Parshas Chayei Soroh – Michael Lebrett

כ״ב חשון תשע״ח – November 2017 11th – שבת פ' חיי שרה

The description of Soroh's death - and its' aftermath - as recorded in the opening pesukim of this weeks sedra poses a number of problems.

Firstly, why is she the only matriarch whose age at death is duly noted by the Torah?

Secondly, the Ba'al Haturim remarks that Avrohom's weeping over Soroh's death was somewhat restrained, as he felt that she had, after all, lived a long and productive life enriched with great achievements. In a sense, her death was not tragic. Nonetheless, this flippant and muted response to the news of her death does require further comment.

Thirdly, Rashi tells us (Bereishis 23:20) that the death of Soroh was triggered by the shock of hearing the news that her son Yitzchok had almost been sacrificed on an altar at the Akeidoh. This is surprising since Rashi informs us elsewhere (Bereishis 21:12) that Soroh possessed greater powers of prophecy than Avrohom. Indeed, Hashem advised him to 'listen to everything she tells you' (ibid). So why did Soroh fail the 'Akeidoh test' when Avrohom and Yitzchok passed it with flying colours?

Perhaps the following thought may provide an answer to these questions,

The Soton is a crafty and cunning foe. His initial attempts are to prevent us performing mitzvos by putting all sorts of obstacles in our way. Indeed, in connection with the Akeidoh, the Medrash records a number of schemes that the Soton perpetrated in order to impede Avrohom and Yitzchok from performing the Akeidoh.

But when the Soton fails he doesn't give up. He is far more tenacious than that.

The next plot is to persuade the mitzvah-doer to regret having performed the mitzvah in the first place. This may take the form of regretting 'wasting' the time, effort or money involved in the performance of the mitzvah. Or it may be to arouse a feeling of self-righteousness or arrogance in the mind of the mitzvah-doer. Either way, this mitigates much of the benefit arising from performing the mitzvah.

This idea finds its way into a phrase we say in Ma'ariv every night. ''He shall remove the Soton from before us (prior to performing a mitzvah) and from after us (after the performance of a mitzvah).''
Now, we can shed light on the wording used to describe Soroh's death. Having failed to prevent Avrohom and Yitzchok proceeding with the Akeidoh, the Soton now attempted to make them regret it. What better way than to link Soroh's death to it!! But the fallacy of the Soton's thinking is exposed by the words used by the Torah.

Firstly, the Torah says that Soroh lived for 127 years and then adds, as if to emphasize, 'the years of the life of Soroh'. Namely, this was her planned length of life. This was no premature or sudden death. Her death was due to occur at this moment anyway. To buttress this point the Torah states her age (unlike the other matriarchs) and then for good measure ends the posuk with 'these were (indeed) the years of the life of Soroh.'
It was now that the Soton seized the opportunity to link her death with the Akeidoh.

Now we can also understand why Avrohom's emotional response to his wife's death was so controlled. The test that Avrohom now faced was whether he rued going ahead with the Akeidoh given the Soton's attempt to connect it to Soroh's death. He passed that test too. This was demonstrated by his muted response to her death. His mourning was no more pronounced than it would have been for the timely passing of any elderly person. Had he fallen into the Soton's trap, his feelings of guilt and remorse for having gone to perform the Akeidoh would have caused a totally different form of mourning than the one described by the Torah.

The lesson to be lent from this episode is be aware of the Soton's tactics and never relax – even after the performance of a mitzvah.

(From the Nesivos Sholom of Slonim).