



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Sarah, Esther, and the Sleepy Students

Jews live their lives within the framework of the Jewish calendar. At this time of year, we identify strongly with the narratives contained in the weekly Torah portions that we read in the synagogue. Our thoughts are with the biblical characters of the current *parshiyot*. We live in the company of Abraham and Sarah, Lot, Hagar and Ishmael, and Isaac and Rebecca.

If we are not thinking of the heroes and villains of the *parsha* of the week, we have an alternative. We can turn our thoughts to the recent holidays or to the ones which we shall soon celebrate. The holiday of Succoth is now part of the rapidly fading past, so we might be thinking of Chanukah, which is but a few weeks away. We are certainly not yet thinking of Purim.

The list of biblical heroines whose stories delight our children and inspire us at this time of year does not yet include Queen Esther. In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Chayei Sarah* (*Genesis* 23:1-25:18), we do encounter two queenly women. We mourn the death of the matriarch Sarah, and we

admire Rebecca's ability to live up to the spiritual standards of the mother-in-law she never met.

But Esther? There is neither trace nor hint of her existence.

So why would I be writing about Esther at this time of year? Purim is still many months away, and there are other female role models in the current Torah portions. Even Chanukah, which occurs much sooner than Purim, features feminine heroines such as Yehudit. Where does Esther shine in?

For the answer let us turn to the Midrash and to that singular sage, Rabbi Akiva. We know that Rabbi Akiva lived a remarkable life, underwent many changes, became a preeminent Torah scholar, and died a martyr.

The Midrash introduces us to Rabbi Akiva in reference to the very first verse in this week's Torah portion. It is a verse which seems to require no exegesis. The verse simply says, "Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years." What further explanation or commentary is necessary? She lived a long and productive life. What more is there to say?

To answer this question, we must remember that Rabbi Akiva was, first and foremost, a teacher. Like every teacher, he had a difficult task. Some students paid attention to Rabbi Akiva's lectures some of the time, but few, if any, listened attentively to every lecture. Like every teacher before and since, Rabbi Akiva had to devise methods to gain the attention

of his disciples.

And so, the Midrash takes us into Rabbi Akiva's classroom. We really should consider this quite a privilege, for there are very few opportunities given in rabbinic literature to actually enter the classroom of one of our sages, let alone a sage as prominent as Rabbi Akiva.

Here is the Midrashic passage: "Rabbi Akiva was sitting and expounding Torah. His audience fell asleep. He tried to awaken them, and said, 'What motivated Queen Esther to reign over one hundred and twenty and seven provinces? We must assume that Esther, as a descendant of Sarah who lived for one hundred and twenty and seven years, considered it proper to reign over one hundred and twenty and seven provinces.'" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 58:3)

What are we to learn from this cryptic passage? To those of us who are teachers, there is a measure of comfort to be derived from learning that Rabbi Akiva too had difficulty maintaining the attention of his students. We also learn that his students were fully aware of the role that the number 127 plays both in the book of *Genesis* and in the book of *Esther*. We can assume that there is something about Rabbi Akiva's mention of this coincidence that awakened the sleepy classroom. But surely there is a much more profound lesson to be learned here.

Many commentators have searched for this deeper meaning. They point out that Sarah's life was a very full one, and at every stage she displayed the vigor of the seven-year-old child, the idealism of the twenty-year-old, and the wisdom of the aged centenarian. No moment went to waste. She led an active life, overcame numerous

frustrations and obstacles, and prevailed. Her life was the paradigm of a life of meaning and accomplishment.

If there is a lesson to be learned from her life, it is that every year is valuable, and so is every month and every week and every day and every hour. If we are to translate 127 years into 127 provinces, then each year is an entire province, each month a region, each week a city, each day a neighborhood, each hour a street, each minute a building, and every second an entire room.

If one allows himself a second of slumber, he forfeits a room. If one sleeps for a week, he loses an entire city. Every segment of time represents a significant opportunity, and with every wasted moment opportunities are lost.

This is Rabbi Akiva's lesson to his sleepy students. "You're not merely dozing off and enjoying idle daydreams. You are wasting time, killing time, and in the process losing opportunities which will not present themselves again. If you miss a moment of a Torah lecture, you create a void that can never again be filled."

Rabbi Akiva's lesson is a lesson to all of us. In contemporary terms, it is a lesson about time management. Time is a gift, but it is an ephemeral gift. A moment lost can never be retrieved.

But Rabbi Akiva insists that this is not his lesson, but Sarah's lesson. It is the legacy that she left for her descendants. Queen Esther grasped that legacy. She did not assume the role of a passive queen, but actively reigned over all of her 127 provinces. She studied their needs, recognized their individual differences, and helped each of them best utilize their unique resources. As Grandmother Sarah valued each and every one of

her years, so too did Esther value every one of her many provinces.

So must we all learn to utilize all of our blessings to the fullest, whether they be the blessing of longevity or the blessing of political power, the blessing of wealth or the blessing of grandchildren. Living a full life means appreciating all of our blessings and making the most of them.

What wonderful teachers we have had, and how differently and creatively they taught us these lessons. Sarah taught them in the context of the family tent. Esther taught them from her royal palace. Rabbi Akiva taught them from his classroom lectern.

Whatever our place in life, following their lessons will lead to a life of meaning and purpose, the kind of life for which we all strive.

Thus, although this week's Torah portion carries Sarah's name in its very title, she would be the first to make room for her progeny, Esther, to join her in teaching her lesson to us. Esther too has a place in *Parshas Chayei Sarah*. ■