

# TO LIVE TO A HUNDRED TWENTY

Parshas Behar

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

Current statistics reveal the lengthened life span, thanks to advancement in medical research. Quite likely, with continued medical ingenuity, the time is not far off when life span will reach a hundred twenty. But why stop at this number? The answer is “it is so stated in the Chumash”. When Hashem was displeased with man’s behavior, He decreed not to contend forever concerning man, “his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (Beraishis 6:3).

Rashi expounds that this number of years was given as the time opportunity to repent, so that the planned punishment of the flood would be rescinded. The same is indicated in Targum Unkeles. The building of Noach’s ark lasted a hundred twenty years, serving as a warning signal to repent and avoid a catastrophe. Regarding retribution, if repentance is not forthcoming, this number is exactly calculated. At twenty years of age a person reaches a certain stage of responsibility (Rashi Beraishis 23:1), while before the Torah was given it was at the age of a hundred (Rashi Beraishis 5:32). Apparently, when the limited life span was decreed the two retribution numbers combined totaling a hundred twenty. Wherein lies the rationalization for this combination?

Some commentators assert this number coincides with the life span of Moshe, whose Neshoma has already been in existence at that time. [The Talmud (Chulin 139b) shows a reference to Moshe in the numerically equal word “Beshagom” (ibid 6:3).] If that generation would have repented, the commentators conclude, not only would have the Flood verdict been repealed, but the Torah, through Moshe, would have been given at that time.

Can we find some insight in our Parsha to radiate some luster on this subject? The Parsha instructs us the laws of Shmita, the Sabbatical year, and the laws of Yovel, the Jubilee year. On Yovel, after counting

forty-nine years, a complete cycle of seven Sabbaticals, the year which follows, the fiftieth year, is sanctified. Properties return to the original ancestral owner, slaves go free, even when the six year service has not been completed. This particular law about the slave going free is also mentioned in the Book of Shemos, but the wording there is that the slave should serve "leolam" (21:6), which literally means forever, unto eternity, but in this context it means "until Yovel". "This teaches that fifty years is considered an eternity" (Rashi ibid.).

Elaborating upon this observation, the Mayono Shel Torah relates the following anecdote: Reb Hershele Zidichoiver as a young man, a disciple of the Choza of Lublin who was then already an elderly sage, approached his Rebbe the Choza, expressing his apprehension, "I cannot live even one day without your guidance and inspiration, I shall pray that you live forever." Retorted the Choza, "But we already have a decree to limit our life to one hundred twenty. Replied Reb Hershele there is no contradiction. He goes on to explain: "The life span of the world, (as we know it) is six thousand years" (Rosh Hashana 31a). (Following the seventh millennia existence will be elevated to a higher spiritual level). This is the equivalence of a hundred twenty jubilee years.  $120 \times 50 = 6000$ . In seforim it is taught that there is a connection among the Jewish soul, time and space. Accordingly, each year of the Tzadik's life impacts upon a complete cycle of fifty years. My prayer, therefore, concludes Reb Hershele, for the Rebbe to reach a hundred twenty, is indicative of eternity. We can now appreciate that the Jubilee year, Yovel, may be called "leolam" (forever) as above in Shemos (21:6) when in fact the period ends on the fiftieth year.

We can also now understand the prominence of the number a hundred twenty, which was chosen as the number to which to limit man's life span. To the righteous it means influence upon fifty years and thus upon eternity.

It remains for us to ponder the benefit to man by placing a number on the life span. Wouldn't it have been just as meaningful if as

a result of man's unworthiness he will not live forever, as the original plan, leaving out the number?

Turning to two historic anecdotes may provide us with the perception in the urgency of the number. We learn in Parshas Korach of a plague the Israelites suffered. Moshe then urged Aaron to take quickly the fire pan with Ketores, incense, to atone for them... Where did Moshe learn that burning Ketores on the altar helps stop a plague?

According to Talmud (Shabos 89b) when Moshe went up to Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels gave him spiritual gifts. Even the angel of death revealed to him the secret of stopping a plague by burning incense. One conjectures the power lies in the "number" of spices. It is imperative to include "all" eleven spices into the mixture. "If he left out one of the spices he is liable to heavenly penalty" (Krisus 6a, quoted in daily Shachris). This service possesses the capacity to stop a plague, it may be suggested, because the Jewish people add up to a certain number, not to be diminished. As Rashi writes (beginning of Shemos) "The Jews are likened to the stars which Hashem brings out and brings in by number." The strict ordinance against missing even one spice is a model for the number in the Jewish count and the influence against diminishing in number by a plague.

A similar anecdote is found during the era of David. The Jewish people suffered more than a hundred daily deaths. It was then that King David instituted the law one should recite a hundred Brochos every day (Mishna Brura 46:14). Here too the solution is in the number, which inspires to be reached, and not to diminish.

We may now better understand the significance of the number a hundred twenty, that the purpose is not just to limit the life span, but rather to give impetus to reach to it.

