

# **Parashat Chayey Sarah**

## **"חיי שרה"**

### **Book of Genesis**

"The concept "*hazara b'teshuvah*" (repentance, return to the faith) is one of the most distorted concepts in the history of Jewish thought and in the Hebrew language".

Thus opens the third section of the ninth chapter of Dov Alboim's book – [A Walk through the Void](#). The phrase "*Hozer B'Teshuvah*" in Modern Hebrew refers to a person who has become more observant of the Jewish commandments, as per the Ultra Orthodox *halacha* (Jewish religious laws). Luckily for me, Alboim goes on to state that the Kabbalistic and Hassidic literature turns this conventional meaning of the phrase "*teshuvah*" (repentance) on its head. The concept of "*teshuvah*" as depicted in this literature is a process that is not necessarily intended to bring about G-d's forgiveness or even our fellow man's forgiveness for sins that we have committed.

The depth of the "*teshuvah*" has to do with the ability of one to change the root of his errant ways, of his objectionable habit, and to consciously return to that moment in time when his/her life began to go in a wrong direction, and from that moment on to begin to interpret his/her life from a totally different perspective. True "*teshuvah*" brings about a substantial, palpable change in one's own personal history.

Alboim further writes that it is fashionable nowadays to view the history of one's life as comprised of the web we weave into our own consciousness and that of those around us – that invisible line that we draw to logically connect the various events of our lives.

Thus, if I want to "renew myself", I must reinterpret my life in a new and different way than I have done thus far. But how can I reinvent my own life story? This has been a relevant question for many people at different times of their lives.

To do so, I need a new interpretation, a new story – strong enough to change me organically, so that even the very cells of my body will respond to it and be convinced of its truth.

I have known for a long time that I am unable to tell lies that are a figment of a false consciousness.

Per Dov Alboim, in order to reinvent my life story and to truly change, I must first establish a clear reference point, a point in time from which to begin my story. I must return to that point, the place where I first felt my own internal pain. To that end, I

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have chosen to share, in brief, the words that I prepared for the Hebrew Union College's booklet for today's ordination ceremony.

In the Bible and in ancient cultures in the Middle East, a name serves not only as a means of identifying a person, but is also an expression of religious-cultural characteristics.

A name creates an affinity; a connection between its bearer and the various aspects and indeed the fate or *karma* associated with the name. Because a name and its *karma* are so intertwined, changing a man's name changes his destiny. Take for example, Abram who became Abraham and from that moment on became "אב המון גוים" (the father of a multitude of nations) (Genesis 17:5). Sarai is blessed with a name change to Sarah (Genesis 17:15). Likewise, Jacob is blessed by being doubly called by the name of Israel (Genesis 17:32, Genesis 35:10).

Midrash *Tanchuma* for *Parashat Noach* gives additional meaning to the changing of one's name: "Rebbe Eliezer said thus: three things can reverse a difficult decree and these are: *Teshuvah*, *Tfilah* and *Tzedakah*" (Repentance, Prayer and Charity), and Rabbi Yossi added "so too, changing one's name and doing good deeds".

A name has a number of functions in the Bible. It is meant to identify a person; to define the character of its bearer; to announce to the world the bearer's "reality" and possibly his destiny.

By perusing the various chapters of the Bible, one sees that many characters undergo a name change. Sometimes, the name is changed by another person; often by G-d or a prophet, and sometimes by the person himself. This phenomenon is found from Genesis right through *Megillat Ruth*. Each Biblical name change is manifested by a significant transformation in the person whose name has been changed – often quite meaningful, signalling a fresh start and a new direction for the person.

In over a dozen instances, the character's original name (by which the reader first "meets" him/her) is changed. In addition to the Abram / Abraham, Sarai / Sarah, Jacob / Israel examples previously mentioned, we add Hoshea the son of Nun who is

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called Joshua (Numbers 13:16), and Naomi who asks that her name be changed to Marah (Ruth 1:20).

Tonight, I have chosen to share this phenomenon of Biblical name changing with you, in light of my own decision to add the name *Ishay* (יש"י) to my own name beginning today.

In the Midrash *Shemot Rabah*, we are told of an orphan girl who grew up with a good and devoted guardian who fittingly raised her and protected her ("גְּדֹלָה וְשֹׁמְרָה כְּרֵאוּי"). Time went on and the guardian asked to find her a husband. The clerk who was asked to write the *ketubah* (marriage contract) asked her name. She answered "*Pelonit*" (so-and-so, anyone). "And your father's name?" the clerk continued. At first she was silent. The guardian asked, "Why don't you answer?" The girl replied, "Because I know no other father than you - (שֶׁהַמְּגַדֵּל נִקְרָא אָב וְלֹא הַמּוֹלִיד) as he who raises you, rather than he who sires you, shall be called "father".

My study for the rabbinate and the ordination ceremony signifying their culmination, symbolize for me at once - both the continuing in an old and familiar path; yet on the other hand, the beginning of a new conceptual goal. On my journey, I carry the baggage of my birth parents; today, in this time of change, I feel that this is the time to praise two people who raised me with love, with consistency and with wisdom and grace. They planted yearning within me.

By intertwining their names with mine, it is my wish to strengthen their closeness to me. From their names, I carve out a link connecting my heritage to my chosen calling.

These two, my father *Issachar* (יששכר), from whose name I take the "י" and the "ש"; and my grandfather Judah (יהודה), from whom I take the "י" – are not those who sired me, but they are definitely those who raised me and they will continue to inspire me forever.

My path has taken me through many dark periods and through them, I have come to new insights and understandings. I have entered my own inner void and returned to the very beginning of my life, to the place where things may begin to be changed.

Now, as I begin to understand the meaning of the responsibility placed on me, I feel ready for the next stage of my life – the stage where my dreams will come true.

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You surely know that the realization of dreams is not just one man's journey. Those of you who know me well, know that I am not the lone pioneer type "חלוץ בודד בשדה". The sound of dried leaves rustling in the dark night, or the sound of a dove behind the shutters, or the jackal's whine is enough to cause me to shake....

In *Masachet (tractate) Shabbat* of the *Talmud Bavli (Chapter 6, Folio 63A)* it is said:

When two scholars sharpen each other in *halachah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives them success

When two scholars are amiable to each other in [their discussions in] *halachah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them

When two scholars pay heed to each other in *halachah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, listens to their voice

When two disciples form an assembly in *halachah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, loves them

Rabbi Kinneret, the fact that you are a wise student is well known. I still have a long road before me. I want to thank you for your encouragement without envy, for your partnership, and for making room for me in the chariot that you have been driving forward alone for twenty six years. I wish us both that we may both continue to "sharpen each other" and be "amiable to one another".

And to all those whose love and support sustain me daily - first and foremost, Anat, Amit, Omri and Assaf, my mother Edna, my "blood" family and my family of choice, friends and loved ones – here and abroad, my teachers, colleagues, students, Kehillat YOZMA – its staff, leaders and volunteers, the HUC board members; you are all my partners on my journey

I thank you all.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

Rabbi Nir Barkin

*Kehillat YOZMA*

November 2, 2007