

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter V: Chavei Sarah (Gen. 23:1-25:18)

Essay 7: The merit of charity.

**ועוד** במדרש על פסוק זה, פתיב עטרת תפארת שיבה, בדרך צדקה תמצא. ר' מאיר אול לממלא, ראה אותם שחורי הראש, אמר שמא ממשפחת בית עלי אתם? דכתיב וכל מרבית ביתך וכו'. אמרו לו, רבי התפלל עלינו. אמר להם, לכו והטפלו בצדקה, ואתם זוכים לזקנה. מאי טעמא? עטרת תפארת שיבה וכו'. ממי אתה למד? מאברהם, שכתוב בו וכו' עכ"ל.

**On the same verse** “Abraham was old” (Gen. 24:1), **the Midrash says:**

**It is written: “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is found by the way of righteousness.”** (Prov. 16:31). **Rabbi Meir went to Mamla**, a Jewish town in the Galilee where residents did not have long lives, and **saw her** residents were **dark-haired. He said, “Perhaps you are from the family of the high priest, Eli? As it is written, ‘all the increase in your house shall die as [young] men.’** (I Sam. 2:33).”<sup>1</sup> **They said to him, “Rabbi, pray for us!” He said to them, “Go and take care with giving charity and you will merit old age.” What is the reason? “Gray hair is a crown of glory.”** How is it found? “It is found by the way of righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> **From whom do you learn this? From Abraham, as it is written regarding him, “to keep the way of the L-rd by doing righteousness and justice”** (Gen. 18:19), meriting old age, as it is said, “Abraham was old, advanced in years.”

- (Gen. Rabbah 59:1)

וקשה, דילמא הצדקה אינה מועלת אלא היכא דליפא חטא וליפא גזר דין, כמו באברהם, מה שאין כן בני עלי, שפבר נמתתם גזר דינם. ועוד אם למד זה מהפסוק עטרת תפארת שיבה וכו', למה לא אמר להם, ואתם זוכים לשיבה? ואם פבר הביא הפסוק עטרת תפארת וכו', מה צורך הנה לו לומר ממי אתה למד, מאברהם?

**There’s a difficulty: perhaps the giving of charity doesn’t elevate the giver, but rather where is no sin, there is no decree of judgment, as with Abraham—something not true with the sons of Eli, whose decree of judgment was already inscribed. Also, if we learn the value of**

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<sup>1</sup> The sons of Eli were wicked, and a prophet came and told them that G-d would break their power and that their family members would not achieve old age.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., giving charity. Hebrew uses the same word, *tzedakah* (צדקה) for both “charity” and “righteousness.”

giving charity from the verse “gray hair is a crown of glory, etc.,” why not say to them, “you will merit gray hair,” instead of telling them they would merit old age? Also, as he had already brought the verse “gray hair is a crown of glory etc.,” as a proof, why did he need to say, “From whom do you learn this? From Abraham”?

וניש לומר שעל הפסוק עטרת תפארת, הרגיש קושיא, מהו בדרה צדקה, ולא אמר בצדקה תמצא? ומהו זה הדרה? ואיתא שם בסמוך ואברהם זקן, ר' יצחק פתח וגם עד זקנה ושיבה וכו'. אמר ר' אחא, אלא שאם נתת לי זקנה, תן לי שיבה עמה. ממי אתה למד? מאברהם, על ידי שכתוב בו ושמרו דרתי, זכה לזקנה, דכתיב ואברהם זקן וכו' עכ"ל.

**Regarding the verse “gray hair is a crown of glory,” there is a sense of difficulty:** why does the verse conclude “it is found by the way of righteousness”? **Why not simply say “it is found by righteousness”?** What is this “way”? In an adjoining section to the Midrash’s commentary on the verse, “Abraham was old,” it is brought: “Rabbi Yitzchak opened a discussion by quoting: ‘even in old age and gray hair, do not forsake me, G-d’ (Ps. 71:18). Rabbi Acha said, we should interpret this as, ‘if You will give me old age, give me gray hair with it.’ **From whom do you learn this? From Abraham, because it is written concerning him, ‘to keep the way of the L-rd by doing righteousness and justice’ (Gen. 18:19), and he merited old age, as it is written, ‘Abraham was old.’**” (Gen. Rabbah 59:3).

וניש לדקדק דאם כן, כל מי שמגיע לזקנה מן הראוי שגגיע אף לשיבה. והרי אנו רואים איפכא שפמה זקנים מתים קודם שגגיעו לשיבה. ובעל פרוש צריך לומר שהענין הוא כה, שמי שמגיע לזקנה מחמת המזל אינו מוכרח שגגיע אף לשיבה, אבל מי שמגיע לזקנה מחמת איזה זכות ובפרט בזכות הצדקה, זוכה אף לשיבה. והטעם שבמצות הצדקה זוכה לזקנה, יש לומר משום דקיימא לו בן ששים לזקנה.

**We should scrutinize this, for if this is so,** that Rabbi Acha’s interpretation is correct, **then everyone who attains old age would necessarily also attain gray hair. But we see to the contrary that a number of old people die before attaining gray hair. For that matter, it could be said that the situation is like this: that one who attains old age because of luck does not necessarily attain gray hair, but one who attains old age because of some merit—and especially because of the merit of righteousness—does also merit gray hair. But that interpretation is not right; rather, the intent is that in the mitzvah of charity, one merits old age but not necessarily gray hair. That is why Rabbi Meir told the people of Mamla that by giving charity they could merit old age, but he didn’t say that would allow them to attain gray hair. It’s worth noting this distinction, because in fact it has been established for us: “a sixty-year-old achieves old age; a seventy-year-old achieves gray hair” (Pirkei Avot 5:21).** That is, gray hair is a sign of distinction, indicating not only a long life, but a very long life.

ובפרק ג' דמועד קטן, אמרינו מחמשים עד ששים זו מיתת פרת. ומי שעושה הצדקה אי אפשר לו למות קודם ששים, שהרי כתיב, וצדקה תציל ממנות. ואם היה מת קודם, הייתי אומר שהצדקה לא הועילה כלום. ואף כשמגיע לששים, אינו מוכח שזהו בזכות הצדקה, שהרי מת מששים שנה זו מיתת כל אדם, כדאיתא התם. ולכן צריך שיתארכו ימיו עד שבועים שנה, שהוא הזמן של השיבה.

**The third chapter of Moed Katan (28a) discusses the significance of death at different ages. In an anonymous opinion, it says that if one dies at age fifty, this is death through *karet*, the divine punishment of excision, meted out for the most serious transgressions. Another anonymous opinion says that if one dies at the age of sixty, this is death at the hand of Heaven. The Gemara then says that one who dies at the age of seventy has attained gray hair. The Gemara quotes, “Rabba said: death from fifty to sixty years of age is death by *karet*.” Giving charity can save one from *karet*, and therefore one who acts with righteousness (i.e., gives charity) cannot die before sixty years of age, as it is written, “Wealth is of no avail on the day of wrath; but charity saves from death.” (Prov. 11:4). In other words, as we said in the previous paragraph, giving charity should help a person reach old age (sixty), but not necessarily achieve the age of gray hair (seventy). If he dies before sixty, I could say that giving charity did not avail him at all (i.e., maybe it did not effect repentance from *karet*). Even if one reaches age sixty, it is not proof that this was in the merit of charity, because dying after age sixty is the ordinary “death of every person,” as it is written there (Moed Katan 28a).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in order to see the merit due a charitable person, it is necessary that his days will be lengthened to seventy years, which is the time of gray hair.**

אבל בני עלי—שכתוב בהם וכל־מרבית ביתך ימותו אנשים, דהיינו סמוך לעשרים שנה—אם בזכות הצדקה יחיו עד ששים, שהוא גדר הזקנה, שפיר מוכח בהם זכות הצדקה. ואם כן, ר' מאיר שפיר אמר להם ואתם זוכים לזקנה, שבזכות הצדקה אדם זכה לזקנה, וכשזוכה לזקנה, זוכה נמי לשיבה. ממי אתה למד? מאברהם, שבזכות הצדקה זכה לזקנה וניתן לו שיבה עמה.

**But regarding the sons of Eli—about whom it is written, “All the increase in your house shall die as [young] men” (I Sam. 2:33), which is close to twenty years old—if in the merit of giving charity they would live to be sixty,<sup>4</sup> which is the edge of old age, that would be a nice proof as to the merit of charity. But if so, it would have been nice for Rabbi Meir to say to Eli’s offspring in Mamlah, “You will merit old age, because in the merit of giving charity, man merits old age, and when he merits old age, he also merits gray hair. From whom do you**

<sup>3</sup> Moed Katan 28a uses the terminology “death of every person” with regard to someone dying after an illness lasting five days, and not with regard to dying after age sixty. However, as noted, Rabba considered that the average person should at least reach age sixty, unless he’s committed a sin punishable by *karet*.

<sup>4</sup> Rosh Hashanah 18a includes a debate whether an oath by G-d can be overcome. It quotes, “And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli’s house will not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever” (I Sam. 3:14). It then notes that Torah study or acts of kindness can overcome such a decree, and that Rabba and Abaye were both descended from Eli. Rabba, who engaged almost exclusively in Torah study, lived to be forty years old, and Abaye, who engaged in both Torah study and acts of kindness, lived to be sixty years old.

**learn this? From Abraham, who in the merit of charity merited to old age and was also given gray hair with it.”**

וְנָהוּ שְׂאֵמֶר הַפְּתוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ צְדָקָה, כְּלוֹמֵר הַשְׂיִבָּה בָּאָה עִם הַזְקֵנָה, שֶׁהוּא דֶרֶךְ וְזָכוּת הַצְדָקָה. וּמָה שְׂאֵמֶר וְהִטְפְּלוּ בַצְדָקָה וְלֹא אָמַר עָשׂוּ, מִשּׁוּם דְּקִימָא לֵן דְּעֵיקָר מְצַנַת הַצְדָקָה הוּא נוֹתְנָה וְאִינוּ יוֹדְעֵי לְמִי נוֹתְנָה, כְּמוֹ הַמְטִיל לְקוּפָּה. וְלִכֵּן אָמַר וְהִטְפְּלוּ בַצְדָקָה, הַשְׂתַּתְּפוּ יַחַד, דְּבִהְכִי תִהְיֶה הַצְדָקָה בֵּין כֻּלְכֶם וְתִהְיֶה יוֹתֵר הוֹגֵנָת. וּבְנֹדָאֵי תוֹעִיל לְכֶם לְפָחוֹת עַד הַזְקֵנָה, דְּתַפְסָת מוֹעֵט תַּפְסָת.

**This is why Scripture says, “in the way of righteousness,” as if to say that gray hair comes with old age, which is a “way” and the merit of the charity. [Rabbi Meir] says “take care with giving charity,” and not “doing [righteousness],” because the principal mitzvah of charity is giving it without knowing to whom one gives it (Bava Batra 10b; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 249:7), as with one who gives to a fund. Therefore, [Rabbi Meir] says, “Take care with giving charity,” as if to say, “Participate together, so that the charity will be from all of you and will be more equitable. Certainly, it will help you to at least reach old age, as it is said, ‘if you grasped a little, you still grasped something’ (Yoma 80a).” I.e., even if one won’t reach the venerated age of 70, with its accompanying gray hair, it is still better to reach the old age of 60 than to die at a younger age.**

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