



TIMELESS TORAH

KINLOSS

Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays: 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

Leadership & Legacy: Learning How to Pass On The Torch

Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל on his 4th Yahrtzeit (20th Cheshvan)

The Captain of the Ship

The Parsha begins by recounting the interaction Avraham has with Ephron and the people of Cheit, while trying to buy a burial plot for his wife, Sarah. During that interaction, they refer to him as נשיא אלקים, which literally means 'a Prince of God' (23:6). Commenting on this, the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, d. 1893) cites the Gemara in Bava Batra 91a which says that when Avraham passed away, people gathered together and said, "Woe is to the world that has lost its leader, and woe is to the ship that has lost its captain". The Netziv explains that these are two distinct phrases. To be a world leader is a very significant skill that requires great wisdom. To be the captain of a ship, however, is less to do with wisdom and more to do with the capacity to give meaningful guidance. When a world leader passes away it is indeed a great loss. However, when a spiritual leader is no longer there, the void created risks the stability of the entire ship. Without an appropriate spiritual guide, it is very difficult for people to remain focused. When people referred to Avraham as a 'Prince of God', they meant that both attributes were present in him. He was a wise leader, and he was also someone who had that essential quality of spiritual leadership.

In a similar vein, Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל inspired people to raise themselves higher. That was why he was such a phenomenal leader – a true captain of the ship. He was able to help people see beyond the immediate here and now, and to provide moral clarity and spiritual guidance in an ever more confusing world.

The Burning Palace

The first verse in the Parsha sets out the years of Sarah's life, who passed away at the age of 127. We find that the years of the righteous are enumerated in several places in the Torah. This is not simply because we need to know how long they lived for. The Midrash Tanchuma teaches us that the Torah is reflecting back to the point where they started their mission in life. These were the years that were set for them from the very beginning to

complete their mission in this world – not to accept the world as it is, but to change it for the better. In his book, *Radical Then Radical Now*, Rabbi Sacks quotes a Midrashic parable of a person travelling who suddenly comes across a burning palace. The person starts to wonder, "Is it possible that this palace has no owner? Could this be an empty palace in flames?" At that moment, the owner of the palace appears and says, "I am the owner of this palace you see burning." So too, Avraham travelled around at the beginning of his spiritual career and said, "Is it possible that this world has no leader? Is it possible that things are running of their own accord?" At that moment, Hashem appeared to him and said, "This palace, this world, does not run by itself. I am the owner. I guide and direct it."

Rabbi Sacks explains that this Midrash represents the constant tension that exists between humankind and Hashem. The palace is the world we inhabit, yet the palace is burning. There seems to be so much injustice, so many things wrong, and so many bad things in the world that we cannot understand or rationalise. Avraham looks at the world and says, "Who could be running this world? It seems so bad, so difficult, so wrong! Where is the owner?" Judaism begins not in wonder at what the world is, but *in protest that the world is not as it ought to be*. It is this 'sacred discontent' which begins Avraham's journey. It is the contradiction between order and chaos; the order of Creation and the chaos mankind creates which prompts him to think differently. Most significantly, there is no resolution to this conflict at the level of thought. It can only be resolved at the level of action, by making the world a different place to what it is. Hashem turns to Avraham and says, "If I put the flames out, there is no free will and there is no free choice between good and evil." It is therefore man who must put out the flames.

This dialogue between Hashem and the Jewish people has continued for four thousand years. We too must have the same sense of restlessness, to not be content with how things are. We must not be content with a world that is burning, to take a step back and let the world burn. Instead, it is our task to appreciate that only we can put the flames out.

Defining Old Age

After Avraham purchases a burial plot for Sarah, the Torah tells us that, “Abraham was now old (זקן), advanced in years (בא בימים), and Hashem had blessed Abraham with everything.” (24:1) There are three parts to this verse – the description of Avraham as old, advanced in years, and blessed with everything. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the description of Avraham as זקן, ‘old’, means that he became wise through his experiences in life. It does not mean ‘old’ in the way we usually understand it. It is not dependent on years of life, but rather the acquisition of experience; a matured personality through the gaining of wisdom.

The Kli Yakar explains that בא בימים literally means ‘to come into days’. As a description of old age, we would expect the verse to write that he was ‘leaving his days’, not entering into days. In fact, however, it was at this point in his life that Avraham ‘came into days’. He was now able to reach the pinnacle of achievement, through all the tests and challenges he had faced throughout his life.

In an article entitled *Death Has Two Timelines*, published in *The Atlantic* on October 5th 2024, Sumita Puri, a palliative care physician, reflected on the advanced age of President Jimmy Carter, who at the age of 100, is the only US President to have reached this age. Over a year ago, he went into hospice care with multiple medical issues. Jimmy Carter expressed a desire to live long enough to vote in the recent Presidential election and remarkably, he made it. As a palliative care physician, Puri commented that she had encountered this phenomenon many times. She recalled one gentleman who survived long enough without the support of a ventilator for his estranged son to arrive and a woman whose fragility precluded any further chemotherapy but survived long enough to witness the birth of her first grandchild. Patients would constantly defy medical expectations and predictable laws of physiology, perhaps because of the spiritual influence of the soul determining the moment of death. When the Torah tells us that Avraham reached old age, at that moment he was also בא בימים, he achieved a spirituality that perhaps even he could not comprehend before that point. It was at this moment that he was indeed ‘blessed with everything’.

To Pass on the Torch

Avraham had to leave the practical task of finding a wife for his son Yitzchak to his servant Eliezer, but his overarching aspiration was the continuation of his mission in a spiritual sense. Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel (d. 1935), shares a beautiful idea elaborating on this point. The burial plot that Avraham bought for his wife was in Chevron. The Hebrew word Chevron means

‘connection’. Rav Kook explains that the acquisition Avraham made in Chevron connected the present to the future and set the stage for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Avraham bought something which symbolised permanence in the land, since there is nothing more permanent than a burial plot. Thus, Avraham stressed that he wanted to acquire an אחוזת קבר. The word אחוזה means to hold on. He wanted a permanent hold on the land.

At the end of the Parsha, Rivka was brought back to meet her future husband, Yitzchak. At that very moment, we are told that Yitzchak went out לשוב בשדה, to ‘speak in the field’. We are also told that it was לפנות ערב – towards evening. Rabbeinu Bachya says that there are two different explanations for the word לשוב. The simple explanation is that שוב is the name for a tree, or vegetation. However, our Sages in Tractate Brachot teach us that לשוב means ‘to pray’. They learn from this verse that Yitzchak instituted the prayer of Mincha. That is what he was doing in the field as evening approached.

Yitzchak therefore represented the fulfillment of everything Avraham had invested through the purchase of land in Chevron. Yitzchak walked in the fields, seeing the trees, the vegetation and the growth and he was also praying. Tefilla (prayer) represents a moment of spiritual growth. Life is not supposed to be static. We are not meant to look at the world today in the same way we looked at it yesterday. Our tefilla today should not be the same as the one that we prayed yesterday. We are meant to grow spiritually each and every day. Mincha represents this idea more than any of our other prayers. During the day so many things have the potential to throw us off course. People are trying to drive us in so many different directions. It is easy to forget our mission, to forget that we are bigger than all of the things trying to distract us. That is why we take our lead from Yitzchak and stop in the middle of the day for a few moments of prayer. Mincha is the ability to pause for a second and bring back our lost spirituality.

Avraham plants the seeds and builds the foundations. The purchase of a burial plot does not represent the finality of life for him. On the contrary, for Avraham, who has belief in the spiritual continuity of life, the permanent resting place that he acquires represents potential. It is where everything else will arise from. One day, King David would build his first palace in Chevron before moving the capital to Jerusalem. That is the power of Avraham and this is what it means to pass on the torch.

Throughout his life, Rabbi Sacks encouraged us to feel spiritually restless - never to stop searching, never to stop growing. It is our role to carry this ideal forward, continuing to put out the flames. Our task is to follow in Yitzchak’s footsteps, growing spiritually in the field of life and fulfilling the potential of all those who came before us.