

“Being Content Because You Did Your Part”

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

Elementary school is filled with fascinating projects. I remember having to create a family crest, during the Middle Ages unit, and selecting symbols and colors that represented my family and its traditions. Of course there was the family tree project, where you trace back as far as you can on either side of your family. And then I recall that one year we were asked to write our own epitaph. The Greek word *epi* means over, and *taph*, from *taphos*, means tomb: Literally the words written or inscribed over your tomb or on your headstone. Now before you consider my 6th grade teacher to be macabre or deranged, recall that many famous literary figures like Shakespeare and Yeats were known to have written their own epitaphs, which is how we came to be doing it in language arts class. Of course the process of writing an epitaph, of describing how you would want to be remembered—and not in all that many words—is a form of a mission statement for life. If this is supposed to be some representation of how you lived or the values you embodied, then you ought to live up to that before the headstone is ordered.

So let's consider the epitaphs we encounter in this week's parasha... We just heard Abraham's in chapter 25:8...

“This was the total span of Abraham's life: 175 years. So far so good, right. And Abraham breathed his last,” now listen:

“*Vayamot Avraham b'seiva tova*—Abraham died at a ripe old age; *zakein ve'savei'ah*—old and content; *va'yei-aseif al amav*—and he was gathered to his kin.”

Isn't that lovely? Could you possibly write a better, more succinct epitaph for a long life of happiness and the fullness of years? It's a masterpiece! Not only that, but just a chapter earlier the Torah says: *V'Avraham zakein ba be'yamim*: Abraham was now old, and advanced in years, *V'Adonai beirakh Avraham bakol!* And God blessed Abraham with **everything**. I tell ya' I don't think it could get much better than that.

By the way the Torah also tells us about Sarah; that she lived to 127 years old. But it is written in a strange way in 23:1. “Sarah's lifetime, the span of Sarah's life, came to 127 years.” Why the redundant language: “Sarah's lifetime” and “the span of Sarah's life?” According to Rashi the phrase Sarah's lifetime refers to the length of her years, and the span of Sarah's life refers to the quality of her years.

So both Abraham and Sarah could not have been more blessed, could not have been more, content, could not have lived fuller, richer lives, right? They were wealthy, they had flocks and servants, they were the ancestors of the oldest monotheistic religion in the world... What a life... What a legacy... Right? Wrong!

Look, everything I just said is true. But please, Abraham and Sarah also had major *tsurris*. They had a lot of aggravation in their lives! Their whole story begins by them being uprooted—they have to leave everything they know, *everyone* they know behind, and resettle in a totally new, totally foreign place. And just as they arrive in that place they have to leave for Egypt because of a famine. And there Pharaoh almost has his way with Sarah because Abraham passed her off as his sister. Then upon returning to the Promised Land after the famine, his no-good nephew Lot takes the good part of the land, leaving Abraham with the rest. Then Abraham has to go to war against a band of Canaanite kings who captured the no good nephew Lot. Then he's told that all the ancestors he's been promised will also spend four hundred years as Egyptian slaves. Following which there is a domestic civil war between Sarah and Hagar, resulting in Abraham having to expel his first born son Ishmael—but only after circumcising him at age 13. And then of course he is commanded to sacrifice his other son, Isaac on an altar at Mt. Moriah; barely escaping that he returns to find that Sarah has died.

So what in the world is going on here?! The epitaphs could not be more lovely; could not be more uplifting. But the *emes*...the reality seems to have been altogether different. Was Abraham old and content? Did God bless him with everything? Was the quality of Sarah's years as great as the quantity of her years?

There seems to be a pretty major discrepancy here that begs for an answer. Remember Abraham and Sarah are promised two important things by God: First, that they will inherit the land of Israel—seven times they are promised that. Second, that they will have many offspring who will bless the nations of the earth—that promise is conveyed on four separate occasions. So at ages 127 and 120 what do they have to show for those promises? Well, they have one, not many children. And they have hardly come to possess the land. What you might expect is a very disgruntled, very disappointed, possibly even angry Abraham and Sarah... You made me uproot everything for this?! You made me relocate, schlep from Ur Kasdim all the way to C'naan for famines and wars with local kings?! You told me all about progeny and yet I had to kick out one son and nearly sacrifice another?!

But we don't see any of that emotion. Rather: *zakein ve'savei'ah*...old and content. What's the secret? Well Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, whose brilliant writing deeply inspires me, suggests that the answer is in the final acts we see Abraham involved in at the end of his life. Two in particular: First, Abraham arranges for his son Isaac to be married to an extraordinary, kind, generous woman named Rebekkah. He invests significant resources in finding a soul mate and partner for Isaac as the second generation of the Jewish people will rise or fall with the two of them. The expedition is successful, and Isaac and Rebekkah indeed love each other, and give birth to their own children. The second is that Abraham negotiates with the local Hittites, and pays top dollar for ma'arat ha'mahpelah, the cave, the tomb where he would inter his beloved Sarah, but that would also become the burial place of future Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs. So what has he accomplished with those two acts: Well, he has insured that his family will continue another generation and he has a legally acquired, top dollar purchase of a parcel of the land of Israel. In those two acts he has secured the two promises God made to him so many years earlier: There will be progeny...there will be a future to this family and this people. And there is now a stake that his family owns in the land of Israel. Does he have to live to bounce 15 great grandchildren on his knees in order to believe that his family has a future? No. Does he have to live to see the skyscrapers of the Tel Aviv skyline in order to have confidence that the Jewish people will take

root in the land of Israel? No. What gives him comfort and confidence and contentment is that he did his part to secure the next generation. He did what he could to pass on the promises to his inheritors, who hopefully will pass them on to theirs. It's amazing, some things never change. Jewish parenting today is about much the same thing...Investing in our children and grandchildren, and providing them with the education, the experiences, the inspiration to acquire Yiddishkeit for themselves. If we do a good job at that, then *b'ezrat Hashem*, they will pass it on to their children. And of course, we labor mightily today to protect, support, and advocate for our enduring connection with the land and state of Israel. Because just as God knew that Abraham and Sarah could not live out their destiny in a foreign land, we know that our destiny is linked to our homeland, to the vitality of the land of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

The wisdom of Abraham and Sarah is that they were able to be content knowing that they did their part for the destiny of their family, rather than having to witness with their own eyes the fruition of all the promises. Yes they had pain and disappointment and disillusionment to deal with throughout their lives. They were real people with real problems. But upon considering their epitaph, there was no doubt that because of what they left for their survivors, they could be nothing but content and happy with the lives they lived.

May we have the wisdom to leave clear and enduring legacies for those who will follow us...and may we learn to be content not with having to realize every dream come true, but having the faith and confidence that those dreams will eventually come true—if not fully for us, then for those who come after us.