

A Little Vav – the Importance of Inclusion

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*(with deep gratitude to Rabbi Susan Grossman
whose sermon inspires and informs this sermon)*

I want to speak about one word today. Really, I want to speak to you about one letter. It is a little letter that means a little word that doesn't even make it into the English translation. But sometimes little words carry great meanings, meanings that can change our perspective, meanings that can perhaps a life, meanings that perhaps can even change many lives.

The letter I want to speak about is the first letter of our parsha, our Torah reading, today, *Hayyei Sarah*. Our parsha begins with *v-yehiyu haye Sarah*, "And Sarah's lifetime was 100 and 20 and seven years when she died." The word "and is that first *vav* in *Va-yeh'yu*.

Why does our parsha begin with "and?" We are not supposed to start a sentence with "and," let alone an entire chapter, at least according to the rules I learned from my High School English teacher.

Now, on one level, that word, "and" is a quirk of Biblical Hebrew grammar. In the Bible, unlike in modern Hebrew, the past tense is often formed by attaching a *vav* – and – to the future tense formation of a word. *Yomar* means he will say but *vayomer* means "he said." *Yedaber* means "he will speak," but *vayedaber* means "he spoke." *Yiten* means "he will give," but *vayiten* means "he gave." You get the idea. Similarly, here, *yiheyu* would mean "it will be," so *v-yiheyu* means "and it was." Sarah's lifetime *was* – past tense – 100 and 20 and 7 years.

Surely, the rabbis of the Talmud knew this rule of Biblical grammar. Yet they chose instead to see a very different meaning behind the use of the *vav* that opens our parshah. They taught that the parsha begins with "and" to teach us that Sarah's death is linked to what came before, last week in parshat *Vayera*.

Last week, Abraham offered his son Isaac up as a sacrifice to God. But Isaac was also Sarah's son. Abraham never told Sarah that he was planning to do with Isaac. But according to rabbinic tradition, Sarah, who was also a prophet, could see what Abraham was doing.

What is the link between that story and the opening of our parshah which deals with Sarah's death? Our sages teach that Sarah's death was indirectly caused by Abraham's actions. Some rabbis say Sarah died of fright at the thought of Abraham readily taking Isaac as a sacrifice. Others say Sarah died of grief, thinking Isaac would be killed. Another tradition suggests that

Sarah turned to God and offered herself in Isaac's place, as any loving mother would do for her child – and that it is for this reason that God instructs Abraham to halt and to offer the ram instead.

Whatever the case, the rabbis all agree that Sarah's death was the result of her knowing through prophecy that which Abraham had hidden from her – that he was taking Isaac to sacrifice him. In this sense, the “and” that begins our parsha highlights for us the reality that Sarah is absent from the momentous decision Abraham makes to take Isaac with him at God's command.

This was not an isolated incident. Throughout their life together, Sarah is often absent during momentous events. Again, in last week's parshah, when the three angels – disguised as men – come to tell Abraham that he will have a son, Sarah is relegated to another tent. Perhaps she is in the women's tent, where women would prepare the food but not were not to be seen or heard. In a phrase that is reminiscent of the story of Cain and Abel, these messengers ask, *Ayeh Sarah, ishtecha*: “where is Sarah, your wife?”

In both stories, we might ask the question: Why would God have to ask where they are? After all, God is all knowing.

In the case of Cain, God's question is meant to spur reflection, and perhaps confession, regarding something Cain had done that was wrong. Could God's question to Abraham – *Ayeh Sarah ishtecha*, “where is Sarah, your wife?” – bear a similar meaning? Perhaps, as with Cain, God asks Abraham this question because he is nudging Abraham to admit and correct his own failing. Through his messengers, God is asking Abraham, why is Sarah relegated to a women's tent instead of being here included with us?

If so, Abraham misses the point. He answers God's question but continues to exclude Sarah.

In ancient times, it was normal to ignore and exclude women from all sorts of decisions and aspects of life. Yet Sarah wanted so much to be included that she listens from the side of the tent in order to hear what the angels have to say, what message they have brought from God. After all, what happens to Abraham also happens to her.

More than anything Sarah wants an “and.” She wants to be included. After all, she and Abraham shared this new journey of faith together from the beginning. Two weeks ago in *Parshat Lekh Lekha*, we read that when Abraham and Sarah journeyed from Haran to Canaan they took with them *ha-nefesh asher asu b'haran* – the souls they created in Haran. Onkelos – who was the first translator of the Torah and rendered it into Aramaic during the time of the Mishnah – translates these words as *ve-yat nafshata di sha'abidu le-oraita* – “the souls that they bound to the Torah.” In other words, Abraham and Sarah proselytized their newly embraced monotheistic faith and *together* built a holy community bound to God by covenant.

This was not Abraham's doing alone. They did this *together*. Judaism was founded by the two of them – Abraham and Sarah – *together*. As a side note, this is a key reason behind the decision of those Conservative rabbis including myself and Rabbi Rudin Luria who hold that the matriarchs should be included in the Amidah.

But back to our text. Despite the fact that -- as husband and wife -- they are partners in life, and despite the fact that they have been partners in founding and nurturing this new faith, Abraham excludes her again and again. He is largely insensitive to her needs, concerns or feelings. The rabbis of the Talmud recognize this and suggest that God places the *vav* – “and” at the beginning of this week's parshah in order to honor Sarah's faith and the many sacrifices that she made for God. In doing so, God grants Sarah the *vav* – the ‘and’ that she for so long sought. At the end of her life, God finally grants Sarah that which Abraham denies to her. God grants Sarah *inclusion*.

When looked at in this way, that little *vav* becomes a mighty message from God. It is a reminder to all of us that too often we exclude groups of people because they are different than us or have less power or influence than we do. Through this one simple letter, God is reminding us that it is our job to include those who we as a society so often actively exclude or don't even think about.

I am proud of the fact that the Conservative movement and our synagogue have seen themselves as strongly committed to this principle of inclusion. It is why we have added the option of including the matriarchs in our prayers. It is why the Law Committee of the Conservative movement has ruled that a deaf community can sign the Torah reading because they cannot hear the rendering of the Torah in sound and therefore can see it in sign. It is why the Law Committee ruled that a blind person can still take an aliyah and why we have braille prayer books available. It is also the reason why it was so very important for the Law Committee and our synagogue to embrace all regardless of gender identity or orientation, to perform same sex marriages and celebrate their relationships.

That *vav* opening this week's Torah portion is the reason our synagogue has an inclusion committee, and why I am so proud that our Inclusion Committee has pressed forward ensuring that our synagogue has every possible accommodation for those with physical disabilities and learning differences. These range from physical accommodations like our Torah tables that rise and lower, our hearing loop and chapel ramp, to accommodations within our religious school and our very popular monthly Inclusion Shabbat.

Similarly, that *vav* calls on us to embrace, support and uplift interfaith families within our congregation, including specifically the non-Jewish individuals within those families. It also calls on us to ensure that Jews of Color – who now make up 15% of American Jews, feel fully a part

of our congregational family. I am especially proud that our synagogue leadership has made it a priority to ensure that our leadership mirrors the full diversity of our congregational family.

The *vav* also finds expression in our *Hesed* Committee, which reaches out to our members who are in need to provide support, be it through meals, rides or just friendship, and which runs collections throughout the year to support various causes.

Beyond the walls of this congregation, Sarah's *vav* reminds us of our obligation to embrace and uplift all those who are marginalized and discriminated against in our larger society. Here too, we can be proud that our congregation is a prominent force through its leadership in Greater Cleveland Congregations. Through GCC we have made possible:

*The expansion of Medicare to cover an additional 330,000 people, including many elderly and financially challenged who previously could not afford health care.

*The passing of two Cleveland school levies and a school construction issue that have significantly raised up the poor quality of Cleveland schools, playing a role in increasing their graduation rate by 26% since 2010.

*The consent decree that has helped reform Cleveland's police department.

*The creation of Cuyahoga County's first Civil Rights Unit

*The reduction of over-charging for non-violent offenses by 20%

*The creation of the first Drug Court in Cuyahoga County whose criteria do not exclude people of color

*The creation of Cuyahoga County's first Mental Health and Addiction Center, giving police a place to take individuals who meet those criteria for treatment rather than booking them in jail.

*The creation of the national Gun Safety Consortium, which allows mayors police chiefs to use their purchasing power to test and promote gun safety products have the potential to reduce suicides, accidents, and gun thefts.

*Right now, in addition to seeking to expand on these achievements, GCC has been engaged in education and pop-up vaccine sites that helped turn the tide of vaccine acceptance in communities of color, involved in efforts to protect voting rights, creating affordable housing, and partnering to raise the quality of life and the vitality of businesses and neighborhoods in the economically depressed Lee-Harvard area.

Discussions have also begun within our congregation regarding how we might join local effort to assist refugees from Afghanistan who are being resettled to our area.

All of these – our efforts at ritual and congregational inclusion, our work in providing accessibility, our efforts to lift up the disempowered and disenfranchised – are all expressions of the value and the mandate contained in that little *vav* that opens this week's parshah.

I hope that you will join us in these efforts and become a part of our collective "*vav*." You can contact Dale Nash regarding inclusion, Rachel Schwarz regarding Hessed, Lee Markowitz regarding GCC. Or speak with me or the other clergy, or Rebekah and the officers, and we'll connect you.

Sarah's life lived largely without that *vav* – that "and" – because she was a woman. For most of her life, she was excluded, even when it came to the faith that she herself helped found, even when it came to something so close to her heart as the fate of her only son. At the end of her life, God grants her what human society had denied her, that "and" that she so wanted and deserved.

So many are waiting for us to share that "and," to include them in our congregational life and our broader community with open arms and hearts. Such inclusion makes a real difference not only in the lives of those individuals but also in our lives. It enriches our own congregation and community. More, it enriches our own lives beyond measure.

Sometimes it is the littlest things that can make the biggest difference. That is the power of an "and."

May we devote ourselves to living a life of "and," and may we see the day when no one is excluded from the tent.

Shabbat Shalom.