

Chayei Sarah

Magical stones, the Omer, and the Elderly

And Avraham was old, coming with his days

Bereishis 24:1

The Jews are commanded to count the seven weeks of the Omer, and those days are meant to be complete.¹ “When are they complete?” Explains the Midrash,² “only when the Jewish people are doing the will of God.”

“Until the times of Avraham, there was no such thing as aging whatsoever. One who wished to talk to Avraham would speak to Yitzchak, for they looked identical. So Avraham prayed, and old age came into existence, as the verse³ says ‘and Avraham was old, coming with his days.’”⁴

The great R. Yaakov Loerberbaum of Lisa,⁵ author of the *Nesivos Hamishpat*, wondered, “This is mind boggling; how is it possible to assume that until Avraham, there was no old age? After all, the nature of physical matter is that as it grows old, it wears out!” Was there some sort of miraculous intervention at all times until Avraham? Secondly, he points out that Maharsha asks why the Talmud does not quote from the many, many earlier verses in the Torah that speak of Avraham and Sarah’s advanced age? Another question he ponders is, why was it necessary at all to prove via Scripture that now people *do* age – would we not know this from our own experience?

One proof that the soul is eternal and does not die, explains R. Yaakov of Lisa, is that although all of man’s senses weaken with time – his eyes dim and his ears grow weak – his intelligence grows more and more powerful. “Elderly Sages – the more they age, the more their wisdom sits well with them.”⁶ Now if the soul were to be physical and thus have an end, it would weaken with age as does all else. This is what is behind our Sages’ statement that until Avraham, there was no old age. Once we believe that there is a spiritual soul that lives on, we then value our old age, for the spiritual thrives and occupies center stage as the physical weakens.⁷

Until Avraham, the world did not accept the idea of a spiritual soul that lives on, and thus did not value old age; to them, it was just a hindrance. People would speak to Yitzchak

1 Vayikra 23:15, “And you shall count for yourselves, on the day after the holiday – from the day that you brought the Omer as a wave offering – seven complete weeks shall they be.”

2 Vaykira Rabbah 28:3

3 Bereishis 24:1

4 Bava Metziah 87a

5 *Emes Liyaakov* on Talmudic Aggados, to Bava Metziah, *ibid.*

6 Kinim 3:6

7 See the comments of *Yam Shel Shlomo* to Kiddushin 4, 28, where he makes the same point.

as they would to Avraham, for though Avraham was much older than his son – the greatest man alive – they saw that with age, Avraham slowed down, and this was all the more reason to approach Yitzchak first. Only afterward would they approach Avraham, as a secondary option. Avraham prayed to God that he be given the ability to teach the world about the soul, so that they would then appreciate old age and make the most of it, and from then on, “old age” came to the world. All the rest of the verses that speak of Avraham’s old age are physical descriptions. They talk of his frailty, or his inability to father children. This verse, however, deals with his “coming with days.” It is the verse that shows how Avraham’s old age was meaningful – that he took all of his days along with him, and didn’t waste any potential. That is why the Talmud brought that verse as its proof, for Avraham is the one who taught us the spiritual value of the physical impediments of old age.⁸

The passing of time is not something to celebrate, unless the time was well used. If time was not well spent, it is a devastating waste of the most precious resource that exists. When we count the days until the Torah is given, we have an interesting task ahead of us. Counting days is a risk, for it reminds us that the world moves on, and that we had better get something done in our time here. Those days that we count cannot be complete unless we are complete. If we are growing more and more complete, then we have a right, and even a responsibility, to count those days. “To count our days – this You should teach us, and then we will bring wisdom into our hearts.”⁹ It is not easy to learn to count our days – to value that we are leaving behind our time, losing our resources, our youth, our energy and our physical abilities. But if we are exchanging all of that for wisdom – if we are leading up to the giving of the Torah – then we value old age.

R. Shimon bar Yochai taught,¹⁰ “A precious stone hung from the neck of Avraham, and when any sick person would look at it, he would be cured of his illness. When Avraham died, this stone was hung on the sun.” R. Yitzchak Arama¹¹ explains that this stone was not a physical stone, but rather the pearls of wisdom that would pour from Avraham’s throat. Avraham had the ability, using his words, to cure any spiritually ill person of his false ideologies if they were to listen to him. When he died, what he gave the world did not die with him, but was rather “hung on the sun,”¹² shining on us all. In fact, R. Yosef Rosen of Rogatchov,¹³ quotes our Sages as having taught that the first set of tablets of the Ten Commandments were carved from the sun. He explains that this means that the precious stone of Avraham, which was hung on the sun, was then taken by Hashem and used as the material that the Ten Commandments were carved upon. In other words, our connection to the Torah was begun

8 See also the important comments of the Tzanzer in his *Divrei Chaim* to Chayei Sarah 24:1

9 Tehillim 90:12 as explained by Rabbi Daniel Kalish

10 Bava Basra 16b

11 *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Bereishis 4. The same interpretation is offered by Abarbanel to Malachi 1:11, and a similar one by R. Bechaya in his introduction to Parshas Yisro. See also *Likkutei Moharan* 1, 112 s.v. *Tzohar taaseh lateivah*, regarding this stone and speech. See also Alshich to Tehillim 113:4

12 See my *Vaani Babashem Atzapeh* to Tehillim 133:4 for an explanation as to why it was hung specifically in the sun.

13 *Tzofnas Paneach al Hatorah*, Bereishis 24:1

by Avraham – without him, we would not have had the context to receive the truth of the Torah. He laid the groundwork for us.

Every year, in order for us to get to the point where we can once again receive the Torah on that tablet that we inherited from Avraham, we must reabsorb his message and count the Omer, learning the message of adding the days up – the message of old age. The Yismach Yisrael,¹⁴ the Rebbe of Alexander, explains that our Midrash teaches that days can only add up if all of our physical activities are done in holiness and purity; then, those days connect to one another and to Hashem as well. In order for the days and weeks to add up, and be a complete package where nothing was left behind, the Jews must be doing the will of Hashem.

In general society, people talk about being “seventy-five years young.” People fear growing old. They don’t want to be called “Grandma,” for that is a term for the old. They seek to be looked at as young, for the old are irrelevant. That is a terrible mistake. There is no greater blessing than that of old age – this is one of the most important lessons that Avraham taught the world. Only when people are living for meaningful and spiritual reasons do days add up to a complete sum, and not go to waste. Only when a human being acts like Avraham does he truly act his age, and value his days.

14 Emor 3, See also R. Avraham Schorr’s *Halekach Vihalibuv* 5762, Emor, quoting his father, R. Gedaliah Schorr, who explains this Midrash in a similar way.