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THE TORAH ANY TIMES

A PUBLICATION OF
TORAHANYTIME.COM



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Manish ben Esther

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Shlomo Zalman ben
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RABBI ELCHONON ZOHN

The Gift of Life

ויחי יעקב

And Yaakov lived... (Bereishit 47:28)

Tomorrow morning, when each of us wake up, the first action we are going to take is that of reciting *Modeh Ani*. As we open our eyes, we are going to thank Hashem for returning our *neshama* to us and granting us another day of life. Our very first thoughts are going to be directed towards the most basic yet most important aspect of life: life itself.

Yet, if you have ever thought of it, isn't this slightly depressing? The phrase which is to serve as the start and foundation of our day prompts us to think of the transience of existence and the fleeting nature of our time in this world. Why would we want to begin our day on such a morose note?

Let me share with you a story I once heard from Dr. David Pelcovitz.

For a young boy whose father served as the groundskeeper at Fenway Park, the baseball stadium of the Boston Red Sox, it was always a treat to be taken along for a day's work. And so, one day, the boy's dream materialized. His father asked if he would like to come along to the stadium. Of course, the boy happily complied.

Now finding himself inside the stadium, the boy stood there mesmerized. To gaze at the perfectly cut green grass, smoothed-out infield and thousands of surrounding seats was overwhelming. And then the boy in fact stepped onto the field. Taking hold of a bat and ball, he walked towards home plate and stood there. He imagined himself as the greatest baseball player of all time. Tossing the ball up into the air, he clutched his bat tightly and swung his arms around in a forward motion. But he missed. The ball simply tumbled down to the ground.

Picking up the baseball again, he positioned himself, lightly threw the ball into the air, and swung with as much precision and strength as he could. But no contact. The ball rolled around in the dirt just a few inches away from where he stood.

Looking on from a distance was the boy's father and colleague. Having seen the boy toss the ball up and embarrassingly miss more than just a handful of times, they began to wonder what exactly he was trying to accomplish. His dreams of becoming a professional baseball player did not seem anywhere near realistic.

Making their way over to the boy, the father and friend saw the boy repeat the same process. Up went the ball, back and forth went the boy's arm and down fell the ball. The same scene repeated itself over and over again. "Young man," interrupted the father's colleague, "what exactly are you doing? I don't mean to squash your dreams, but the Major Leagues are not for those who keep on throwing up the ball and missing it."

The young boy gently looked back at the man. "Sir, have you ever seen a pitcher like that?" The boy had pitched one ball after another to himself, and not once was it hit. He had indeed pitched a perfect game.

The realization that every breath of life is a blessing is the biggest motivator to accomplish our dreams.

Life is all about perspective. When we deal with the realities of life and death, it is important that we recognize every day to be an invaluable gift. Reciting *Modeh Ani* is the furthest thing from depressing. To the contrary, the realization that every breath of life is a blessing not to be taken for granted is the biggest motivator and impetus to accomplish our dreams every day. We can look at life as disappearing little by little and look at our missed attempts as failures, or we can approach life with gumption and gusto and view the ball falling to the ground as the indication of a perfect pitch.

This is what Shlomo Hamelech reminds us of when stating, “Better to go to a house of mourning than a house of rejoicing... and the living should take it to heart” (*Koheles 7:2*). Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest of all men, encourages us to attend a funeral over a wedding for the former teaches a transformative lesson. But that transformative message that life does not last forever should not be one which makes us excessively somber and impair us to move on with life. It should be one which inspires us to maximize every moment of every day, motivates us to dream about the

limitless potential we have and encourages us to keep on swinging our bats until that one day when finally, just finally, we reach our true inner greatness.

REBBETZIN TZIPORAH HELLER

From Floundering to Flourishing

והשיב אתכם אל ארץ אבותיכם

And I will bring you back to the land of your fathers (Bereishit 48:21)

With Avi growing up as a young irreligious boy, he had little exposure to the rich Torah lifestyle many other boys his age experience. Yet, life's challenges for Avi were only that much more compounded as he was without either of his parents. And so, as it happened, he was admitted into Rabbi Yitzchak Dovid Grossman's yeshiva, *Migdal Ohr*, located in Migdal Ha'Emek, Israel. Yet that didn't mean all his problems were over with.

For Avi, learning Gemara was an arduous task. He and his Gemara were not the best of friends. Yet he pushed himself as much as he possibly could and persevered despite his many vicissitudes and little knowledge of Torah. When he later turned eighteen, he began thinking that maybe it was time for a little change. Perhaps it was time to enroll in a different yeshiva. Looking into his options of leaving *Migdal Ohr*, he finally made up his mind that doing so would in fact be the best decision. Yet before he could pack up his bags, he was asked to meet with Rabbi Grossman.

“You have a few options,” said Rabbi Grossman. “You are a wonderful boy, and I would think that given your talents, personality and future, you would thrive in a vocational school where you would be able to learn a skill and still seriously remain dedicated to learning Torah.”

But Avi had something else on his mind. “What about a full-time yeshiva?” While Avi had undeniably experienced difficulty studying Gemara, he was passionate about Torah learning. But Rabbi Grossman felt that going through with his plan would not be best at his stage of development. “You should definitely remain fully committed to your learning, but I think that given your circumstances, you would best fit into a more relaxed environment where you can as well study for a profession.”

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But Avi had already set his mind elsewhere. Packing his bags as he had planned, he left the yeshiva and headed not for a school where he could dually learn Torah and for a career. He instead headed to a different yeshiva which was even more intense than his previous one. But, as time would tell, the hours and seriousness of learning was not something Avi was ready for yet.

It wasn't long before he rarely opened his Gemara and his learning began to dwindle. Spending hours outside of the yeshiva, he soon found a group of friends who received a salary to travel around and fundraise for various causes. Traveling from one location to another, he raised a considerable sum of money. With more and more money trickling in, it was not long before he and the rest of his fundraising group were caught in mishandlings and brought to the police station.

Now Avi was nineteen years old, out of yeshiva, with no job and imprisoned in the middle of the night in Tel Aviv. "Is there anyone you would like to call?" asked the police officer. There stood Avi wondering who he could call. He couldn't call his father nor his mother nor any of his relatives. He didn't have anyone to call. But then he realized that he had someone as close to him as a father. "Yes, there is," Avi said. And with that, he picked up the phone and dialed Rabbi Grossman's phone number in the middle of the night.

"Rabbi? Sorry for waking you." Before Avi could get out another word, Rabbi Grossman spoke up. "Avi? Is that you?" After Avi relayed his current situation, Rabbi Grossman said, "Avi, don't worry. I am coming to pick you up."

And so, there was Rabbi Grossman driving in the middle of the night from Migdal Ha'Emek to Tel Aviv. Avi went on to return to a yeshiva suitable for him and slowly grow in his learning and love of Torah. He was helped to find a job as well as a *shidduch* and continue learning at a happy and reasonable pace. Aside from Avi and his Gemara reuniting and now becoming best of friends, he was rerouted on a direction in life that would lead him to true meaning and fulfillment.

What children and students need more than anything else is the gentle love and care of a parent and teacher. For Avi, at a moment when he had no one to turn to, he finally found someone. And who was that individual? His Rebbe who had genuinely taken interest in him. It doesn't take much. Sometimes just a simple smile and warm hello is all that is needed. And from there, the future life of a Jew who would otherwise be floundering is flourishing.

But then he realized that he had someone as close to him as a father.

RABBI EYTAN FEINER

The Jewish Body and Soul

במערה אשר בשדה המכפלה... שמה קברו את אברהם ואת שרה אשתו...

In the cave that is in the field of Machpelah... there they buried Avraham and Sarah, his wife... (Bereishit 49:30-31)

Rav Michel Zilber in his book *Tipah min ha'yam* makes the fascinating observation that although many great individuals are recorded in the Torah as having passed away, the first instance where any mention is made of Jewish burial is where Avraham Avinu buries Sarah Imeinu in Parshas Chayei Sarah. Why in fact is this so? Why do we find no indication of *kevurah*, burial, anywhere before in the Torah?

Rav Zilber explains that although people were of course buried, Avraham and Sarah introduced an entirely new concept of burial. Until that time, the general perspective on burial was limited and narrow. Burial was performed because



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of the need to remove the corpse and its accompanying stench in the aftermath of natural decay. The putrid odor and unsightly view of the body was something repulsive and necessary to be done away with. But that was as far as the purpose of *ke'vurah* went. That was the common understanding and full scope of death and burial in the minds of people.

Avraham and Sarah, however, brought to light a far more profound and novel idea. The same Avraham Avinu, about whom Chazal (*Kiddushin* 82a, *Yoma* 28b) tell us fulfilled the entire Torah and transmitted it to the next generation, understood that a body is not merely composed of flesh and blood. There is a *nes'hama*, a soul, which is housed within the body and infuses it with the holiness of Torah, *mitzvos* and good deeds. Throughout the lifetime of an individual, the body serves as a receptacle to the *nes'hama*, which in turn uplifts and elevates the body. And even after the soul departs and leaves a person unable to carry out *mitzvos* any longer, the body remains intact with holiness. It is comparable to a Sefer Torah which possesses innate sanctity and contains much more than its external parchment, ink and letters.

On this account, just as a Sefer Torah possesses *kedusha* and requires burial underground upon its decomposition and wearing out, so does the physical body. The body served as no less than a home to a Divine spark of spirituality and must be treated with utmost dignity and respect and laid down to rest with care and concern.

Avraham and Sarah thus redefined for mankind the scope and meaning behind burial. The Jewish body is quite literally like a Sefer Torah, having achieved unparalleled levels of *kedusha* throughout its journey on earth, and thereby mandates not merely stowing away, but dignified and honorable burial.

For this reason, not coincidentally, the Parsha where we are first introduced to this idea is named *Chayei Sarah*, the *life* of Sarah. It is when the body loses its last vestige of the *nes'hama* and is ready for burial that we can look back in hindsight throughout the *life* of the person and appreciate just how spiritually elevated they made their body by means of all the Torah they learned, *mitzvos* they performed and good deeds they carried out.

Parshas Chayei Sarah is thus given the first mention of burial in the Torah for it is there that its true intent and meaning is conveyed. The body of a Jew is something which shines forth with Torah, *mitzvos* and kindness, and indeed, should be treated with no less care and respect than a Sefer Torah.

A SHORT MESSAGE FROM

Mrs. Chaya Reich

I once came across a refrigerator magnet which sent such a simple yet inspiring message: "Who we are is a gift from Hashem; what we make of ourselves is our gift to Hashem and to ourselves." Our inborn traits and characteristics – pretty, smart, musical, quick, organized – are gifts Hashem has given us and are to be embraced and appreciated. Yet, there is still much work to be done from our end. We are to take those qualities and use them to better ourselves and our surroundings, grow closer to Hashem and attain that spiritual greatness awaiting us all.

The Jewish body is quite literally like a Sefer Torah, having achieved unparalleled levels of kedusha throughout its journey on earth.