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Hold on to that Glimmer of Hope

This week's Torah portion, entitled Chayei Sarah, the life of Sarah, begins with Sarah's death. We learn that Sarah lived to be 127 years old, that she was buried in Hebron, and that "Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and wail for her."¹ This series of events seems typical enough, part of the life cycle-sad, of course, but not tragic. Yet, her death is not necessarily as uncomplicated as it might seem in the first couple of lines of our Torah portion.

In last week's Torah portion, we read one of the most dramatic of our Torah stories. God calls on Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac.² Abraham does not argue, but rather wakes up early the next morning to begin his journey up the mountain where he has been instructed to sacrifice his son. Along the way Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham does not tell him that he is the sacrifice, but instead assures him that God will provide the animal. Once at the top of the mountain, Abraham binds his son, grabs the knife, and lifts it into the air. At the very last moment, an angel calls, "Abraham, Abraham," and stops him in his tracks. Only then does Abraham notice a ram in the thicket, the ram that he will sacrifice in place of his son.

The ancient rabbis are haunted by Sarah's death and its proximity to the "Binding of Isaac." Sarah appears to be absent from the entire episode. Our text does not tell us whether Abraham informed Sarah of his plan. Many commentators assume that he did not. They are left to imagine what must have happened when Sarah found out.

¹ Genesis 23.2

² Genesis 22

One midrash (interpretation) goes as follows: *When Abraham returned from Mount Moriah in peace, the anger of Sammael (a Satan like being) was kindled, for he saw that the desire of his heart to frustrate the offering of our father Abraham had not been realized. (In this imagining Satan wanted to stop Abraham from fulfilling God's demand). What did he (Sammael) do? He went and said to Sarah: Have you not heard what has happened in the world? She said to him: No. He said to her: Your husband, Abraham, has taken your son Isaac and slain him and offered him up as a burnt offering upon the altar. She began to weep and to cry aloud three times, corresponding to the three sustained notes (of the Shophar), and (she gave forth) three howlings corresponding to the three disconnected short notes (of the Shophar), and her soul fled, and she died.* Rashi, a medieval commentator explains that according to this midrash, Sarah died from shock.³

In another midrashic story we read: *Satan went to Sarah and disguised himself as Isaac. When she saw him, she asked: "My son, what has your father done to you?" He answered, "My father took me and made me climb up mountains and go down into valleys and he made me climb up a certain mountain, and built an altar. He set up the altar and arranged the kindling and bound me on the altar. He then took the knife to slaughter me. If the Holy One had not called out, 'Do not cast your hand on this boy,' I would have been slaughtered."* He did not complete his sentence when Sarah's soul had already gone from her. Thus it is written, *"And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to cry for her."* Where did he come from? *From Mount Moriah [where the binding of Isaac occurred].*⁴

³ Pirke d'Rebbe Eliezer Chapter 32, translation from My Jewish Learning
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/where-was-sarah/>

⁴ Midrash Tanhuma, translation from My Jewish Learning
<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/where-was-sarah/>

Perhaps Rashi is right that Sarah died of shock. After all, in the first version of the story that I shared, Satan leads Sarah to believe that her only son Isaac, the son she prayed for and waited for until she was 90 years old, has been killed by his own father, her husband. It's almost unfathomable what Sarah might have felt in this moment.

But in the second version of the story, Sarah learns of what Abraham did, but knows that Isaac did **not** die. Yet, the knowledge that her husband was nearly seconds away from sacrificing her own son leads to the same outcome as the story in which she believes he died. How are we to understand this?

In my own midrash on this midrash, I not only see shock, but deep, deep despair. I see Sarah lose all her strength and crumble to the ground as the hope in her heart dries up. She's lost hope in humanity and faith in God. She wonders, "How could God ask Abraham to do such a thing? How could Abraham not argue?" She knows she won't find answers to these questions. All she is left with are feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, and with only that left, her soul leaves her body.

I can't help but think about all that Sarah missed. She and Abraham never had the chance to discuss what happened. She didn't see Isaac fall in love with Rebecca and begin his own family. She didn't see Isaac reunite with his brother Ishmael after many years apart. She never saw another sunrise or the twinkling stars in the sky. What if despair had not taken over? What if she had been able to persevere?

I do not wish to sound as if I am judging Sarah so harshly. It's difficult to imagine how anybody could continue to function in her situation. But as extreme as Sarah's situation was, we can learn something important from it.

I would guess that many of us have had moments in life during which we have felt some level of hopelessness or helplessness. I know how I felt this past Saturday when I saw the horrifying news from Pittsburgh. I was not surprised by what happened, not after knowing what I know of Jewish history, not after seeing virulent anti-Semitism displayed on the streets of Charlottesville, not after nine people were killed in a black church in Charleston in 2015, not after watching news footage of mass shooting after mass shooting after mass shooting. How could I feel hopeful when violent words and messages lead to violent actions over and over again?

But then the messages started pouring in. The first one I received came from a reverend in town. It said, "Hey friend. Love you. Please let me know if you need anything." Another wrote, "Rachel, I'm just hearing the news from Pittsburgh. I'm heartbroken and want to send you and all of CBI my love. I know it is a meager consolation, but it is real and it runs deep." Rabbi Tom and I received countless similar messages. Then, at our vigil on Sunday night, non-Jewish clergy from all over Charlottesville showed up to stand with us, surrounding us with love and care. And then Monday, I watched on livestream as the Jews of Pittsburgh protested in the streets singing out "Olam Chesed Yibaneh," a world of loving-kindness will be built. Even they still had hope. And then that glimmer of hope came back as I remembered that we are not alone. Alas, it seems that Sarah was not surrounded by loving-kindness as we are. From the plain text and the interpretations, it appears as if Sarah was all alone. No wonder she could not go on, holding so much pain and sorrow.

But we are not alone in our pain and sorrow. We are loved by many more than we are hated. And we can't afford to become lost in despair because there is too much work to do and so many joys left to experience in this world. The world needs us to hold onto that glimmer of hope. The Jews of Pittsburgh need us to hold onto that glimmer of hope. We need us to hold onto that

glimmer of hope. We can find the strength within us, as Sarah did in an interpretation I like much better than the other two that we have read tonight.

In an adaptation of Faith Rogow's contemporary midrash, by Rabbi Paul Kipnes Michelle November, Sarah knows of Abraham's plan because she hears Abraham talking to God in the middle of night. But rather than be overcome by fear and despair that Abraham would even consider such a thing, Sarah takes matters into her own hands. She has hope that she can make things right. Sarah says:

"My heart began to pound as I realized Abraham had misunderstood (Rabbi Paul Kipnes, Sacrifice My Son? What Was I Thinking). God was commanding an offering to help transmit leadership to Isaac. A sacrifice of the finest of our flocks was called for, not a sacrifice of Isaac. I realized then, that the future of our people depended upon me. I had to prevent a nonsensical death, and ensure our continued covenant with God. It was on me.

"I hoped Abraham would figure this out himself. But in case he did not, I had to intervene. So I went back to bed and with my eyes closed, I planned my next step.

"Abraham got up early, gathered his supplies, and took off with Isaac. He didn't even try to wake me. No explanation; not even a kiss goodbye.

"As soon as they were gone, I gathered my supplies and took our finest ram. I followed carefully, hiding in the shadows. At dawn on the third day, as they slept, I hurried up the mountain, releasing the ram into the bushes.

"The rest happened so quickly. Abraham was holding the knife, about to sacrifice Isaac. He seemed to be in a trance. So in my voice that he often called 'angelic,' I called out, 'Avraham, Avraham.'

“That broke the trance. Realizing what he was about to do, he dropped the knife. He looked up, saw the ram that I brought for him to sacrifice instead, and stepped toward it. Relieved at having saved my son’s life, and grateful at having ensured the survival of our people, I was exhausted. I cried and cried. Then I lay down on the ground for what I sensed would be a long, long sleep.”

This is how I choose to remember Sarah. Completely alone, she took-action. But we don’t have to take-action alone. We have one another, and so many others looking out for us. May the love that surrounds and the love that is in us give us the courage we need to overcome tragedy and create the world we yearn for. May we all find strength, comfort, and hope on this Shabbat and in the days ahead⁵.

⁵ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/chayei-sarah/where-was-sarah-during-akeidah-binding-isaac>