Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk** 

CHAYEI SARA

Expiration Date

The Book of B'reishit isn't only about beginnings and Creation. It is also about deaths and farewells. And two of our biggest send offs take place in this week's Torah reading.

It's fascinating that the book's biggest death scenes are reserved for Sara Imeinu and Ya'akov Avinu. Two complete chapters (48 & 49) are dedicated to the departure of Ya'akov Avinu, replete with scenes of pathos and benedictions. And the depth of Avraham Avinu's loss for Sara Imeinu is so moving at the beginning of this week's parsha. But I'd like to analyze the short (2 verses) description of the death of our Alte Zeidie, Avraham Avinu.

The Torah relates: This was the total span ('these were the days of the years') of Avraham's life (CHAYEI, 'lives') which he lived, a hundred years, and seventy years, and five years. And Avraham breathed his last ('and he expired', VAYIGVA) and died at a ripe age, old, and contented ('satisfied', V'SAVA) when he was gathered unto his kin ('people', AMAV).

The two verses contain much too much information for my short essay format, but I'd like to describe a few of the ideas in our verses which, I believe, are meant to inform a meaningful life. Avraham's death is described in terms intended to explain his good life, so that we can emulate those efforts.

Rashi makes a similar comment about both the death of Sara and Ya'akov. His remarks (100 years and 70 years and five years) that he (and she) kept the same level of liveliness at all stages of life. Rashi mentions 'beauty' and 'strength', but I believe strongly that he's really describing the level of enthusiastic behavior they displayed to all those they encountered, at every stage of life. In other words, we, too, should live every day to its fullest.

Rav Ya'akov Meckenburg (1785-1865) wrote a long description of our two verses, analyzing every detail. He enigmatically declares that he should have lived another five years. Really, why? Well, Yitzchak lived until 180, and, apparently, that was the default number for Patriarch life expectancy. But God took Avraham before Eisav brazenly revealed his evil ways. The truly righteous are protected by God from very specific forms of grief, including, apparently, profound dis-appointment.

Rav Mecklenburg is very interested in the terminology VAYIGVA, 'breathed

his last' or 'expired'. This term is only used in the deaths of the truly righteous (Bava Batra 16b). The Ibn Ezra writes that this literally means a death which is 'quick and without pain'. Rav Mecklenburg explains that the term really means the cessation of movement. He believes that the death of the righteous is the cessation of movement of the physical entity, but the spiritual reality continues its movement in its own, separate realm.

Rav Mecklenburg is also intrigued by the word V'SOVE'A. He suggests that one could translate it as 'satisfied', but that's not really satisfactory. He avers that the term really means 'contented', which means that the soul delights in what it has, and does not desire more. This is also true when the word is used for the Mitzva of Birkat HaMazon (V'ACHALTA V'SAVATA). One blesses God when he is truly sated.

Finally, he is interested in the expression 'gathered unto his kin'. There are those that think this means to walk the path of their ancestors. He is more concerned with the term AM, which denotes the unification of those that join with one another by virtue of shared concerns. During life the righteous person seems like a traveler on a journey, but at the time of death that motion ceases. The soul stops moving because it has found its primary home in the Upper Realm, and there it finds peace.

The Pri Tzadik, on the other hand, has a very mystical or, perhaps, spiritual take on our verses, but he comes at his approach through a rather simple technical anomaly: The words 'which he lived' appear redundant. He begins his analysis by explaining that the focus of Avraham was on the attribute of love, 'the seed of Avraham who loved Me (Yeshayahu 41:8). And when the Talmud demands that we 'learn from Avraham' (Yoma 28b). What shall we learn? Rashi explains: To be zealous!

How was this zealous love expressed? This, the Rebbe claims, is the idea behind Avraham being truly alive all those years. How? By always progressing in his zeal and love every single day.

The Rebbe goes on to explain that we, too, are travelers in this realm. We must remain in motion, moving forward to achieve spiritual perfection within our own spiritual level. For Avraham every year and every day counted because he progressed every one of them.

Uh oh, didn't I miss a day last March, when I didn't feel 100%? How bad is it that I don't move forward every day? Ah, the Rebbe anticipated that question, and he reminds us that the verse gives Avraham Avinu a perfect

score (every day), but didn't he live a number of years before discovering God? Take your pick: 3 or 39.

Therefore the Rebbe concludes: Through his immense spiritual exertion, he merited that his entire life would be nourished by the 'Dew of the Ancient One', making all of his years like those ideal years that have been perfectly unfolding since Creation. Therefore, the entirety of his life is beautifully, retroactively called: 'which he lived'.

Wow! God marks on a curve! We get credit for 'days' that we might have missed the mark, because of our overall direction and commitment. God's more lenient than the step counter on my phone.

So, as we sadly bid our beloved Alte Zeide adieu, we are still inspired by his life and his behavior and his effort. May his merit continue to reward us, and may his example continue to inspire us! And as Dr Seuss wrote: Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened! 