

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Chayei Sarah

How do we Learn to Appreciate Our Loved Ones While They are still in Our Lives?

### Why do People Tend to Only Appreciate What They Lose?

We learn about the passing of the righteous Sarah in *Parashat Chayei Sarah*. While Avraham mourned the loss of his dear wife Sarah, he also knew how to appreciate her during her lifetime. This is despite the natural inclination to notice the bad rather than the good; as the saying goes, "You never know what you have until it's gone." This is due to the negative bias that we all suffer from because the human brain has a natural tendency to focus on negative experiences or interactions more than on positive ones. For example, I never understood why anyone would praise my garden. In my eyes, most of the plants look sagging and dried out, with brown withering leaves. When I think of my garden the memory of all the plants that died pops up. So, when my husband bought me new garden plants, instead of appreciating their beauty and the gesture, I was ungrateful because his gift triggered a negative memory of the same kinds of plants that had died for me in the past. Our lives are filled with evidence of how easy it is to fixate on the negative and ignore the blessings. For example, we all take water for granted and never give it another thought. But if we lose access to it, we notice it fast and will do anything to get it back ASAP. There is a practice described by the Code of Jewish Law that when a person passes away, one should spill out the water stored in the home in which the person died and the water of the adjacent homes (Rav Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 339:4.4). What could be a reason for this strange custom? During the Israelites' desert wandering Miriam, the prophetess had an enormous impact on the nation. Through her merit, the Israelites were provided with water. Perhaps, during her lifetime, Miriam was even taken for granted. However, with her passing, her huge impact became evident. Suddenly, there was no water. If the people had not previously appreciated Miriam's righteousness, at her death they could no longer ignore her tremendous impact. Perhaps the custom of spilling water when a person passes away is to remember that every person – even if they are far from Miriam's greatness – their impact on the family and community is still as vital as water and will be sorely missed. It is too bad that we often don't appreciate the significant people in our lives adequately. Only when we lose them do we realize their true greatness. This happens to me on a small scale each year when my husband visits his parents in the USA, and it also happened to me with staff and students who left the midrasha. It takes a great effort to overcome the natural negative bias and focus on the positive qualities and the contribution of people while they are still in our lives.

### Avraham's Love and Appreciation for Sarah His Faithful Partner

Although it never states explicitly in the Torah that Avraham loves Sarah, their mutual respect and appreciation are clear from their interaction and their teamwork as partners and lightworkers. Both equally participated in teaching the world about serving the one and only G-d (*Bereishit* 12:5 with Rashi). Avraham greatly trusted Sarah knowing that nothing evil would befall her, due to her spiritual protective energy field created by her exceptional modesty. This is what is written, "A woman of valor is the crown of her husband" (*Mishlei* 12:4). This is Avraham who would lament over Sarah as it states above, "Sarah died..." Avraham began crying about her, reciting: "A woman of valor who can find, the heart of her husband trusted in her..." (*Mishlei* 31:10-11). When? At the time when he told her, "Say please that you are my sister..." (*Bereishit* 12:13) (*Midrash*

*Tanchuma, Chayei Sarah*, Chapter 4). The Midrash continues to expound each verse of the *Eishet Chayil* as Avraham's tribute to Sarah and as his testimony to their closeness and how Sarah was his faithful partner throughout all of Avraham's great feats. It is therefore not surprising that Avraham listened to and obeyed Sarah on more than one occasion, for example when she told him to take Hagar as a wife (*Bereishit* 16:2-4). Although in his love for Sarah, it was very distasteful to Avraham to take an additional wife, he complied, reluctantly to honor Sarah's request. Scripture does not state, "And he did so." Rather it says that he listened to Sarah's voice, indicating that even though Avraham greatly desired to have children, he did not do so without her permission. Even now it was not his intention to build up a family from Hagar, and that his children be from her. His intent was merely to do Sarah's will... Scripture further informs us that Avraham did not hurry the matter until Sarah took Hagar and gave her to him. Again, Scripture mentions Sarah Avraham's wife... (Ramban, *Bereishit* 16:2). When the Torah mentions that both Avraham and Sarah were זקנים/*zekeinim* (*Bereishit* 18:12), it alludes to Avraham's *Chachmah* (wisdom) and Sarah's *Binah* (Repentance and analytic intuition). These two attributes are lovers that never separate. Likewise, the love and appreciation that Avraham had for Sarah made them inseparable (Based on the Chozeh of Lublin, *Divrei Emet* on *Beha'alotcha*). We too can train ourselves to appreciate our loved ones while they are still in our lives. The more we exert conscious effort to look for the good and express it the easier it becomes.

### Being Blessed by the Source of All

**ספר בראשית פרק כד פסוק א ואברהם זקן בא בימים והשם ברוך את אברהם בכל:**

"Avraham was old, advanced in days, and Hashem had blessed Avraham with everything"

Although Avraham had gone through many challenges and he was still grieving over losing Sarah, the Torah calls him "blessed with everything." Various rabbis dispute what blessing this refers to. According to one opinion, Avraham was blessed with riches, possessions, honor, longevity, and children, which are all the treasures of humanity. Rabbi Meir said that Avraham was blessed in that he did not have a daughter. Rabbi Yehuda says: "On the contrary, the blessing was that he had a daughter." Others say that he did have a daughter and her name was *Bakol* (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 16b). This confirms the saying of Rebbetzin Mazal Goldstein, "It is a blessing to have but it is also a blessing not to have." If Avraham had a daughter, it would surely be a blessing but if he didn't have a daughter, it would also be a blessing that he wouldn't have to worry about finding her a proper husband, which was challenging for Avraham as he wouldn't have wanted his daughter to marry 'out' and be influenced by immoral people. Thus, the Talmud reflects how everything can be a blessing when we have an attitude of gratitude. On a mystical level, the verse refers to Avraham's great perception which reached the level of Bakol - In all. Whoever is blessed in 'all' is blessed with heaven and earth. The level of Bakol emanates from the source of all which is Hashem as it states Hashem blessed Avraham Bakol (Based on Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 24:1). The word Bakol hints that the Holy One, blessed be He, has an attribute called *Kol* (All) because He is the foundation of everything. It is with reference to this attribute that it says, "I am the Eternal that makes 'Kol' (all)" (*Yesha'yahu* 44:24; Ramban, *Bereishit* 24:1). Aside from the mystical implications, we can learn from Avraham that when we maintain our connection with the source of blessings and work on viewing everything, we face in life, in a positive perspective we can learn to feel blessed through thick and thin.

### Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Chayei Sarah

When you show your loved ones your appreciation, you'll deepen your connections with your favorite people and feel happier in your life. There are lots of ways to express appreciation, but sometimes it is best to keep it simple with a simple, "Thank you," or "I really appreciate you." If you want to make it more meaningful or personal, go into detail about how they helped and supported you.

- Give a Gift – Giving a gift shows your loved ones that you are grateful for them and value the role they play in your life. It doesn't need to be an expensive or fancy gift, remember it's the thought that counts.
- Write An Appreciation Note – Expressing gratitude to your loved ones in writing lets them know that their efforts haven't gone unnoticed. Your appreciation letter doesn't have to be long or wordy to make a big impression. Keep it simple and sincere by providing an example of how they went above and beyond for you. Then, wrap it up and let them know your great appreciation.
- Compliment Them – A simple compliment can go a long way in making your loved ones feel appreciated. In fact, studies have found that receiving a compliment makes your brain react just like it would if you were paid a monetary award. To make the greatest impact be specific and sincere.
- Create Something Homemade – Not all gifts have to be store-bought. Instead, a homemade gift can make your loved ones feel especially appreciated, as they'll know that you took time out of your busy schedule to create something just for him or her.
- Lend a Listening Ear – Listening is perhaps the world's best way to show appreciation. When you lend a supportive ear and listen with curiosity, care, and compassion, your loved one feels appreciated and valued. Plus, your connection and bond will truly deepen.
- Do Something They Enjoy – Spend quality time with your loved ones to show your gratitude. Even better, put them first and consider doing something that they really enjoy that isn't particularly your cup of tea. At the very least, you'll learn something new.
- Make a Photo Album – A photo album or a little movie can help show your loved ones how much you appreciate them by reminiscing about all the fun things you've done together. You can do it the old-fashioned way with a scrapbook and pictures or make a digital album or movie with one of many online programs.
- Help Out – Feel free to return the favor. For example, if you are a Shabbat guest offer to help clean, to watch the kids, or help with grocery shopping. No matter what you choose, lending a hand will make others feel appreciated and valued.
- Say "Thank You" – It may be easily overlooked, but a simple word of thanks can go a long way. Tell others how much you appreciate them and be clear and specific about the things you appreciate.
- Remember Their Birthday – People really feel valued when we remember their birthday, and today it is so easy with all the automatic reminders. Whether you bake them a birthday cake, send flowers, or a birthday card, or even just give them a call, it can uplift others more than you can imagine.