

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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The Torah describes Avraham as “*zaken, ba bayamim*”—old and advanced in days.

The Midrash elaborates: “A person can be old but not advanced in days, or advanced in days but not old. Avraham, however, was both.”

What does this mean? Aren’t these two terms synonymous?

Some commentators understand “old” as referring to *looking* old, while “advanced in days” means *actual* long life. Each trait carries independent value, as years bring experience, while venerable looks bring respect.

According to this approach, the Midrash is saying that someone who looks old may really be very young. (A famous example is R. Elazar ben Azariah, who said, “I am *like* a seventy-year-old person.” At the age of eighteen, white hair miraculously grew in his beard, giving him the appearance of an elderly sage.) On the other hand, someone who is truly old may appear young. Avraham, however, had both qualities: He *looked* old and he *was* old.

MORE THAN JUST OLD

However, this explanation is problematic. The Torah would not praise Avraham with qualities any regular person can have; the descriptions in this *possuk* must surely show how Avraham was one of a kind. While maturity and venerable looks are advantageous, they are not what made Avraham unique.

Avraham was more than an old, wise-looking fellow. He was the first Jew, and the first of our three forefathers. Moreover, the Midrash describes the world before Avraham as “functioning in darkness.” Although the world was inhabited by many righteous individuals, it was spiritually dark. It was only once Avraham came along that the world started being illuminated with the light of Torah.

Although Avraham lived centuries before Mattan Torah, the era of Torah began with him. The Gemara divides the 6000 years of existence into three: 2000 years of *tohu*—chaos, 2000 years of Torah, and 2000 years of *Yemos Hamoshiach*. The two thousand years of Torah do not begin with Mattan Torah, as that took place in the year 2448. Rather, they begin with Avraham.

Indeed, the *possuk* relates that Avraham “made many souls in Charan,” and Onkelos translates this to mean that he influenced them to follow

the Torah’s ways. Although the Torah was actually given hundreds of years later, its methodology already began then.

In light of Avraham’s tremendous role in history, it is clear that “*zaken, ba bayamim*” means much more than just old age and distinguished appearances. What is the inner meaning of these two descriptions?

DAYS WITH VALUE

The Hebrew word for *old* is *zaken*. The Gemara explains that *zaken* (זקן) is an acronym for *zeh shekanah chachmah* (זה שקנה חכמה), someone who has acquired wisdom. In particular, it refers to someone who has acquired the wisdom of Torah.

Ba bayamim, advanced in days, can also mean “arrived with days.” The Zohar explains that Avraham arrived Above with all of his days complete and filled with *mitzvos*. When a day goes by without a *mitzvah*, it is empty and has no value. Avraham made sure to make each day meaningful by filling it with *mitzvos*.

According to this explanation, *zaken* and *ba bayamim* refer to Torah and *mitzvos* respectively.

Why does the Zohar connect *mitzvos* to days? Doing a *mitzvah* seems to be an objective achievement, unrelated to when it was performed. Why do we emphasize that Avraham filled his *days* with *mitzvos*?

IT’S TIME TO ELEVATE TIME

To understand this, let’s analyze the difference between Torah and *mitzvos*.

In general, when you learn Torah, your focus is on personal achievement. You set out to amass spiritual wealth, by acquiring wisdom and allowing the Torah to illuminate your character.

Mitzvos have an opposite objective. Most *mitzvos* are performed with physical objects, with the goal of elevating them to *kedushah*. The focus is not inward but outward, on influencing the world at large.

(This can help us understand a *halachah* about *mitzvah* performance. If a *mitzvah* comes your way that cannot be done by anyone else, it takes precedence over Torah study. However, if someone else can do it, you should not

interrupt your studies. Why is this so?

The Alter Rebbe explains: The reason our *neshamos* were sent to this

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world was not to attain greater spiritual heights, but to transform the world into a *dirah lo yisbarech*. This is accomplished primarily through *mitzvos*.

Therefore, if no one else can do the *mitzvah*, you must do it, as that is the ultimate purpose of creation. But if someone else can do it, better use the opportunity to focus on personal growth.)

The universe we are tasked with elevating is defined by time and space. While spiritual worlds are timeless and spaceless, the world we call home is limited in both areas.

An analysis of time and space reveals that time is the more limited of the two. What makes space limited? The fact that any given spot in the universe is limited to where it is, to the exclusion of anywhere else. However, at least it stays where it is and does not fluctuate. Time is similar to space in that it also only exists *when* it is: today is not yesterday, nor is it tomorrow. But time is worse than that: It is subject to constant change. It does not stay stable for more than a single instant.

This is why the Zohar emphasizes that Avraham filled his *days* with *mitzvos*. Since the objective of *mitzvos* is to elevate the world to *kedushah*, it is important to fill our *days* with *mitzvos*, so that we can uplift not just space but time as well.

INWARD VS. OUTWARD

We now have a new interpretation of *zaken* and *ba bayamim*, in which they refer to the inward focus of Torah and the outward focus of *mitzvos*.

We can now revisit the Midrash: "A person can be old but not advanced in days, or advanced in days but not old. Avraham, however, was both."

If a person only serves Hashem as suits his nature—as is generally the case—he will either be a *zaken* or *ba bayamim*, but not both.

Let's examine two scenarios.

Scenario 1—*zaken*: This is the person who is devoted exclusively to spiritual advancement. He strives to acquire wisdom, studying Torah and connecting to Hashem through davening. He is not too fond of dealing with materialism and materialistic people. This doesn't mean that he won't do *mitzvos* or get involved with others; he will do all that, but only because these activities are also necessary for his personal growth.

You can climb up and reach down at the same time. Personal growth and outreach can, and must, go hand in hand.

The *zaken* is especially hesitant to deal with someone who constantly changes, like time. Some people may be far from Yiddishkeit, but at least they have a backbone; if they are committed to something, they will do it. But some people keep on fluctuating. What he commits to today is not a proof for tomorrow. The *zaken* certainly does not want to deal with such erratic people.

Scenario 2—*ba bayamim*: The opposite personality is the *ba bayamim*, the one who is dedicated to others. He is more than happy to reach out to anyone, regardless of how low and instable he might be. In fact, he is so involved with others that he forgets about himself, and his spiritual growth is sorely lacking.

CLIMBING UP WHILE REACHING DOWN

The Midrash concludes that Avraham was both *zaken* and *ba bayamim*. He was able to combine both approaches, constantly striving higher while simultaneously working with others.

The attitude of sticking to one style of *avodah* is characteristic of *tohu*, the 2000 years of chaos preceding Avraham. Avraham, however, ushered in the 2000 years of Torah.

The Midrash says that before Mattan Torah, heaven and earth were separate realms that could not join together, and Torah unified these two opposites. "Heaven" and "earth" represent spiritual and material involvement respectively. Mattan Torah represents the fusion of "heaven" and "earth," teaching us that we must combine these two approaches.

This is the message of Torah. You can climb up and reach down at the same time. Personal growth and outreach can, and must, go hand in hand.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 3, pp. 773-777.

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