

Dvar for Chayeh Sarah 23:1 to 25:18 Oct 30/21 (3rd tri 24:53 to 25:18)

Boker tov, as we actually gather together in person after so long! Kind of like opening the doors to the Ark and re-emerging on dry land after the Flood..a whole new world:)

Before we explore this week's parsha I'd like to respond to the question Susan GM asked us to reflect on last week..can we link Vayera and lessons we've learned from the pandemic. Here's my link. Upon climbing the mountain, Abraham answers Isaac that Gd will provide the sacrifice. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks commented that Abraham was living a great contradiction in that moment. He had been promised several times that his son would become the progenitor of many nations and yet he's now asked to murder the living connection between present and future. Rabbi Sacks concludes that the Akedah was not about sacrifice but about uncertainty. Abraham knew that G*d's promises would be fulfilled but he didnt know how or when. Abraham taught us that faith is not certainty; it is the courage to live with uncertainty.

I will return to uncertainty in my conclusion and will focus on the importance of the women in this parsha to the continuity of our people. According to Torah-A Woman's Commentary- the parsha's central events - death of one matriarch (Sarah) and introduction of another (Rebecca)— emphasize how profoundly the fulfillment of G*d's promises is connected to women. Women's opinions and their actions count, as we shall see.

As for the parsha's events--Rachel Barenblat, the Velveteen Rabbi writes that [Chayei Sarah](#) is bookended with funerals. Sarah dies and is buried in the cave Abraham bought to bury her, at Machpela. Abraham grieves, rises up from mourning, sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac, and with a mix of divine intervention and using his senses to discern a gem at the well, Eliezer brings Rebecca back for Isaac. Abraham marries Keturah (considered to be Hagar) who bears him six more sons. Ishmael has children who are named (indicating their importance) and Abraham dies at age 175.

Although named 'Life of Sarah', the parsha covers events AFTER Sarah dies. Rashi's Midrash is that Sarah's soul departed at the same moment Isaac's life was spared on Mount Moriah. Most commentaries are that Sarah died of

heartbreak upon learning of the Akedah, but Chabad suggests she died of happiness that Isaac was alive. Abraham returns from Mount Moriah without Isaac, who went to live with Hagar and Ishmael. According to Jewish Women's Archives (JWA), after the emotional trauma and upheaval of the Akedah, Isaac could not return to his parents, but sought refuge with his stepmother and brother Ishmael, both whom he had lost when they were banished. My Jewish Learning describes Hagar as a woman who loved her children, both the son she bore and the son she helped to raise. Maybe it's uncomfortable, but Hagar is our [people's stepmother](#) and her son, Ishmael is our brother. We come from a blended, complicated family with much turbulence, drama and conflict that gets passed down, l'dor va'dor. It seems to have continued to this day, with two peoples with the same ancestral father claiming divine promise to the Land of Israel...but I won't elaborate.

As we revere Sarah as our first Matriarch and our continuity through Isaac-- not through Ishmael or through any of Abraham's other children-- I think it noteworthy that both Sarah and Hagar were beloved by God (Who promises and does make great nations from them both) . Both women were also loved by Abraham (he is twice distressed by Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael), and ultimately Abraham takes Keturah-slash-Hagar as his second wife.

It's only after Sarah is buried and [Rebecca](#) is brought to Isaac that Isaac resurfaces in the narrative. Isaac loves Rebecca and takes her to his mother's tent, where he is finally comforted after Sarah's death. Chabad states the Sages explain that it was when Isaac saw that Rebecca possessed the spiritual virtues of his mother that he loved her. Rashi wrote in Midrash Rabbah (24:67) ...as long as Sarah lived, a cloud (signifying the Divine Presence) hung over her tent. When she died, the cloud disappeared; but when Rebecca came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, her doors were wide open. At her death, that openhandedness ceased; but when Rebecca came, it returned. As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath. When she died, these ceased; but when Rebecca came, they returned. So Sarah's attributes lived on through Rebecca, and Isaac recognized some of his mother's character was present in his wife-to-be.

My Jewish Learning states that the parsha holds one of the very few times a woman's opinion is sought and valued. Sarah told Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, but her husband only listened to her after God told him to. Abraham gave "everything he had to Isaac," giving his other children mere "presents." This reflects the influence of Sarah who told Abraham that "the son of the handmaiden will not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

When Abraham instructs his servant Eliezer to go find a wife for Isaac from his ancestral home "The servant said to him, 'Perhaps the woman will not want to go with me to this land...'" (V [24:5](#)). This is the first time Torah that a man has ever considered a woman may say no. In 24:57 Laban and his father consent to Rebecca's marriage to Isaac, which they believe is in accordance with divine will. But they also agree 'we will call the girl and inquire at her mouth'. In other words, a woman should not be given in marriage without her consent. Right from the onset we see Rebecca as the young woman who brings water to the camels, the strong woman who stands up for herself, makes decisions against the recommendations of her family, and is respected in the biblical man's world for her opinions and actions.

As women are increasingly visible in OUR public sphere and in all realms of social engagement in our part of the world (thanks in some small measure to reproduction control and day care), a shifting sensibility in men has also come about and must continue. We now see proud young dads carry their babies, push strollers and share responsibilities in the home, to a far greater degree than in past generations. I know I'm not saying anything new to some of our congregation who did all this previous to the 21st century. My point is that the perspective of women must be on par with that of men. What we read in Torah has been filtered through the lenses of those who chose what to tell us. It is time to highlight the importance of women in our stories, without whom we would not be here. Just being Captain Obvious:)

According to Torah--A Woman's Commentary, although human beings facilitate Rebekah's betrothal to Isaac, it's through divine providence that a mate for Isaac is found. Tamara Eskinazi asks the reader "How does Rebekah's decision to go with the servant show one of the ways in which women contribute to the fulfillment of national destiny? And what do the events in this parash suggest about the role women play in the covenant with G*d?" I propose the word is

pivotal. What if Sarah had not 'given' Hagar to Abraham in Vayera? What if Rebecca did not consent to travel west to marry Isaac? Our story would have been something different entirely.

Back to continuity, and uncertainty. Although Abraham's role in the selection of a wife for Isaac reflects the world of the ancient Near East, that is, arranged marriages, today parents have many concerns about their children's choices of a mate. It is said that WE know we are Jews by having grandparents and parents who are/were Jewish. But can we say with certainty that our grandchildren will be Jews? Today, what role, if any, should parents have in the choice of their child's mate? We live with uncertainty about how our grandchildren will emerge in a secular context, and I'll leave these threads with you to consider.

To conclude, on the note of uncertainty. Rabbi Sacks has often written that we're in a covenantal partnership w G*d. Yet while G*d may decree, we need to act...we have to do something. Quote "Despite all the promises, G*d does not and will not do it alone. By the very act of self-limitation (tzimtzum) through which He creates the space for human freedom, He gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. G*d saved Noah from the flood, but Noah had to make the ark. He gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. **G*d gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is not what G*d does for us but what we do for G*d.**

I leave you with Tfilah haderech A Prayer for the Journey--transitions in life by Merle Feld, p 169 of Lev Shalem---

Our lives are always changing, and change brings with it fear of the unknown. The journey into the unknown is fraught with danger, yet rich with possibility. It has always been so..as Abraham and Sarah went forth, as Rebecca then Jacob went forth. Our ancestors across time have looked to You for protection, from the wild beasts of the road, from the vagaries of weather. So too I, in this place, in this time, look to You. Help me to remember my strength and courage, help me to see clearly, to listen deeply, to act wisely. Help me to be my best self in this new place and time. Every journey leads into the unknown. May the unknown ahead of me offer blessing. *////* May we build our relationships with our Creator..to be able to act with courage and a moral compass. Shabbat shalom

