

The first time that the term *'kever,'* as a place of burial, appears in the *Humash* – in the Pentateuch – is in reference to Sarah's death. This happened in the context of last week's Torah portion, *Hayyei Sarah*. At the beginning of this *parsha*, we find a detailed description of Abraham's effort to offer Sarah a 'proper burial.' I hope you catch the irony of this expression 'proper burial.' Since this is the first burial in the Jewish tradition, we can ask ourselves, what constitutes 'proper' when it comes to burial?

What Abraham does, becomes the archetype of what, from then on, will become 'proper' in reference to burial in the Jewish tradition. This is true for the other patriarchs and matriarchs as well. Much of what we do when it comes to death and dying is informed by these first practices which are part of the Biblical text. They become the norm in our Jewish tradition.

But this week's Torah portion, *Toldot*, is not about death and dying. Actually, quite the opposite; it is about life and future!

Immediately after Sarah's burial, *kevurah*, what follows is *Rivkah*, a wife for Isaac! If I was writing these *D'var Torah* in Hebrew, it would have been more evident that '*kvurah*' and '*Rivkah*' use the exact same three Hebrew letters for their root – *rvk* or *kvr* - only in a different sequence. Is this a coincidence? Hard to tell. But the message is compelling; after Sarah's death, Abraham realizes that his son, Isaac, is also in mourning. With the goal to mitigate Isaac's sadness in mind, Abraham sends his personal servant to his family with clear instructions: find the right wife for my son!

It doesn't take long until the servant returns with Rebekah. As soon as that happens, Isaac brings Rebekah into his mother's tent; he marries her and he loves her. This is the exact sequence that the Biblical text presents to us. Immediately following Sarah's burial, Rebekah enters Sarah's tent to marry Isaac.

And *Parshat Toldot* opens with Isaac's and Rebekah's agony. They cannot have children. Isaac prays to God on her behalf (as if she was the one responsible for their infertility) and God responds with Rebekah becoming pregnant with twins.

At this point, Rebekah is already occupying a central role in the narrative. Yesterday, she was a newcomer. Now, she is in intimate dialogue with God and she is the one who understands the future of their children. "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

After this revelation, Rebekah is the one who will keep this true until the end. Rebekah becomes the main factor in the unfolding of this story. This is a story that unquestionably presents a serious moral dilemma: Is it right to do wrong?

And the Rabbis go out of their way to justify the morals of the story. Was it morally acceptable for Jacob to 'buy' his birthright from Esau? Was it morally acceptable for Jacob to deceive his father Isaac and 'steal' a blessing from a 'blind' father?

According to Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l, Rebekah understood God's promise to mean Jacob would continue Abraham's mission and therefore he should receive the covenantal blessing. She knew that no one who despised his birthright could become the trusted guardian of a covenant intended for eternity. This was much more than a family feud; it was about God and the future of God's chosen people.

As proof of this, Rabbi Sacks' claim is that Rebekah did not deceive Isaac. She actually worked together with her husband in order to prepare Jacob, to make him more fit, to make him stronger, for the huge task that was waiting ahead of him. In order for this to happen, Isaac actually had two blessings; one fitting Jacob, the second one fitting Esau's qualities and needs.

Recognizing that Israel is the name that Jacob will adopt after prevailing in his struggle with the angel of God, we are B'nai Israel, the descendants of Jacob.

As B'nai Israel we are the carriers and guards of a message that survived so many generations, so much hostility, so much rejection; and we are still proud carriers of this message. May we do our part for this message to remain relevant for generations to come!

Shabbat Shalom!

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