Once, when Rabbi Akiva was teaching his students, they appeared to be lethargic, almost dozing. Rabbi Akiva aroused his students by referring to Parshat Chayei Sarah, which begins by relating that Sarah lived “100 years and 20 years and 7 years.” He then said that Queen Esther merited ruling over 127 lands of the Persian Empire because of her ancestress Sarah. Aside from the bloodline, what other connection can we establish that would explain why Esther merited such greatness?

First, we must understand that these students were not ordinary students prone to boredom. Among them were the great Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehuda – giants whose work enabled Judaism to continue after the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, says Rabbi Druck in Dorash Mordechai. However, that was exactly the point. Rabbi Akiva lived during a period of destruction and devastation for the Jewish people. There was work to do.

Both Sarah and Esther were founders of a new nation, Sarah at the point of our inception, and Esther at our rebirth from imminent annihilation. Despite these challenges and responsibilities, each maintained their temimut, their wholeness and purity, at every stage of their lives.

Rabbi Menachem Zion Sacks, a Holocaust survivor, adds another dimension to our discussion by citing a complementary source from Shir Hashirim Rabbah. Here too, a great Rabbi’s students needed to be roused from their lethargy.

Rabbi Yehuda told his students that in Egypt, one woman gave birth to 600,000 children at once. Who was this woman? Yocheved, who gave birth to Moshe Rabbeinu. Because of his role in saving the Jewish nation, Moshe is equivalent to the 600,000 people who left Egypt under his leadership.

Both Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yehuda were dealing with the sense of despondency and hopelessness of their generation after the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash. By citing these models – Sarah, Moshe and Esther, they were trying to inspire hope in their disciples and rally them to rebuild, to fire up their brothers and bring the assimilated Jews back to Torah. That was their mission, and that is what they accomplished, as did our great post-Holocaust Rabbis of the previous generation.

Rashi says the Torah adds “these were the years of Sarah” to tell us that all her years were equally good. Why were they all equal and good? Rabbi Sacks explains that in spite of her very difficult challenges, even being imprisoned in a foreign king’s palace), Sarah never lost hope to do good. Similarly, Esther also went through challenges and trials, even being in a foreign king’s palace (albeit as queen), but she always remained as steadfast in her faith as she had been as a ward in Mordechai’s home. Rabbi Akiva could easily have given up, but by citing the examples of Esther and Sarah, he bolstered his own faith and spurred his disciples to action.

While Queen Esther ruled over 127 lands, Rabbi Alpert maintains that the connection between Esther and Sarah is stronger than external sovereignty, for Sarah, as her name suggests, also ruled. (שָׂרָה means a female officer or minister.) Both maintained mastery over themselves and over their faith, in whatever circumstances they found themselves. They always believed they were where G-d wanted them to be at the moment and that G-d was with them.

The righteous ones are temimim, whole, complete, with integrity to their entire being. G-d knows this integrity as it is intertwined with time. Time is itself a product of G-d’s creation, and just as each of us is recreated each day, so is time. Therefore, each moment is unique and must be used appropriately. Each moment needs to be integrated into one’s life toward fulfilling one’s spiritual potential. Otherwise, one is killing time rather than letting it live on to eternity. Both Sarah and Queen Esther used their time fully, whether “creating souls” in Charan or maintaining Jewish identity during a time when G-d hid His face from us.

This was Rabbi Akiva’s message to his disciples. Just as Sarah Imeinu affected so many lives in her generation, so can you affect lives in this generation. Wake up from your lethargic despondency and make your time count.

Mrs. Shira Smiles is a sought-after international lecturer, a popular seminary teacher, and an experienced curriculum developer.