

The Circle of Life

As we open up this week's *parasha*, we detect a sharp contrast between *Parashat Vayera* and *Parashat Hayei Sara*. In *Parashat Vayera*, unbelievable, cosmic, world-changing events occurred, whirlwinds that would make headlines. Angels visited Avraham, Sodom was destroyed, Lot's wife turned to salt, and Avraham nearly sacrificed his son. Each awesome event made an impression on the entire world.

Then comes *Parashat Hayei Sara*, which seems to deal with very different events. In contrast to *Parashat Vayera*, this *parasha* does not deal with earth-shattering events. Avraham buries Sarah and seeks to find a wife for Yitzhak – down-to-earth, everyday activities.¹ Yes, obviously there were miracles, like Eliezer's *kefitzat haderekh* when traveling to Haran and the water rising up to Rivka, but in contrast to *Vayera*, the types of occurrences are drastically different. The events in *Parashat Vayera* would never happen to us. Fire and brimstone raining down on a city like in Sodom? The *Akeda*? *Malakhim* coming for a meal? These things don't happen in every generation. The stories in *Hayei Sara*, conversely, are not dramatic like those recounted in *Parashat Vayera*.

1. There are some commentaries that even refer to this as a *nisayon* for Avraham. After being on such a spiritual high, he had to deal with the mundane negotiation with Efron the Hittite over a burial plot.

What's the message of the juxtaposition of these two *parshiyot*? Rav Adin Steinsaltz suggests the following.²

Throughout our lives, we experience hectic times that require a lot of effort, action and physical and emotional strength, while at other times, life is quiet, peaceful and even boring. No matter which life cycle we are experiencing, we need to serve HaKadosh Barukh Hu to the best of our ability.

There's one lifecycle that is full of extremes, on a personal level and a national level. For example, Tishrei is an extreme time period: There are *selihot*, Rosh HaShana, *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, *Tzom Gedalya*, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Something is always happening, and emotions take a front seat. We often experience a spiritual high during this period. Similarly, on a personal level, we all have moments of excitement and of *simha*, and God forbid, sometimes the opposite. We experience emotional ups and downs. That's one lifecycle type.

The second type of life cycle is that of the day to day, when things are routine and seem uneventful. There are always bumps in the road, but they can be little speed bumps. These are days with no major detours: just life as usual.

Even the cycle of the year can follow this rule. For example, in the spring and summer, life is busy. From Passover, it's exciting: Passover, *Sefirat HaOmer*, *Pesah Sheini*, *Lag BaOmer*, Shavuot. Then the High Holy Days: Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simhat Torah. Then, suddenly, as winter approaches, things quiet down and Marheshvan enters.

On an individual level, we waver between these two types. Sometimes we are extremely busy and preoccupied with significant events, and at other times, we continue with our uneventful daily routine.

These are the different stages and time periods of our life, and they parallel *Parashat Vayera* and *Parashat Hayei Sara*. *Parashat Vayera* represents the extreme events and feelings, while *Parashat Hayei Sara* signifies the day-to-day activities. We have to realize, though, that the extremes go in both directions. Life is like a seesaw. Sometimes, if we have a big high, we swing the other way right afterward. Sometimes

2. Rav Adin Steinsaltz, *Hayei Olam* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011), 43.

we feel empty after a Yom Tov ends, or after a family *simha*, or perhaps even after Shabbat, because we have to return to our normal work week.³

In life, we must recognize that there are sometimes *Parashat Hayei Sara* days, and other days are *Parashat Vayera* days. Sometimes, we are on a high, and at other times, we are going with the flow. Our duty is to fulfill our mission as an *oved Hashem* in both situations. We have to make the day to day exciting and to try to normalize extreme events. Avraham flourished in both scenarios, and we should emulate his example.

3. *Arukh HaShulhan, Orach Hayim 297:1*, states that we use spices at Havdala because our *neshama* feels let down after Shabbat.