

## Parshas Chayei Saraf 5772

### TEACHINGS OF THE TOMBSTONES

#### THE GOLDEN YEARS

It was almost impossible not to notice that there was something very different about this particular *beis hakevaros* (cemetery). In hopes of attaining some explanation for the unique features he observed, the stranger directed some of his questions to a local passerby.

“Tell me, please,” the stranger asked, “it seems that everyone interred here lived for a relatively short period, as their ages are recorded on the headstone. Furthermore, the amount is recorded with a certain precision. Here is someone who lived twenty years and fifty days; over here is someone who was thirty years and ten days; and so on. What is the meaning of this unique arrangement?”

The bewildered visitor received his answer: “In the cemetery of our town, the graves are marked according to the number of years the individual really lived – that is, utilized his time. That person may have actually lived for eighty years, but – after factoring out the time wasted – he “lived” only twenty years and fifty days. His neighbor made use of thirty years and ten days worth of his allotted years; and so forth.”

While the above description (recorded in *Gesher Hachaim* 3:2) may appear somewhat glaring, it does provide a clear illustration of a vital teaching of our Sages. As the Mishnah in Avos states (2:8):

לזכר ולעילוי נשמת  
מִרְן הַגַּה"צ ר' נתן מאיר בן הרב משה יום טוב זצוק"ל

רָבֵן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי... הִלִּיז אֹמֵר, אִם לְמִדַּת תּוֹרָה הִרְבֵּה, אֶל תִּתְחַזֵּק טוֹבָה לְעַצְמְךָ, כִּי לְכַד נּוֹצְרֶת.

“Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai said: If you have studied much Torah, do not account greatness to yourself; for it is for this purpose that you were created.”

The Mishnah stresses that immersion in Torah study and observance is our *raison d'être*. When we devote too much time, energy or concern to peripheral pursuits, these are resources diverted from our primary mission. And – as depicted in the above illustration – only that which was designated toward our true purpose really counts in the final analysis.

#### THREE STRIKES...

To drive home this crucial point, R' Moshe Aharon Stern (the Kaminetzer Mashgiach) would relate the following hair-raising account:

A certain earnest young scholar was contemplating his spiritual future. Aware that he possessed certain shortcomings, he wished to be apprised of his spiritual standing. And so he sought out the counsel of a known *chochmas-yad-nikker*. (*Chochmas-yad* – or study of the hand – is a field involving the discernment of attributes and properties of the individual through the reading of the palm. The details and mechanics of this particular area of expertise are well beyond the knowledge of this writer and the scope of this forum but are documented in classical and mystical works. Reference is made here to the field and its practitioners [known as *chochmas-yad-nickers*] solely for recounting purposes.)

Upon emerging from the audience chamber, the

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
הַיְיָמָה בֵּית דּוֹד ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives  
to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

scholar appeared shaken. His colleague noticed that he appeared white as a sheet. “What did the sage tell you?” he asked his friend.

“He spoke to me about the idea of *gilgul* (reincarnation). When a person is set upon this world, the *neshamah* (soul) with which he is imbued is granted a specific task and charged with a particular quota to be accomplished over the course of a lifetime. Should the quota remain unfulfilled, the soul is forced to return, to be placed once again inside a physical body with the hopes of fulfilling its mission this time around. Only when the goal is accomplished can the *neshamah* enter the bliss of the afterlife. However, the process is not limitless; the soul is granted only three chances to fulfill its quota.

The *chochmas-yad-nikker*, upon studying my situation, gave me a chilling report. Apparently, my soul is on its third incarnation, and if things don’t improve soon...”

### THE DAYS AND THE YEARS

One individual who serves as a model for priorities and time-usage is our patriarch Avraham. R’ Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky (*Gesher Hachaim, ibid.*) employs the aforementioned ideas to explain a curious phrase in this week’s *parshah* concerning Avraham’s passing. The verse states:


וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר חָי מֵאֵת שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחִמֵּשׁ שָׁנִים.

(Translated loosely:) “And these are the years of Avraham’s life, which he lived: 175 years” (*Bereishis* 25:7).

Focusing on these two particular words – יְמֵי שְׁנֵי (literally: the days of the years of...) – the superfluity should be obvious. What exactly is meant by the “days of the years” of Avraham’s life? Were they his “days” or his “years”?

R’ Yechiel Michel explains that there exists a great difference between a life filled with long years and a

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life filled with long days. Someone can live many years, but these years may be devoid of days. The illustration that served as the opening of this article is a case in point. A person could technically live to be 100 years old but remain only a small child when measuring his true accomplishments. This is especially true when the measuring is performed by the Almighty (which is always the case, of course), as He does not use wealth or status as a yardstick for accomplishment.

Avraham Avinu was blessed with many years, as the verse continues (v.8): “And Avraham died at a ripe old age...” But not only did his life technically span many decades, it was also filled with many true accomplishments, of good deeds, perfection of character and devotion to the Almighty. Hence, he merited not only long life, but years filled with complete days of real achievement, something we, as his offspring, will hopefully aspire to and merit, as well.