

How do we define a life?

וַיְהִי יָעֹלֶב בְּאֶרְצָם מִצְרָיִם שְׁבָע עֶשֶׂרֶת שָׁנָה וַיְהִי יָמִינְיָעֹלֶב שְׁנַיִם חֲמִינְיָעֹלֶב שְׁבָע שָׁנִים וְאֶרְבָּעִים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה:

“And Yaakov lived in the Land of Mitzrayim for seventeen years. And it was the days of Yaakov’s life were seven years, and forty and hundred year.” (Bereishis 47:28).

First, the pasuk gives the years that Yaakov lived in the Land of Mitzrayim. From this we can calculate how old Yaakov was when he went to Charan, when he married Leah and Rochel, and when he returned home. (See what we wrote in Parshas Vayishlach 5786). Also, the Torah tells us Yaakov’s entire lifespan. What else is learned out of these two pieces of information?

Yaakov arrived in a different Egypt than Yosef had, two decades earlier. When Avraham and Yosef came down to Mitzrayim it was a small city-state bordering the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It had a Pharaoh who was a king of a small country. Through the years of the famine Yosef was able to gain control of territories around Mitzrayim. All of the lands surrounding Egypt became Pharaoh’s. (Ibid 47:20). And the boundaries of Mitzrayim greatly expanded. (Ibid 47:21). The first time the Torah uses the phrase “Land of Mitzrayim” meaning country of Egypt, in any significant way, is in Pharaoh’s dreams. (Ibid 41:19). Until then, it called the land simply, Mitzrayim. (Ibid 12:10). Part of the interpretation of the dreams was that Pharaoh dreamed of an expanded country. He had his eyes on expansion. (Ibid 40:5). After this great expansion due to rationing and selling food during the famine, Egypt was no a city-state, but an empire.

The Torah does refer to Egypt as “Land of Mitzrayim” a few times earlier. When it refers to how nice the plains of Yarden Valley were it says “like the Lands of Mitzrayim.” (Ibid 13:10). However, that is the Torah using a name at the time the Torah was given. It is the same when Hagar took a wife for Yishmael from the Lands of Mitzrayim. (Ibid 21:21). When Hashem talked directly to Avraham, though, the Torah says, “from the Nile of Egypt.” (Ibid 15:18). This is because it was not the great country yet. Because Yosef understood Pharaoh’s goal in expansion, and was the only one who used the term (future) “Land of Egypt” when referring to the dreams, he was put in charge of this project – the soon to be Country of Egypt expansion project. (Ibid 41:43). This is the country that Yaakov spent his last seventeen years in. The final five years of the famine that solidified the expansion, and twelve more years.

The Torah also teaches lessons in how it gives the years of a person’s life. Chazal make a big deal about Sarah’s life which is given as “A hundred year, and twenty year, and seven years.” (Ibid 23:1). Notice how units – hundreds and tens – are in the singular

form. The ancient method of counting was not with written numbers. It was done in sets. Once ten was reached a mark or pottery shard was used to indicate ten. Same when hundred was reached. Therefore, the person can then count the hundred markers, 1,2,3,4 is four hundred; and the same with tens markers. That is why each unit is given as singular, except for the ones.

Sarah's life is written just like Avraham's—a hundred year, and seventy year, and five years, (ibid 25:7); and Yishmael's—a hundred year, and thirty year, and seven years (ibid 25:17). This is how the Torah writes it. Yitzchok is similar but single digits—one hundred year and eighty year (ibid 35:28); and Noach was nine hundred year and fifty year (ibid 9:29). Going from hundreds to tens to single digits is the norm in the Torah. Also, breaking them up by group, e.g. hundred-year, tens year, single digit years, is also the norm; at least by the patriarchs.

The notable exceptions, going from singles to tens to hundreds actually, are Terach and Yaakov. Terach—five years and two hundred year. (Ibid 11:32). He is also the only one from Shem to himself where the Torah gives the total years of his life, outright. Yaakov—seven years, forty and hundred year. (Ibid 47:28). This is the first time the Torah combined tens and hundreds without "year" in between. Yosef is another exception, his years are given hundreds to singles but it combines them—a hundred and ten years. (Ibid 50:26). It also uses the plural of "years" by Yosef—when it combines a ten and a hundred, but it gives the singular by Yaakov when it combined hundred and tens.

The years of Levi, Kehas, Amram, and Aharon are all given in the singles to hundreds combined forms, e.g., "Levi was seven and thirty and a hundred year." (Shmos 6:16). By Moshe, it says, "a hundred and twenty year." (Devarim 34:7). The Torah returns to greater to lesser but combines them. Why the differences?

The years of Noach, Avraham, Sarah, Yitzchok, and even Yishmael were seen as complete. They lived a block of time, and their lives were full of importance. Terach was a bridge from Shem to Avraham but he never made it to Canaan. Therefore, his life is small, from lesser to greater. Also, Terach was the first to commence the journey to leave his birthplace to obtain Eretz Yisroel. Yaakov's life was full of exile, movement, and hardship. But he, too, was the Av who established a hold in Eretz Yisroel by fathering the nation that would conquer it. Yosef was a hybrid. He lived most of his life in galus and was a king in a foreign land. His life did not result in conquering Eretz Canaan. However, he fostered an environment where Bnei Yisroel could thrive and grow. He was a quasi-av; greater numbers given first but combined. It is also given in singles because every year of Yosef's life was precious and deserving to be counted. From seventeen years living a home, to his years as a prisoner, to his rise to vizier, and then supporting his family, each year moved Bnei Yisroel closer to its goal. Each year had a purpose.

Those born in galus were from lesser to greater, but combined. They were also vital to the journey but lived in galus. Moshe returned to be an Av but he also did not step foot in the Land. Therefore, it is greater to lesser but combined. He facilitated but did not complete. When counting our own lives and our own years, we should strive to make each one count. We should continue to make goals and live life toward them. May we all be successful.