as human beings. They felt that with proper training and environment, an animal could be transformed. The Rambam argued that it was impossible to alter the nature of an animal. They established a date when the philosophers' trained cats would be put to a test.

It happened that the Sultan was visiting on the appointed day. It was decided that he would observe the cats' behavior and be the judge of their "humanness." A large group gathered to gape in wonder, as the cats set a table for the Sultan and his distinguished entourage. Each dignitary was assigned a specific place, while the Sultan was at the head of the table. Word was fast spreading that the Rambam's theory was refuted. Yet, the Rambam sat there unperturbed by the proceedings. The meal was about to begin. The cats came out of the kitchen carrying large tureens of hot soup. Everyone was visibly impressed with the poise with which the cats carried out their functions. As soon as the cats came close to the table with the hot soup, the Rambam opened up a little bag that he had brought with him. Suddenly, a little mouse appeared for all to see. At the sight of the mouse, all of the cats were thrown into a frenzy. They dropped the pots, causing the hot soup to spill all over the tables and the guests, and chased after the mouse.

Everyone was now wet and fully aware of the Rambam's lesson. We might succeed in superficially training the cats, but their internal nature, their essence, cannot change. A cat is, and will always be, a cat.

This analogy applies likewise to Efron. As long as he did not see the money, he could act refined, dignified and almost human. As soon as Avraham said, "Take my money," and Efron saw the money with his own two eyes, he reverted to the money-hungry, deceitful person that he had always been. Human nature is difficult enough to change when one seeks to transform himself. What can we expect from Efron, who was comfortable with his current position?!

*Let it be that the maiden to whom I shall say, "Please tip over the jug so I may drink," and who replies, "Drink, and I will even water your camels," her will You have designated for Your servant Yitzchak. (24:14)*

Eliezer established a criteria for a suitable mate for Yitzchak. He would request of her an act of chesed, kindness. If her response exceeded his request, it would indicate that she was truly a baalas chesed. The wife for Yitzchak, the future Matriarch of Klal Yisrael, must be an individual whose character refinement is innate. Rivkah displayed a level of chesed that was exemplary. We may wonder why her willingness to draw water for the camels was so remarkable that it demonstrated her admirable quality of chesed. What was so special about it?

We suggest that the answer lies in understanding the essence of chesed and its true meaning. People perform acts of loving-kindness for various reasons. Some people do it because they actually want to help others. Other individuals do it because they feel good when they make other people feel good. Yet others perform acts of chesed for the recognition they get. True chesed is developing a sensitivity towards another's needs. We feel for other people, and we attempt to provide them with what they need, not with what we need. It is essential to help those who are in material need with food and clothing and, at times, even shelter. A simple "Good morning," or the act of including someone who does not have friends into one's inner circle, also constitutes chesed. Chesed means providing kindness where and when it is needed--not when it is convenient or fashionable. Chesed means not expecting and not desiring recompense--of any sort. A cute anecdote tells about the boy scout who came to school one half-hour late. When the teacher asked him to explain his tardiness, the young boy responded, "I was helping an old woman to cross the street." "Since when does that take a half-hour?" asked the teacher. "Well, she did not want to cross!" This boy had been taught to perform acts of kindness, so he performed them whether or not the person was in need.

All too often, we act kindly--for our benefit. We might be responding to a guilty conscience or the need for recognition, or, we might be searching for a merit. We must be sensitive to the needs of those around us, looking for those areas where we can be of assistance, for purely altruistic reasons. Being available when one is needed can be of greater significance than sending a meal.

Rivkah was the model of a baalas chesed. She was sensitive and caring. She sought to give help, even if it was to an animal that could not express its feelings or say, "thank you." When Eliezer saw Rivkah's outpouring of chesed, even for an animal that does not express its needs or respond with gratitude, he knew that he had found the suitable mate for Yitzchak.

*And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household who controlled all that was his....And I said to my master, "Perhaps the woman will not follow me?" (24:2, 39)*

The Torah tells very little about Eliezer, Avraham's trusted servant. Who was he? Who was his father? The first indication about his origins is later in the narrative, when Rashi explains the word "hkt"--"ulai," this word is normally spelled with a "vov" and is translated as "perhaps." It is now spelled without a "vov" and should really be interpreted as "to me." Rashi says that Eliezer was alluding to his own daughter whom he had hoped to marry to Yitzchak. Thus, when he asked Avraham what to do if he was not successful in finding the suitable mate for Yitzchak, he was not really asking. Rather, he was hoping that he would not find a mate and that Yitzchak would come "to me." Avraham responded, "My son is blessed, and you, as a Canaani, are accursed. The accursed cannot unite with the blessed." Apparently, Eliezer was a descendant of Canaan. Targum Yonasan states that Eliezer was the son of Nimrod, the son of Kush, the son of Cham.

Regardless of whether Eliezer was a Canaani or Nimrod's son, he came from a tainted lineage. The only question is the degree of imperfection. Nimrod was the great rebel who disputed Hashem's Divinity, who rallied a world to rebel against Him. He was the one who threw Avraham Avinu into the fiery furnace in an attempt to rid himself of any antagonists. Yet, he fathered Eliezer, who was entrusted by Avraham to find a wife for Yitzchak.

Horav Zaidal Epstein, Shlita, makes a compelling observation from here. We see that it is conceivable for one who is a rasha m'rusha, thoroughly evil, to have a child that who achieve

remarkable spiritual heights. We find that descendants of Haman ha'rasha studied Torah in Bnei Brak. Consequently, we must keep in mind that while we must separate ourselves as much as possible from reshaim, a concealed spark of "decency" might be buried deep beneath all that evil. The spark in this individual might germinate and manifest itself many generations later through his descendants. Indeed, we find that before Moshe killed the Egyptian who was striking a Jew, he saw through Ruach Hakodesh, Divine Inspiration, that nothing positive would ever emerge from him. We should never totally dismiss anyone's possible future merit. Is that not what characterizes Judaism?

*And Avraham expired and died in a good old age, mature and content. (25:8)*

The Ramban remarks on Avraham Avinu's lofty character. He was sameiach b'chelko, satisfied with his lot in life. He was not one to yearn for luxuries. Those who desire luxuries will never be happy with what they attain. If they have a hundred, they desire two hundred; if they have two hundred, they desire four hundred. We are puzzled by the Ramban's statement. Avraham really did not have a reason to complain. Hashem blessed him with extraordinary wealth and prestige. He miraculously saved his life when he was thrown into the fiery furnace. He was blessed with a son in his old age to perpetuate his legacy. He was selected as the Father of Am Yisrael. Now, was it really that difficult for Avraham to be satisfied with his allotted portion in life? Things could certainly have been worse.

Horav A.Z. Leibowitz, Shlita, asserts that we have no idea of the compelling effect that human desire for wealth and luxuries has over us. How often do we hear the statement from people who are supposedly "happy." "If I had a million dollars, I would give it to tzedakah and be satisfied with my own financial situation"? People just do not seem to be happy with what they have. If Avraham had not been born with unique character traits, even he, who was blessed with so much, would not have been happy. So what should we say? No one is above the desire for luxuries, regardless of his present financial state of affairs.

There is also an alternative approach to this concept. One who has financial means should - by all means - enjoy it. This does not mean that he should act like a glutton and overindulge. It is just in the natural order of things that he who is blessed by Hashem with material wealth should enjoy and be happy with his gift. Only he who enjoys what he has is able to share his blessings with others. An anecdotal story is told about a Chassidic rebbe who visited one of his wealthy constituents and found him eating black bread and radishes for dinner. The Rebbe told the man, "My dear friend, you should be eating chicken one day, turkey the next, duck the third day, and then have a good steak. This is no way to live." When they left, the students who had accompanied him questioned their Rebbe's interest in the diet of this affluent man. The Rebbe replied, "If he eats chicken, he may then be expected to give a poor man herring. If he himself eats radishes, however, what do you think he will end up giving the poor man?" Let the rich enjoy, so that he may be favorably disposed to sharing his wealth with others. To paraphrase Reb Yitzchak Bunim, zl, "There is only one thing in life that is multiplied by division. Divide and share your happiness, and you increase it."