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THE YEARS OF SARAH'S LIFE: SUR ME'RA VE'ASEH TOV by Rabbi Jake Berman

Parashat Chayei Sarah begins with a description of the duration of Sarah Imeinu's life. The Torah states, "*VaYihyu Chayei Sarah Mei'ah Shanah Ve'Esrim Shanah VeShevah Shanim Shenei Chayei Sarah*", "and the lifetime of Sarah was one-hundred years, twenty years, and seven years, [these were] the days of Sarah's life" (BeReishit 23:1). Rashi (s.v. *ibid.* "*VaYihyu Chayei*" etc.) famously interprets the Torah's "additive" formulation by expounding upon each set of years individually: "when Sarah was one-hundred, it was as if she was twenty in relation to sin; just as a twenty-year-old is without sin, as they are not subject to punishment, so too Sarah was without sin at the age of one-hundred. And when she was twenty she was as beautiful as she was when she was seven." Additionally, Rashi comments (s.v. "*Shenei Chayei Sarah*") on the Pasuk's closing clause, "*Shenei Chayei Sarah*", "the days of Sarah's life." He writes, "*Kulan Shavin LeTovah*", that the years of Sarah's life "were all equal in regard to goodness."

The irregular nature of the opening Pasuk is not limited to the peculiarity of its format. The very fact that the Torah describes the length of Sarah's life at all seems to be unprecedented. The Zohar (121b) asks: "*What is the difference by Sarah, that the Torah specifies her death (in terms of years), from all other women in the Torah whose deaths are not mentioned in terms of years? Because when Sarah was taken captive by Paroh in Mitzrayim, she turned away and did not cling to him at all. As the Pasuk states, 'And they sent him off with his wife and all that he owned' (BeReishit 12:20). And through this act, Sarah, her husband and her children afterward merited a lofty, elevated life. Therefore, because of this happening, Sarah merited the enumeration of the years of her life within the Torah...*"

The Shem MeShmuel (Rav Shmuel Bornstein from Sogotchov, the Avnei Nezer's son) wonders why the Zohar specifically focused on the merit Sarah gained by not clinging to Paroh and Mitzrayim. By her interaction with Paroh (or lack thereof), Sarah did not actively do anything. She remained passive and neutral-- she did not cling. So why did her separation from Paroh and Mitzrayim result in her earning such significant merit?

Based on another Zohar, the Shem MeShmuel explains that "*the more a person distances him or herself from the clutches of the evil inclination, the more the person enters into Kedushah.*" Meaning, that refraining from falling into the traps of the Yetzer Hara doesn't just maintain an individual's level of Kedushah, but rather it generates more Kedushah. Even though this action was not really an action at all, but rather a refrain from negative activity. In other words, Kedushah is not only generated through an Aseh Tov, positive action, but even *more so* from a Sur M'Ra, a distancing of oneself from evil. Essentially through her separation from Mitzrayim, Sarah Imeinu was able to generate an immense amount of Kedushah, and thus merited the inclusion of the duration of her life in the Torah.

Perhaps this idea explains a famous concept found in the Gemara (Berachot 34a) that "*Tzadikim who never sinned cannot stand where Ba'alei Teshuvah stand, as the Pasuk says 'Shalom Shalom LaRachok VeLaKarov', 'the Rachok (far) is in front of the near' - 'Far' refers to one who was far from Hashem (but repented). 'Near' refers to one who was always close.*" The Rambam codifies this Gemara in Hilchot Teshuvah (7:4): "*The Chachamim said: The place where Ba'alei Teshuva stand Tzaddikim cannot stand, as if to say that their level is above the level of those who never sinned, because it is more difficult for them to subdue their passion.*"

The Ba'al Teshuva can accomplish something that the Tzadik will never be able to achieve. As the Rambam formulated, a person that has previously been involved in sin is tempted to repeat his negative actions. Yet, he makes the difficult and challenging decision to turn away-- he is Sur Me'Ra. This dissociation has an effect-- it is not a neutral endeavor. By actively separating oneself from the negative, one is able to generate an

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immense amount of Kedushah, which is subsequently transferred throughout the world. Never before, even in the depths of Mitzrayim, have the Jewish people been tested in areas of Kedushah as we are today. Although it may seem as if we are fighting an uphill battle, nevertheless, when we are tested, and we turn away from improper actions, we may actually find ourselves on top quicker than we've ever imagined.

In light of this Gemara and Zohar, Rashi's comments on the first Pasuk become abundantly clear. The Pasuk's unusual listing of the years, and its repetition of "Shenei Chayei Sarah" establishes Sarah's righteousness (she was without sin, and the years of her life were "Kulan Shavin LeTovah"). She was "Sur MeRa" throughout her entire life, an undertaking traditionally associated with Ba'alei Teshuvah. Thus, Sarah established the merit of refraining from negative action, and thus merited the inclusion of her "Kulan Shavin LeTovah" years of her life within the Torah's description of her death.

On the flipside, one should not make light of the Kedushah that is brought into the world through positive action, "Aseh Tov." Rav Chaim Vital (Sha'ar HaGilgulim 38:140, quotes the Ari"zl as saying "*A small action (Mitzvah) done in this generation is equal to numerous great Mitzvot done in earlier generations. As today, the challenges are very, very great, unlike the challenges of earlier generations.*" If this was said in the 16th century, can you imagine what one Mitzvah looks like today in 2018? We can't fathom how much light we bring into the world when we decide to recognize the Borei Olam through our positive actions.

Although this generation has challenges that we've never faced before, we should never view these challenges as obstacles, but rather as opportunities to bring more Kedushah and light into this world, both in Sur MeRa (distancing from bad) and Aseh Tov (actively doing good). It's important to remember and internalize that refraining from doing bad doesn't just keep one at a status quo, but rather brings as much, if not more, light into the world than a proactive positive action does. No other generation has faced the same spiritual challenges that we do, and therefore no other generation can bring the same Kedushah into the

world that we're able to bring. It is specifically at times when we emerge victorious over our great spiritual conflicts that we bring an immense amount of light and Kedushah into the world. This was perhaps Sarah's great legacy that she passed to us across all generations; to be able to withstand the trials and tribulations that we all face individually and communally.

BURIAL OF SARAH IMEINU: TEST OF TESHUVAH?

by Ezra Seplovitz ('20)

This week's Parashah, Parashat Chayei Sarah, portrays the famous episode of Avraham Avinu purchasing a burial plot for his wife, Sarah Imainu. After accomplishing what many consider the epoch of Avraham's legacy at Har HaMoriah, Akeidat Yitzchak, Avraham returns home to receive the devastating news of Sarah's passing. Despite this travesty, Avraham holds his head high and departs to find a prime burial location for his wife. He discovers *Me'arat HaMachpeilah*, and confronts Efron HaChiti, the cave's owner, to agree on a price. Despite Efron's trickery, Avraham remains collected and complies with his demands. Finally, Avraham is able to bury Sarah.

Many commentaries view Avraham's humble conduct throughout the purchase as yet another one of his many righteous acts. The Rambam, Vilna Ga'on, Bartenura, and others, do not consider this incident to be one of Hashem's ten tests given to Avraham, which are referenced in Pirkei Avot (5:3). Rabbeinu Yonah (ibid.), however, disagrees, and views this story as the tenth and final *Nisayon* that Avraham Avinu endured. He notes that Hashem had previously promised Avraham the entire land of Canaan, yet Avraham Avinu still paid an exuberant price for this burial plot. Rabbeinu Yonah, adopting Rashi's approach, then states that Avraham passed this test because he neither questioned nor doubted Hashem's promise. Rabbeinu Yonah's uncommon and unexpected approach raises several questions.

From a logical standpoint, it makes sense for Rabbeinu Yonah to include this story as one of the ten tests. It is very similar to the Akeidah, in which Avraham Avinu is faced with a serious doubt as to whether or not the Ribono Shel Olam is keeping His promise. Hashem promised Avraham that a great nation would emerge from Yitzchak, yet he was about to kill Yitzchak on Hashem's command. Similarly, in Parashat

Chayei Sarah, Avraham is unsure as to whether or not Hashem will keep His promise of giving to him the land of Canaan. If Rabbeinu Yonah's explanation is so obvious, then why did other great Rishonim disagree?

Many commentaries base their interpretation on a famous Midrash that compares the "Lech Lecha" (Bereishit 12:1) that provided Avraham with the initial instruction to leave his homeland, and the "Lech Lecha" (ibid 22:2) of Akeidat Yitzchak. The Midrash heavily implied that these were the first and last of the Nisyonot, and therefore many authorities exclude the burial of Sarah. However, I believe there is another reason why the Rabbeinu Yonah, against many other Rishonim, believes the burial of Sarah was one of the tests.

Rabbeinu Yonah, in his famous Sefer on the process of Teshuvah, Sha'arei Teshuvah, lists twenty steps of Teshuvah that can ultimately be divided into four categories: *Charatah* (regret), *Azivat Chet* (foresaking sin), *Viduy* (confession) and *Kabalah Al Ha'Atid* (accepting to avoid the sin in the future). Perhaps, Rabbeinu Yonah sees Akeidat Yitzchak and the burial of Sarah not only as tests, but also as Teshuva opportunities for Avraham. After all, the Midrash articulates that when Avraham made a banquet in honor of Yitzchak's birth, he invited prominent people like Sheim, Eiver, and Avimelech, but neglected to recognize Hashem's obvious role in the miracle. Can we assume Avraham Avinu would never do Teshuvah!? Rabbeinu Yonah does not think so; rather, utilized Akeidat Yitzchak and the burial of Sarah as opportunities for Teshuva.

Within the Rabbeinu Yonah's conception of Teshuvah, Avraham Avinu's response to Hashem, "Hineini" (ibid 22:1), at the beginning of the story of the Akeidah, can be viewed as *Charatah*; Avraham regretted his sin and is now ready to repent. Binding Yitzchak to the *Mizbe'ach* represents *Azivat HaCheit*, and *Viduy* is manifested in Avraham's humbling eulogy for Sarah to the B'nei Cheit. Finally, the purchase of the burial plot serves as *Kabalah Al Ha'Atid*, the final step in Rabbeinu Yonah's Teshuvah process. This final act of recognizing Hashem, even in a time when he was seemingly hidden, did not just complete Avraham's Teshuvah, but also the ten tests that Hashem imposed upon him.

Deep *Bitachon* (trust) in Hashem, combined with ultimate humility, is what made Avraham Avinu worthy of fathering the greatest nation. May we all be *Zocheh* not only to admire and internalize Avraham's ability to repent with joy and humility, but also to have the

strength and will to conquer any test that Hashem lays before us.

SECHIRAT RESHUT: PART II – RENTAL OF AN ENTIRE COUNTRY by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Editors' note: The following article by Rabbi Chaim Jachter is the second part of a series on Sechirat Reshut. For the first part, please visit koltorah.org.

Rental of an Entire Country

After analyzing the specific Halachot of Sechirat Reshut, we can now discuss the question of renting the entire country from the United States president or his representative. Rav Willig's initial response was to investigate whether the federal government enjoys the right of eminent domain, and if they retain the right to enter people's houses with an appropriate warrant. These are the two bases of how a Sechirat Reshut could work in a democracy.

Upon researching these matters I discovered that the federal government undoubtedly enjoys the power of eminent domain as made clear by the following authoritative website <https://www.justice.gov/enrd/history-federal-use-eminant-domain>. The following link, in turn, makes it clear that the federal government is able to enter houses after obtaining a warrant <https://www.fbi.gov/resources/victim-assistance/a-brief-description-of-the-federal-criminal-justice-process>. Thus, it would seem that the President of the United States as the head of the federal government enjoys the Halachic right to rent the entire country. Indeed, in Israel, the chief rabbis rent the entire country from both the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Defense and the national head of the police. Interestingly, the rental was not made from the Prime Minister.

However, when I presented this idea to Rav Schachter he did not endorse the idea. Rav Schachter thought that, unlike a mayor, chief of police or county executive, the president has little to do with the day to day functioning of a city or a county and thus is not qualified (or perhaps overqualified) to conduct a Sechirat Reshut. We may add that even though Israel's chief rabbinate rents the entire country from the government, one cannot compare the United States and Israel since the United States is dramatically larger and has a dramatically greater

population. Thus, the Israeli officials have much more involvement in the running of the area than the American President and even cabinet ministers.

Issues of Eivah

In addition, the danger of causing animosity among the other nations of the world (“Mah Yomeru HaGoyim” and Haseir Sone’Einu UmKatregeinu”) makes it unwise for the Jewish community to “rent” the entire country from the president. Thus, regarding this idea we apply the wise words of the Gemara (Pesachim 22b) “K’Sheim Shemekabeil Sechar Al HaDerishah Kach Mekabeil Sechar Al HaPerishah”, just as reward is granted for the investigation so too is reward extended for withdrawing a proposal when it is appropriate to do so.

Foreign Embassies Within an Eruv

Muammar Gaddafi’s September 2009 visit to New York raised a serious question in regard to the validity of the Englewood, New Jersey Eruv. The Libyan Ambassador to the United Nations resides in the heart of the Englewood Orthodox Jewish community. During the summer of 2009, in anticipation of Gaddafi’s possible visit to the Libyan property in Englewood in September, extensive work was done on the property. The fences and gates that surrounded the property were temporarily removed, raising a serious question concerning the validity of the Englewood Eruv. The fences were not utilized as part of the Eruv – what could have the problem have been?

The Netivot Shabbat (37:93) notes that all would agree that the mayor and police cannot rent out a foreign embassy located within a city, as international law recognizes it as sovereign territory of the nation it represents. Thus, according to this opinion it would be forbidden to carry into a foreign embassy even in an area encompassed by an Eruv, such as Jerusalem or Washington, on Shabbat.

Prior to the summer of 2009 the Libyan property did not pose a problem for the Englewood Eruv since it was fenced in and was thereby excluded from the Eruv. However, when the fences came down in 2009, the Englewood Eruv became “exposed” (Nifratz L’Makom Assur) to the Libyan property. This meant that the rabbis of Englewood would have had to conduct a sechirat reshut with Muammar Gaddafi or his representative in order for the Englewood Eruv to be valid!

Seeing that it was highly unlikely that we would be able to obtain the cooperation of Libyan officials, I (in

my role as the Rav HaMachshir of the Englewood Eruv) consulted Rav Mordechai Willig. He told me that he confronted the same issue with the residence of the Russian ambassador to the United Nations located within the Riverdale Eruv.

Rav Willig informed us that he consulted with Professor Louis Henkin, son of the great Poseik Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, who was a world renowned expert on international law. Professor Henkin explained that foreign embassies are not technically defined as foreign territory. Under normal circumstances, local authorities grant the embassies a great deal of autonomy as a courtesy. Thus, police would not usually enter a foreign embassy. However, in case of a serious emergency such as a fire, local officials do enter embassy property even if the foreign representatives protest such entrance. Local authorities would not be able to do so if the embassy area was truly foreign territory. Attorney Michael Wildes, formerly the mayor of Englewood, confirmed (in a personal conversation) that this is accurate and current information.

Embassy property is included in the Sechirat Reshut granted by the local authorities, since it is not technically defined as foreign territory (at least in the United States; it might differ elsewhere, such as in Israel where the author of Netivot Shabbat resides). Accordingly, the removal of the fences on the Libyan property in Englewood did not impinge on the validity of the Englewood Eruv and no separate Sechirat Reshut with Libyan officials was required.

Interestingly, though, the Mechon L’Hoyro’ah excludes the property of the United Nations from the Manhattan Eruv, which it oversees. This seems to stem from concern that the United Nations property is considered international territory and not part of the sovereign United States territory (though for further discussion see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Headquarters_of_the_United_Nations) and thus not subsumed within the Sechirat Reshut conducted with the New York city officials.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:
koltorah@koltorah.org

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