

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Chayei Sara

“And Sarah was a hundred years and seven years and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah.” (Bereishis 23:1)

This week’s parsha records the events which follow immediately after the death of Sarah. It begins with a verse which records her age at the time of her passing: 127 years old. There is an unusual syntax that appears in this pasuk which is noted by the Sages: the word “shanah”, “year,” is repeated in each clause of the phrase which refers to Sarah’s age. Thus: “a hundred **years** and seven **years** and twenty **years** old.”

The Sages explain that there is a hidden message here. Sarah was as innocent of sin as a twenty-year-old when she was 100 years old and was as beautiful as a seven-year-old child when she was twenty. This begs the question: shouldn’t we look at the woman in her prime as an exemplar of beauty, and at the child as a model of innocence?

Rabbi Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that in the eyes of the Sages, the very opposite is true. We ought to look to the twenty-year-old for innocence rather than beauty. This is because it is her real virtue. True innocence is not the naivete of childhood, but the achievement of virtue through the struggle against one’s natural urges. It is likewise the

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unaffected beauty of a child which is admirable as a quality in and of itself, as opposed to the contrived, conscious beauty we so blindly pursue.

The Sages comment further on the end of the verse: “These were the years of the life of Sarah’: All of them were equal for good.” Sarah’s life was full of suffering. It would have been very easy for her to wish for a different life, or even worse. Nonetheless, Rabbi Hirsch explains, she preserved her faith and equilibrium every day and every year until her salvation came.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Asher Coleman

