

Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years. (23:1)

Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 58:3) relate an intriguing story. Rabbi Akiva was giving a profound, intricate *shiur*, lecture. He noticed that his students were drifting off. In order to arouse them from their "slumber," he presented them with a question (more like a riddle): Why did Esther merit to reign over 127 countries? He answered: She was a descendant of Sarah *Imeinu* who had lived 127 years. The question is rhetorical; the answer is beguiling. What does one have to do with the other? It is not as if Esther actually reigned over 127 countries. She was married to King Achashveirosh who ruled over these countries.

Horav Tzadok HaKohen, zl, m'Lublin, offers a riveting explanation which implies a lesson for us all. Esther took her life into her own hands when she went uninvited to meet Achashveirosh in the palace. Anyone who entered the palace uninvited was condemned to death. Hashem protected her, and she emerged unscathed. From where did she derive the courage to risk her life in this manner? *Chazal* teach that when Esther entered the royal chamber, she became ensconced with a holy presence, *ruach ha'kodesh*. It was this Divine Presence that catalyzed her captivation of the king's heart, allowing her to live. How did she achieve such an elevated spiritual level to merit Divine protection?

Rav Tzadok posits that Esther used Sarah, her ancestress, as her role model. Sarah achieved spiritual distinction in her life such that has never been emulated. We must factor in the murky roots of Sarah's early life. She was raised by her grandfather, Terach, an idolater of the lowest order, a man who was prepared to send his sons to their deaths, because Avraham had ridiculed him and his lifeless idols. Everywhere Sarah went, she was confronted by the cruelty and perversity associated with idol worship. She knew that she was destined for a greater, holier life. She bided her time, knowing that, one day, she would sever her relationship with them and move on to a better, more sanctified life. It took time, patience, intense yearning and commitment – but she made it.

Not only did Sarah leave her ignominious past, she was able to employ her murky past to enhance and enable her commitment to Hashem. Her humble background enabled her to nurture a sense of humility and diffidence, which led her to Hashem. She married and was now recognized as the wife of the most distinguished monotheistic theologian of his time – a man who literally stood alone against a world of falsehood and paganism. She fought every step of the way, never giving into hopelessness. Was she asking too much? Was she striving too high? When she married Avraham *Avinu*, the marriage did not go to her head. She maintained the submissive character that had always been her trademark.

Esther could have easily fallen into despair. She could have become despondent, thinking that Hashem had left her. She was no longer the same Esther. She was now married to a gentile, a

cruel individual, an avowed enemy of the Jews. She could have pitied herself, and, as a result, not imagined that Hashem would save her. She kept her chin up and went forward. After all, her role model/mentor, Sarah, would have done the same. If she was here in Shushan, married to the king, it must have been by Divine initiative. She would watch it play out.

Esther employed Sarah's approach of not permitting her somber past and present surroundings to cloud her future. On the contrary, it served as a springboard for spiritual growth. Nothing was going to hold her back from achieving her goals of sanctity and purity. Esther followed Sarah's lead and calmly walked into the king's chamber – come what may. She was on a mission to save Klal Yisrael. Her marriage to a gentile despot did not prevent her from going forward. Her firm commitment to Hashem was her lodestar with which she would navigate through the spiritual obstacles that stood in her way.

Esther's humility kicked in – as it did for Sarah. Never did she entertain thoughts of heroism, or seek credit and accolades for risking her life for her people. She was carrying out her mission. She was acutely aware that any of the talents and skills that she possessed were Divinely inspired to assist her in her duty to Hashem. She followed the course set forth by every past Jewish leader: to always act with humility.

When Rabbi Akiva noticed his students begin to wane, he attributed it to their viewing themselves as falling short in their ability to grasp the depth of the lesson. They felt that the new wisdom he was revealing was way above them. As a result, they suffered from a sense of unworthiness and malaise. Rabbi Akiva intimated: If Sarah and Esther could overcome the despondency that would have enveloped a lesser person – so could they. We do not give up when we are confronted by obstacles, we either step over or drive right through. We are on a mission. While humility should be part of our psyche, it should never hinder us from personal growth and achievement – it should never be an obstacle.