

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Chayei Sarah

Genesis 12:1-17:27

Torah Reading for November 16-22, 2003

Paradoxically, the Torah section entitled *Chayei Sarah* ("The Life of Sarah") deals entirely with events that occurred after Sarah's death. The first verse of the Parshah tallies the lifespan of the first of the Four Matriarchs of Israel:

And the life of Sarah was one hundred years, twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life.

The second verse reports:

Commentary

AND THE LIFE OF SARAH WAS ONE HUNDRED YEARS, TWENTY YEARS AND SEVEN YEARS (23:1)

At the age of twenty she was like age seven in beauty, and at the age of one hundred she was like age twenty in piety. [Another version: at one hundred she was like twenty in beauty, and at twenty she was like seven in piety.]

(Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

Why does the Torah split up the tally of her years into three parts ("one hundred years," "twenty years" and "seven years")? To tell us that every day of her life was the equivalent of them all. At the age of one hundred years she was like age twenty in strength, and at age twenty she was like age seven in modesty and purity; at age seven she was like age twenty in intelligence, and at age twenty she was like age one hundred in righteousness.

(Midrash HaGadol)

AND ABRAHAM CAME TO MOURN FOR SARAH (23:2)

Where did he come from? He came from Mount Moriah, Sarah having died of grief over the Binding of Isaac.

(Midrash Rabbah)

I AM A STRANGER AND A RESIDENT AMONGST YOU (23:4)

The Jew is a "resident" in the world, for the Torah instructs him not escape the physical reality but to inhabit it and elevate it. Virtually all the mitzvot (divine commandments) of the Torah are physical actions involving physical objects, in keeping with the Jew's mission to make a "dwelling for G-d in the material realm" by sanctifying the everyday materials of everyday life.

At the same time, the Jew feels himself a "stranger" in the material world.

Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.

Presenting himself as "a stranger and a resident amongst you," Abraham approaches the people of Het with the request to purchase a plot of land for Sarah's burial. Abraham is particularly interested in the Machpeilah Cave ("the double cave" or "the cave of the couples") and the surrounding field—a property belonging to Ephron the son of Chefer.

Ephron declares that he is prepared to give the cave and field to Abraham free of charge, but also lets fall that he values the property at 400 silver shekels. So,

Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Het, four hundred shekels of silver in negotiable currency...

Then Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the

His true home is a higher, loftier place—the world of spirit, the world of holiness and G-dliness from which his soul has been exiled and to which it yearns to return. Indeed, it is only because the Jew feels himself a stranger in the world that he can avoid being wholly consumed and overwhelmed by it, and maintain the spiritual vision and integrity required to elevate it and sanctify it as an abode for the divine presence.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

The story is told of the visitor who, stopping by the home of the great Chassidic master Rabbi DovBer of Mezheritch, was outraged by the poverty he encountered there. Rabbi DovBer's home was bare of all furnishings, save for an assortment of rough wooden planks and blocks that served as benches for his students during the day and as beds for his family at night. "How can you live like this?" demanded the visitor. "I myself am far from wealthy, but at least in my home you will find, thank G-d, the basic necessities: some chairs, a table, beds..."

"Indeed?" said Rabbi DovBer. "But I don't see any of your furnishings. How do you manage without them?"

"What do you mean? Do you think that I schlep all my possessions along with me wherever I go? When I travel, I make do with what's available. But at home—a person's home is a different matter altogether!"

"Ah, yes," said Rabbi DovBer. "At home, it is a different matter altogether..."

(Likkutei Dibburim)

THE CAVE OF MACHPEILAH (23:9)

Rav and Samuel differ as to its meaning. One says that the cave consisted of a lower and upper chamber. The other says that it had multiples of couples [interred in it]: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

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field of Machpeilah before Mamre, that is Hebron in the Land of Canaan.

Thus "the Machpeilah Field with the cave in it" in the heart of Hebron became the first Jewishly-owned plot of land in the Holy Land.

Eliezer's Mission

"Abraham was old and come along in days; and G-d had blessed Abraham in all things"—so it was time to find a wife for Isaac.

Abraham summons Eliezer, "the eldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had" and says to him:

"...Swear by G-d, G-d of heaven and G-d of the earth,

that you will not take a wife to my son of the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell; but you shall go to my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife to my son Isaac..."

And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; all the goods of his master were in his hand. And he arose and went to Aram Naharayim, to the city of [Abraham's brother,] Nachor.

How to find the right woman to marry Isaac and become the second matriarch of Israel? Eliezer had a plan.

He made his camels kneel down outside the city by a well of water at the time of evening, at the time that the women go out to draw water.

And then he prayed:

"O L-rd, the G-d of my master Abraham... Behold, I stand here by the well of water, and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water.

"Let it come to pass that the maiden to whom I shall say, 'Please, set down your pitcher that I may drink,' and she shall say, 'Drink, and I will give your camels drink also'—

Commentary

(Talmud, Ervin 53a)

AND EPHRON THE HITTITE ANSWERED ABRAHAM: "THE FIELD I GIVE TO YOU, AND THE CAVE THAT IS IN IT, I GIVE IT TO YOU..." (23:11)

Said Rabbi Eleazar: The righteous promise little and perform much—Abraham promised his guests "a morsel of bread" (Genesis 18:5) and then "ran to the herd and fetched a calf tender and good, and he hurried to prepare it" (ibid., v. 7).

On the other hand, the wicked promise much and do not perform even a little. Initially Ephron proclaimed, "A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you?" But in the end, "Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Hetfour hundred shekels of silver in negotiable currency."

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 87a)

AND ABRAHAM WEIGHED TO EPHRON THE SILVER (23:16)

Said Rabbi Judan the son of Rabbi Simon: This is one of the three places regarding which the nations of the world cannot accuse Israel and say, "You have stolen them." The three places are: the Cave of Machpeilah, the site of the Holy Temple, and the tomb of Joseph at Shechem. The cave of Machpeilah, as it is written: "And Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver"; The Temple: "So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of

gold" (I Chronicles 21:25). And Joseph's tomb: "And [Jacob] bought the parcel of land (at Shechem) for a hundred pieces of silver (Genesis 33:19).

(Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 33:19)

FOUR HUNDRED SHEKELS OF SILVER (23:16)

As per Leviticus 27:16, a field the size of a beit-kur, which is the equivalent of 75,000 square cubits, represents a value of 50 silver shekels. Thus, the size of the field which Abraham purchased for 400 silver shekels was eight kur, or 600,000 square cubits.

A square cubit (approx. 20 inches by 20 inches) is the space occupied by a single person. This means that Abraham purchased a plot of land that provides an individual "space" for each of the 600,000 souls of Israel.

(Paaneach Raza)

Our sages tell us that the Torah contains 600,000 letters (counting the spaces between letters), for each Jew possesses something of the Torah. The same is true of the Land of Israel. Israel is the eternal inheritance of the Jewish people, equally the property of every individual Jew. And so it has been from the very first moment of Jewish ownership of the Holy Land: the first plot of land obtained by the first Jew included a share for every Jewish soul.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

ABRAHAM WAS OLD AND COME ALONG IN DAYS (24:1)

When Abraham aged, he did not merely pass through the days of his life: he accumulated them. Each day was fully utilized, so that they were fully

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she is the one You have appointed for Your servant Isaac...

Things now happen swiftly:

Before he had finished speaking, Rebecca came out... with her pitcher upon her shoulder. And the girl was very fair to look upon...

The servant ran to meet her, and said: "Please, let me drink a little water from your pitcher." And she said: "Drink, my lord"; and she hastened, and let down her

pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink.

And when she had done giving him drink, she said: "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have done drinking." And she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again to the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels.

Eliezer "looked at her wonderingly, but kept his peace, waiting to know whether G-d had made his journey prosperous or not" for he still had to determine if she met the criteria insisted upon by Abraham—that Isaac's wife be "from my kindred."

Still, he must have been fairly certain that she was the one, because he immediately gave her "a golden ring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold," in effect betrothing her to Isaac. Only then did he ask:

"Whose daughter are you? Tell me, I pray thee: is there

Commentary

possessed by him.

(The Zohar)

I WILL MAKE YOU SWEAR BY G-D, G-D OF HEAVEN AND G-D OF THE EARTH (24:3)

But further on (in verse 7) he says, "G-d, the G-d of heaven, who took me from my Father's house."

This is what Abraham was saying to Eliezer: "When G-d summoned me from the house of my father, he was G-d of the heavens but not of the earth: the inhabitants of the earth did not recognize Him and His name was not referred to in the land. But now that I have made His name familiar in the mouths of His creatures, He is G-d in both heaven and earth."

(Rashi)

BEFORE HE FINISHED SPEAKING, BEHOLD, REBECCA CAME OUT (24:15)

Three people were answered by G-d as their words left their mouths: Eliezer, the servant of Abraham; Moses and Solomon. Eliezer, as it is written, Before he finished speaking, behold, Rebecca came out. Moses, as it is written, As he concluded saying all these things, the ground split open... Solomon, as it is written, As Solomon concluded praying, the fire descended from the heavens...

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THE MAN TOOK A GOLDEN RING, A HALF-SHEKEL IN WEIGHT; AND TWO BRACELETS OF TEN SHEKELS WEIGHT OF GOLD FOR HER HANDS (24:22)

A half-shekel—to allude to the shekalim contributed by the people of Israel [for the construction of the Sanctuary in the desert], a half-shekel per head.

(Rashi)

AND HE GAVE STRAW AND PROVENDER FOR THE CAMELS... AND THERE WAS SET FOOD BEFORE HIM TO EAT (24:32-33)

First he fed the animals, and afterward he was served food. For it is forbidden for a person to taste anything until he feeds his animals.

(Midrash HaGadol)

AND HE SAID: "I WILL NOT EAT, UNTIL I HAVE TOLD MY ERRAND." AND HE SAID: "SPEAK" (24:33)

Said Rabbi Acha: The talk of the servants of the fathers is more desirable than the Torah scholarship of the children. For Eliezer's story, which takes up two or three pages in the Torah, is twice recounted, while many principles of Torah law are conveyed with a single word or letter.

(Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

AND SARAH, MY MASTER'S WIFE, BORE A SON TO MY MASTER IN HER OLD AGE; AND TO HIM HE HAS GIVEN ALL THAT HE POSSESSES (24:36)

Eliezer showed them a deed of bequest in which Abraham had given Isaac all his possessions, so that they should hurry to send their daughter.

(Rashi)

As the first Jewish marriage described by the Torah, the union of Isaac and Rebecca is the prototype of all subsequent Jewish marriages, both in the literal sense of building a home in Israel and in the broader sense of uniting the physical world with its cosmic soul, thereby fulfilling the Divine purpose in creation of making the world a dwelling place for G-d. In this endeavor is invested everything that Abraham possesses: all the resources—spiritual and material—with which the Almighty His people to the end of realizing His purpose in creation.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

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room in your father's house for us to lodge in?"

And she said to him: "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milka, whom she bore to Nachor."

She was Abraham's brother's granddaughter! Then she answered his second question: "We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in."

The Family of the Bride

Commentary

I ARRIVED TODAY AT THE WELL (24:42)

From Hebron to Charan is a 17-day journey, and Eliezer made the trip in three hours.

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 16)

AND HER BROTHER AND MOTHER SAID... (24:55)

But where was Bethuel? He wished to hinder it, and so he was smitten during the night.

(Midrash Rabbah)

WE WILL CALL THE GIRL, AND INQUIRE AT HER MOUTH (24:57)

From this we learn that a woman should not be given in marriage without her consent.

(Rashi)

ISAAC WENT OUT TO MEDITATE IN THE FIELD... AND BEHOLD, CAMELS WERE COMING (24:63)

Sometimes a person must go to his soulmate, and sometimes his soulmate comes to him. In the case of Isaac, his wife came to him, as it is written, "And he saw, and, behold, there were camels coming." Jacob, however, went to his wife as it is written, "And Jacob went out of Be'er Sheva..." (Genesis 28:10).

(Midrash HaGadol)

AND ISAAC BROUGHT HER INTO THE TENT [OF] HIS MOTHER SARAH (24:67)

This verse can also be punctuated "And Isaac brought her into the tent—his mother Sarah" implying that when she came into the tent she became, in effect, his mother Sarah.

Rebecca runs home, and Eliezer and his ten camels follow. There he is greeted by Rebecca's brother, Laban, who provides feed for his camels and water for him and his camel-drivers to wash their feet.

And there was set food before him to eat, but he said: "I will not eat, until I have told my errand."

And he said: "Speak."

And he said: "I am Abraham's servant."

"And G-d has blessed my master greatly... He has given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and menservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses."

"And Sarah, my master's wife, bore a son to my master when she was old; and to him he has given all that he has."

For as long as Sarah lived, a cloud (signifying the divine presence) hung over her tent; when she died, the cloud disappeared; but when Rebecca came, it returned.

As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open; at her death that openhandedness ceased; but when Rebecca came, it returned.

As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased; but when Rebecca came, they returned.

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND ISAAC WAS COMFORTED AFTER HIS MOTHER'S DEATH (24:67)

Such is the way of the world: As long as a person's mother is alive, he is attached to her; when she dies, he finds comfort in his wife.

(Rashi)

ABRAHAM TOOK A WIFE, AND HER NAME WAS KETURAH (25:1)

This is Hagar. She is called Keturah because her deeds were now as pleasing as the ketoret (the incense offered in the Holy Temple).

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND HIS SONS ISAAC AND ISHMAEL BURIED HIM IN THE CAVE OF MACHPEILLAH (25:9)

This implies that Ishmael did teshuvah (returned to a righteous life) and placed Isaac before himself.

(Rashi)

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The Torah now repeats the entire sequence of events—Abraham's instructions to Eliezer; Eliezer's arrival at the well; his prayer and the "test" he invented; Rebecca's appearance and her actions; Eliezer's gifts to her and his conversation with her—this time as told by Eliezer to Rebecca's family. Laban and Bethuel respond:

"The thing comes from G-d; we cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebecca is before you, take her, and go, and let her be your master's son's wife, as G-d has spoken."

The next morning, however, her mother and brother (Bethuel is mysteriously absent) have some last-minute objections: there are many arrangements to be made, a trousseau to be prepared. "Let the girl stay with us a year or ten months; after that she shall go."

Eliezer, however, insists that they must set out immediately. "Hinder me not, seeing that G-d has prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master."

And they said: "We will call the girl, and inquire at her mouth." And they called Rebecca, and said to her: "Do you want to go with this man?"

And she said: "I will go."

Marriage

And Rebecca and her maids arose, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man; and the servant took Rebecca and went his way.

And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the evening time; and he lifted up his eyes and saw, behold, camels were coming.

Rebecca lifted up her eyes and saw Isaac; and she fell from the camel.

And she said to the servant: "Who is this man who walks in the field to meet us?" And the servant said: "It is my master." And she took her veil, and covered herself...

And Isaac brought her into the tent [of] his mother Sarah. And he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her; and Isaac was comforted after his mother.

The Other Sons of Abraham

Our Parshah has one more event to relate before concluding:

Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bore him Zimran, and Yakshan, and Medan, and Midyan, and Yishbak, and Shuah.

The Torah, however, is quick to point out that these additional sons of Abraham were not to be included in the Abrahamic legacy:

Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from his son, while he yet lived, eastward, to the east country.

Thus the Torah concludes its account of Abraham's life:

And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: a hundred years, and seventy years, and five years. Then Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.

And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the Cave of Machpeilah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre; the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Het: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife.

The Torah also informs us that Ishmael died at age 137 years, after fathering twelve sons, each of whom was the prince of a domain; the territories of these twelve clans extended "From Havilah to Shur, which is before Egypt, all the way to Assyria."

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LIFE AFTER DEATH

The events recounted in the Torah section of *Chayei Sarah* (Genesis 23:1-25:18) all take place after Sarah's death. Not only that—they seem to all underscore the fact of her demise. First we read of Sarah's burial in the Machpeilah Cave in Hebron. Following that, we have the story of Rebecca's selection as a wife for Isaac and how she came to replace Sarah as the matriarch in Abraham's household. And then the Torah tells of the return of Hagar—whom Sarah had banished from Abraham's home.

Yet *Chayei Sarah* means “the life of Sarah”! How is this to be reconciled with the concept that the name of a Torah portion expresses its essential theme and message?

It turns out that lots of people believe in life after death. Two polls conducted by The Gallup Organization report that 79% of Americans believe that after they die their souls will be judged and sent to heaven or to hell, and that 33% believe in ghosts. An Internet poll informs us that 38% of those responding believe in reincarnation (though only 26% think that they themselves will be accorded that privilege).

There's a mixed message in these surveys. While they express a certain optimism regarding continuity of our precious selfhood, they also imply that our present state of existence is doomed to obsolescence. We may live on as a basking or roasting soul, a spooky apparition, or the neighbor's cat; but at a certain point, common wisdom has it, life as we know it will come to an end.

Jewish tradition has a more encouraging scenario. While it includes heaven and hell (though a very different heaven and hell than the cloud-borne country clubs and the subterranean fire pits depicted in *New Yorker* cartoons), reincarnation and even dybbuks, its central feature is *techiat hameitim*, the vivification of the dead. *Techiat hameitim* states that in the messianic age our souls will be restored to our resurrected bodies. In other words, life as our own soul inhabiting our own body—basically the life we know today—will resume.

But the sages of the Talmud go even further than that, stating that there is a level on which life extends beyond death without interruption. “Moses did not die,” they categorically state; “Our father Jacob did not die,” despite the fact that “the eulogizers eulogized, the embalmers embalmed, and the gravediggers buried.” Lest one interpret these statements allegorically, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, the greatest of the biblical and talmudic commentators) explains, “He seemed to them as if dead, but in truth he was alive.”

Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains that life as we know it can indeed survive death; the question is only what sort of life is it that we know before death.

When do you feel most alive? What is life to you—a good cup of coffee, the smell of baking bread, a stroll in the park on a sun-kissed day? Or is it the experience of seeing a project you've labored over for months finally come to fruition, or when struggling to explain something to your child the light of comprehension suddenly comes on in his eyes?

Life's pleasures are many and varied, but they can be divided into two general categories: the satisfaction of a personal need or desire, or the achievement of a certain impact on the lives of others. The first category offers many gratifying moments; but nothing can equal the fulfillment that comes when you make a difference in others' lives, when the world becomes different—better, smarter, holier—because of something you've done.

The first category ceases with the interruption of physical life. Once you're dead and buried, there are no more strolls in the park. But your impact on the world continues. If you taught something to someone, that person is now teaching it to someone else. If you acted kindly to someone, that person still feels good about it, is a better person for it, and is acting more kindly to others. If you made the world a better place, that improvement is now being built upon to make the world an even better place.

So does “life as we know it” extend beyond death? That depends on what you know life as. If life, to you, is getting the most you can of its resources for yourself, you have a limited time in which to get as much as you can, and then the fat lady sings and the

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curtain falls. If life, to you, is making a difference in the lives of others, you're going to live forever.

This is the message of the Torah reading of *Chayei Sarah*, in which "The Life of Sarah" occurs after her death. Ostensibly, the events of *Chayei Sarah* emphasize that fact that Sarah is no more; in truth, however, they proclaim that Sarah lives.

Together with Abraham, Sarah pioneered the Jewish settlement of the Land of Canaan; as described in the opening chapter of *Chayei Sarah*, her burial in the Cave of Machpelah achieved the first actual Jewish ownership of a piece of land in the Holy Land. Sarah devoted her life to the creation of the first Jewish family; the story of Rebecca's selection demonstrates how Sarah's successor embodied the ideals upon which Sarah founded the Jewish home. Even the return of Hagar expresses the extent of Sarah's impact on Jewish history: Sarah's banishment of Hagar and Ishmael was to remove their threat to Isaac's integrity as Abraham's heir; the return of Hagar, as described in *Chayei Sarah's* closing verses, achieved exactly that—it established Isaac as the torchbearer of the legacy of Abraham.

Thus the name *Chayei Sarah* expresses this Torah section's true import. Indeed, none of the earlier Torah sections that relate the events of Sarah's life before her death can merit the name "The Life of Sarah." These describe what, taken on its own, can be seen as a temporal life—a life with a beginning and an end, a life confined to a particular body and a particular span of time. The true *Chayei Sarah* comes to light in the events following her death, when the eternity of her life is revealed.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com

THE STORYTELLER

Said Rabbi Acha: The talk of the servants of the Fathers is more desirable than the Torah of the children. For Eliezer's story is twice recounted by the Torah, while many principles of Torah law are communicated only through allusion

The Midrash

Human beings love to talk. At times, it seems that we hardly trust a thought or feeling to be our own until we have communicated it to others. To this end, we have invented hundreds of languages and dozens of media—all to say what we feel needs saying.

Indeed, our capacity for self-expression lies at the very heart of our humanity. In the second chapter of Genesis, the Torah describes the creation of man: "And the L-rd G-d formed man [from] the dust of the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life. And man became a living soul." Onkelos, in his Aramaic translation/commentary on the Torah, translates the words "And man became a living soul," as "And man became a speaking spirit." In the philosophical and Kabbalistic works of our sages, man is called the speaker. (The entirety of creation is divided into four realms or kingdoms: *domem*, the silent or inanimate creations; *tzomeach*, growing things; *chai*, the animal world; and *medaber*, the speaker—man).

Would it not have been more fitting to define man by his intelligence or spirituality? Of course, the ability to communicate is a mark of intelligence. It is also an indication of spirituality—of the ability to transcend the self and relate to something other, different and even opposite than it. But there are other human faculties that exhibit these traits. The fact that man is named the speaker implies that the faculty of speech is the essential component of our purpose and mission in life.

Toil of the Mouth

The centrality of speech to man's purpose in creation is also expressed in the following Talmudic passage:

Said Rabbi Elazar: Every man was created in order to toil, as it is written (Job 5:7), "For man is born to toil." I still do not know, however, if he was created for the toil of the mouth or for the toil of work; when the verse says (Proverbs 16:26), The toiling soul... his mouth compels him, this tells me that he was created for the toil of the mouth. I still do not know, however, if he was created for the toil of Torah or for the toil of speech; when the verse (Joshua 1:8) says, This book of Torah should not depart from your mouth," this tells me that he was created for the toil of Torah. (Talmud, Sanhedrin 99b)

An important rule in Torah learning is that when a supposition is introduced by the sages, it remains a

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valid hypothesis even after it has been rejected in favor of another. For the very fact that it has been presented as a possibility implies that it is true, on some level. Ideas to which there is no truth on any level are not entertained in the first place (thus, Rabbi Elazar does not begin by saying, I do not know if man was created for toil or for relaxation; when the verse says, For man is born to toil, I know that he was created for toil—as he does with the other rejected suppositions). If we apply this to the above passage, it means that all three toils—the toil of work, the toil of speech, and the toil of Torah—are part of man's purpose; it is only that the toil of the mouth expresses a higher aspect of this purpose than the toil of work, and that within the toil of the mouth, the toil of Torah is loftier than the toil of speech.

What, exactly, are these three toils? What, in particular, is the toil of speech, and why is it greater than the toil of work, yet not as lofty as the toil of Torah?

The Spoken World

“From my flesh I perceive G-d,” proclaims the verse. Since G-d created us in His image, we can contemplate His personality (i.e., the manner in which He relates to creation) by examining the workings of our own souls. The reverse is also true: by examining what the Torah tells us about how G-d relates to our existence, we can understand much about the human personality and man's place in creation.

In describing the divine act of creation, the Torah does not say that G-d made a world, but that He spoke it. G-d said, “Let there be light, and there was light;” G-d said, “Let the earth sprout forth vegetation...” and it was so; and so with all other creations, each of which is contained, explicitly or implicitly, in the Ten Utterances with which G-d created the world.

For in creating the world, G-d was doing what we do when we speak: He was communicating. He was projecting of Himself to an audience—to a reality which (at least in its own perception) is outside of Him. As we do when we speak, G-d wished to see His own thoughts and feelings take form in a consciousness and perception other than His own.

When we speak, we emulate G-d's speaking the

world into being. We, too, create. We, too, extend ourselves beyond the reality of our own existence to recreate ourselves and our vision of reality in the minds, hearts and deeds of others.

Effort

If we understand speech, both in G-d and in ourselves, as synonymous with creativity, we begin to understand why the toil of speech is central to our uniqueness as human beings. But first, let us examine the statement, Man is born to toil.

This, of course, is a fact of life, as well as of human nature—we experience as meaningful and satisfying only that which we have gained by effort and struggle. If a person is not compelled to work for a living, he will embark on endeavors in which he must exert himself to achieve some goal. Retirement invariably withers both body and mind unless one starts a second career or challenges oneself in some other way. An effortless life is ultimately a life not worth living. In the words of our sages, unearned gifts are bread of shame which bring no satisfaction to their recipient.

Why, indeed, was man made this way? Certainly G-d, who is the essence of good, who is benevolent and merciful, could just as easily have created a world that is free of hardship, and have formed the nature of man so that life in such a world is meaningful and fulfilling. Why did He create man to toil and endow him with a nature that thrives only on struggle and challenge?

But in an effortless world, man would be nothing more than a passive beneficiary of G-d's gifts. He might derive satisfaction and pleasure from these gifts (were his nature so inclined), but his role in creation would be limited to that of recipient. Unless he were driven to toil—driven to acquire and achieve beyond what comes to him without difficulty—he could not be the partner with G-d in creation that G-d desires him to be.

We experience effort and toil when our deeds are met with resistance, when they are at variance with the status quo. An effortless deed is a deed that is fully consistent with the present constellation of forces in the universes; a deed that isn't challenged by anything because it changes nothing. A deed that, even if it is conducted with great fanfare, does not, in truth, do anything.

Toil defines the point at which we cease to be mere recipients, accepting the world as it is, and

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begin to be givers and contributors to G-d's world. The point at which we contest the present reality and begin acting as G-d's partners in the endeavor to build the world He desires.

Development, Creativity and Transcendence

On the most basic level, we achieve partnership with G-d through the toil of work—through our ongoing efforts to develop the resources of creation. Each time we plow and seed the earth to coax nourishment from it; each time we forge wood, stone and other materials into a home; each time we distill energy from matter; we are working. This is toilsome work, for we are combatting the inert state of these raw materials. It is G-dly work, for we are furthering His enterprise of forming an ordered and civilized world out of an initial state of chaos and formlessness. We are fulfilling the divine will expressed in the verse (Isaiah 45:18): “He did not create [the world] for chaos; He created it that it be settled.”

This, however, is the most rudimentary level of partnership with G-d: we contribute to G-d's work but are only involved at a lower, secondary plane. The innovative and creative aspects of the endeavor are solely the domain of the senior partner, while our role is limited to furthering what He has initiated. G-d, after all, created the world, while we only develop what He has created.

A higher level of partnership is achieved when we introduce our speech—our capacity for creativity—into our involvement with G-d's world. When we redefine reality by communicating our experience of it to others. When we speak worlds into being, as G-d spoke the world into existence. On this level, we are partners with Him not only in that we are both contributors, but also in that we are both creators.

This level of partnership, which the Talmud calls toil of the mouth, consists of two elements: the toil of speech and the toil of Torah.

Mirroring the Ten Utterances of creation are the Ten Commandments spoken by G-d at Sinai. If the Ten Utterances are the source code of the natural world, the Ten Commandments are the essence of a higher reality—the reality of Torah. The Torah embodies a divine vision of reality which supersedes

the natural reality: a reality of unadulterated goodness and perfection; a reality that is a consummate actualization of the divine will.

The Ten Utterances derive from the Ten Commandments, for the natural world, which was designed as the environment within which the Torah is to be realized, draws its essence and *raison d'être* from the Torah; yet they are a lowlier and coarser expression of the divine self-expression. The Zohar goes so far as to refer to the Ten Utterances as mundane words in relation to the sublime words of the Ten Commandments, saying that it is beneath G-d, so to speak, to utter the world into being, as it is not the way of the King to engage in mundane talk.

Thus the Talmud distinguishes between two areas of human creativity: the toil of speech, which are our creative efforts within the context of the natural world (speech being a reference to the Ten Utterances), and the toil of Torah—the effort to impose a higher, supra-natural reality upon the world by implementing the divine will, as expressed in the commandments of the Torah, in our daily lives.

(The toil of speech assumes its highest form in the endeavor of prayer, in which our material needs become the substance of our communication with G-d (see Talmud, Berachot 26b; Ohr HaTorah, Vayeishev 911a). But even this spiritualization of material life is within the context of the created reality, and is thus mundane words in relation to the speech of Torah.)

G-d in the Details

And yet, the Midrash also states that “The speech of the servants of the fathers is more desirable than the Torah of the children.”

In the 24th chapter of Genesis, the Torah relates the story of the journey of Abraham's servant, Eliezer, to Mesopotamia to find a bride for Abraham's son, Isaac. We read how Abraham summons Eliezer and sends him on his mission, instructing him to choose a bride from the family of Abraham's brother, Nachor. Eliezer arrives in Mesopotamia and prays to G-d, asking for His guidance in finding a worthy bride for his master's son. He then devises a sign: the maiden who, when asked for a drink of water, will offer to draw water for his camels as well, is the one destined to marry Isaac. Rebecca appears and fulfills all the requirements of the sign; when Eliezer asks after her family, he learns that she is a granddaughter of Nachor. The servant

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thanks G-d “for leading me on the path to the home of my master’s brother.”

Eliezer is invited to the home of Rebecca’s family. At this point, we read all the details of the events of that day for a second time—this time in Eliezer’s words, as he relates them to Rebecca’s family. The point of the story, once again, is the show of Divine Providence in the affairs of man. The matter has been ordained by G-d, agree Bethuel and Laban, Rebecca’s father and brother. We can say nothing, good or evil.

This long (67-verse) chapter evokes much discussion by the sages. Not only is the Torah uncharacteristically detailed in its description, but it twice recounts the entire story almost verbatim. This, in a book so concise that many complex laws are derived from an extra word or letter! Hence the conclusion that the Torah prefers the conversations of our forefathers’ servants to the intricacies of Torah law addressed to and studied by their descendants.

Eliezer’s story is a classic example of the toil of speech—of the manner in which we apply our creative and communicative skills to create a world in partnership with G-d. A series of events takes place at the city well of a Mesopotamian town and results in the marriage of a certain woman to a certain man. These are wholly natural events, strung together by what is commonly described as coincidence. But Eliezer transforms these events into speech—into a cohesive and meaningful narrative. Eliezer tells how he prayed to G-d for success, expressing his belief that what is about to unfold is G-d’s doing rather than the blind workings of fate; he asks for a sign, and presides over its fulfillment; he then tells the story to Bethuel and Laban, communicating to them what he has experienced and convincing them that “The matter has been ordained by G-d. In Eliezer’s experience and telling, a piece of the natural world is defined as the handiwork of G-d”, as an expression of the Creator’s involvement with His creation.

Ultimately, the study and implementation of Torah law ranks higher in the hierarchy of toils than the seeking of G-d within the workings of creation.

Through the toil of speech, one relates to the Creator only on the level of the Ten Utterances, whereas through Torah, one supersedes the natural reality, realizing a partnership with G-d that transcends the mundane talk of creation. Nevertheless, there is a specialty to the toil of speech that makes Eliezer’s story more desirable than the Torah of the children. G-d derives a special pleasure from His partnership with us as we go about our daily affairs, integrating Him into the most commonplace details of the narrative of our lives.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com