



TORAH FROM OUR MUSMAKHIM

A RABBI OF ALL AGES

RABBI ARON WHITE



Rabbi Aron White lives with his family in Katamonim, Yerushalayim. He works for RZA-Mizrachi USA, as the Coordinator of the Tzurba M'Rabanan Community, and as the Associate Editor of Hamizrachi Magazine.

What do a pulpit rabbi in Memphis, an elementary school teacher in Sacramento and a kashrut mashgiach in Shanghai have in common? Despite their great differences, all of these individuals are fulfilling a genuine and important rabbinic role, and these are just some of the varied occupations a rabbi can undertake. From prison chaplain to yeshiva rebbe, from outreach professional to seforim publisher, there are a great number of routes that a rabbi can take in his career.

This has always been the case – no two rabbinic career paths are the same, and in fact the lives of our greatest rabbinic luminaries differed in very significant ways. Some rabbis, such as Rashi, spent their entire life in one relatively confined area of the Jewish world (Ashkenaz), whereas others, such as the Ibn Ezra, travelled thousands of miles throughout numerous

communities across the world. The timelines of rabbinic careers also differ greatly. Rav Samson Refoel Hirsch published his *Nineteen Letters* and *Horeb*, his two most famous works, before he was 30 years old. The Maharal of Prague on the other hand, did not publish his first work until the age of 66. Even the routes of entry to the rabbinate differ greatly. By the time he was a young adult, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik had spent years in the company of the leading rabbis of Europe, absorbed in an atmosphere suffused with Talmudic brilliance. On the other hand, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks spent his young adult years pursuing philosophy at Cambridge University, and making bus trips across the United States, searching for religious guidance and meaning that would ultimately bring him to his incredible rabbinic career.

While this is interesting and to some extent, validating for a young rabbi,

it also can leave one confused. How does one approach a career in a field with so many options, where it is unclear what step will come next, and how one's career trajectory will play out?

In one of my favorite divrei Torah, Rabbi Soloveitchik offers an insight on Parshas Chayei Sarah that may give us some guidance to this question. The opening pasuk of the parsha says that Sarah lived for “one hundred years and twenty years and seven years.” Commenting on the unnecessarily long wording of the pasuk, Rashi writes that the Torah is seeking to draw an equivalence; “At one hundred she was without sin as at twenty, and at twenty she was as beautiful as she was at age seven.” Rabbi Soloveitchik gives a profound explanation of this comment. He explains that what is being described is the relationship between three periods in Sarah's life: her childhood,

her youth and her adult years. "The child is endowed with a capacity of an all-absorbing faith and trustfulness; youth bursts with zealousness, idealism and optimism; the adult, mellowed with years, has the benefit of accumulated knowledge and dispassionate judgment. Each age is physically and psychologically attuned to particular emphases, **but the superior individual can retain and harmonize the positive strengths of all three periods during his entire lifetime.**"

The mark of a life well lived is the ability to take the unique experiences and lessons from each stage of life and bring them with one as they move on to the next stage. Sarah was at once childlike, youthful and mature,

expressing the qualities of all these stages as the cumulative development of her persona.

I believe this lesson can help frame the way we see our rabbinic careers. We already have begun a journey, filled with the experiences we gained through our semikha studies: The Torah we have learned in shiurim and the beit midrash, the communal insight learned in practical rabbinics classes, and the sensitivity achieved through classes on pastoral counselling. From here onward, our paths will diverge. Some will quickly find their niche and calling, and others have more varied paths, trying one role, then finding an unexpected opportunity on the other side of the country, before settling down in

a third role, one they might never have even seen themselves fulfilling. Regardless of the path, there will hopefully be meaningful experiences at each step along the way. If one can always be learning, growing and taking those insights and experiences with them, then they will be able to live a life like that of Sarah, which as Rashi comments: "*kulan shavin letovah*"; despite the difference of experience at each stage, all of her years were equal in their fundamental goodness. If we can always learn and grow, then wherever our careers take us, we will be able to say that the years we spend in the rabbinate are "*kulan shavin letovah*," — all equal in the good we do for the Torah, Land and People of Israel.