

PARASHAT CHAYE SARAH

Genesis 23:1–25:18

While *Chaye Sarah* may be translated as “Sarah’s lifetime,” this Torah portion actually tells us about Sarah’s death. Abraham seeks to purchase the cave of Machpelah, in Hebron, for her burial. Ephron, the son of Zohar, owns the land, and Abraham bargains with him for the purchase. After the burial, Abraham sends a trusted servant back to his native land to find a wife for Isaac. The servant chooses Rebekah and returns with her to the Land of Israel where Isaac takes her for his wife.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Sarah, Abraham’s wife and the first Mother of the people of Israel, died at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. She died in the town of Kiriath-arba, known today as Hebron, located nineteen miles south of Jerusalem in the Judean Hills.

Abraham was filled with sadness at her death and wanted to find an appropriate burial place for her and for his family. So he spoke to the people of Heth who owned property around Hebron and said to them: “I am a foreigner living here with you. Sell me a burial place for my dead.”

They replied: “You are a very special person

among us. Simply choose the place you wish, and we will be happy to give it to you.”

Abraham bowed, as was the custom in such negotiations, and told the people of Heth: “If you are so willing to be helpful, please go to Ephron the Hittite, the son of Zohar, and tell him that I would like to buy the cave of Machpelah, which is at the edge of his land. Also, inform him that I am willing to pay the total amount of its worth.”

Now, Ephron happened to be among the people of Heth with whom Abraham was speaking. He stepped forward and told Abraham: “In the presence of my people, I present you, for no cost at all, with the cave of Machpelah and the field around it. Go bury your dead there.”

Abraham thanked him but said: “Allow me to pay the full price.”

Ephron replied: "My friend, what's a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver between us? Take it from me and bury your dead."

Instead of taking the land for no payment, Abraham gave Ephron the full price of four hundred shekels of silver before the people of Heth. The payment gave him all rights to the cave of Machpelah and to the field and trees around it. Having made the purchase, Abraham buried Sarah.

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After Sarah's death, Abraham called his trusted servant to his side and asked him to take an oath that he would not allow Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman but, rather, would return to Abraham's native land and find a wife for Isaac from among his people. The servant promised he would do so and set off for Aram-naharaim, which means "Aram of the two rivers," which was also called "Haran." It is located in northern Syria.

When the servant reached the place, he rested his camels near a well and prayed to God. "O God of my master Abraham, grant me good luck today. As I wait here and the women of the city are coming out to draw water from this well, let the woman You have chosen to be Isaac's future wife answer me when I say, 'Please lower your jar that I may drink from it.' Let her tell me, 'Drink, and I will water your camels.'"

As the servant finished his prayer, Rebekah the daughter of Bethuel, who was the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with a jar on her shoulder. She was very beautiful, and, when she filled her jar, the servant ran to her side and said, "Please lower your jar that I may drink from it." And she replied, "Drink, and I will also water your camels."

After she had done so, Rebekah ran home and told her brother, Laban, about the man. He came out to welcome him and to invite him to be their guest. The servant accepted their hospitality, but, before he would take any food, he insisted on



telling them about his prayer and how Rebekah had answered it with generosity not only for him but for his animals. He then informed them that this was all a sign that Rebekah was the woman destined to be Isaac's wife.

Laban and Bethuel agreed and asked Rebekah if she would leave them to go with the servant back to the Land of Israel to marry Isaac. She was willing and so departed without delay.

As they reached the land, Isaac happened to be out walking in the field. Rebekah saw him and asked the servant, "Who is that man?"

"That is my master," he answered. Rebekah covered her face with her veil, which was the custom of modesty at the time.

After the servant told Isaac all that had happened to him in Aram-naharaim, Isaac took Rebekah home. They married, and he loved her and found comfort with her after the death of his mother, Sarah.

THEMES

Parashat Chaye Sarah contains four important themes:

1. Jewish attitudes and practices at the time of death.
2. Paying the full price for what we acquire.

3. Beauty.
4. The meaning of "love."

PEREK ALEF: *Mourning the Death of a Loved One*

When someone we love dies, we experience deep sorrow. We miss that person's presence and caring. We miss the support and all that we shared. At times we are angry and ask, "Why did that loved one have to die?" At other times we understand that death is something that happens to every living thing, but the pain is confusing. We find ourselves wishing to share just another day or a few hours so that we might say some things that we never found the time to say.

Death is so final. We can't turn back the clock.

That must have been the sadness Abraham felt when Sarah died. They had shared so much together. In his grief he must have remembered the close call with death they had both experienced with Abimelech or how upset Sarah had been when she could not become pregnant. He must have recalled how much she loved their son, Isaac, and how jealous she had become of Hagar and Ishmael. They had been partners for so many years. He would miss her. Little wonder that Abraham wept and mourned for Sarah.

Abraham must also have realized how helpful it was to share his grief with others who were there to comfort him. Talking and weeping with friends is healthy when we lose a loved one. Friends can support us and ease our loneliness and pain. So can the rituals and customs of Jewish tradition.

Jewish mourning customs

Keriah is the symbolic cutting of one's garment or a black ribbon at the time of the funeral. It symbolizes the "tearing" that occurs when we lose a loved one.

Comforting the mourners: It is a mitzvah to visit a house of mourning to comfort those who have lost a loved one.

Shivah candle: After returning from the cemetery, mourners customarily light a special candle that burns for seven days. The shivah candle

symbolizes the warmth, wisdom, and love that the dead person brought into the lives of the mourners.

Kaddish and Yizkor: It is a mitzvah for the mourner to recite the Kaddish prayer in memory of the dead at services at home and in the synagogue and to attend Yizkor services in honor of those who have died. Kaddish and Yizkor are ways of giving thanks to God for the gift of life and the continuing influence upon us of those who have died.

Jewish rituals and customs at the time of mourning are meant to help us face death realistically and to find comfort with friends. Jewish tradition helps us understand that "death is not the end" but that our loved ones continue to live in the memories and influences they leave behind.

This healthy-minded approach of Jewish teachers through the ages provided not only beautiful rituals for the expression of grief but also a warning that "if we dwell too long on our loss, we embitter our hearts and harm ourselves and those about us." In this regard, the Torah's description of Abraham's mourning for Sarah provides us with a very important model.

His grief was not endless. Abraham did not stop functioning or taking on responsibilities. While his heart was filled with sadness, he knew that he had to accept her death and get on with the task of her burial and the challenges of his life.

A time to mourn

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:

A time for being born and a time for dying. . .

A time for weeping and a time for laughing,

A time for wailing and a time for dancing. . .

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4)

My child, let your tears fall for the dead, and as one who is deeply suffering begin your period of mourning. . .

Let your weeping be bitter and your crying genuine; observe the period of mourning according to the merit of the one you have lost, for one day, or two, to avoid criticism; then be comforted for your sorrow. For too much sorrow results in death, and sorrow of heart saps one's strength.

. . . (Ecclesiasticus 38:16–18)

Like many people who suffer a loss, Abraham must have had moments when he felt cheated that Sarah would no longer be at his side. He must have missed her and been lonely. He may even have wondered if he could go on living without her sensitivity, love, and support. But his mourning and grieving helped overcome his loss. He was strengthened by those who cared for him and comforted by his traditions. He did not become embittered by his grief. Despite the pain of his loss, the Torah tells us that he “rose” from his sorrow and went on with his life.

PEREK BET: *Paying the Full Price*

After Sarah's death, Abraham seeks a burial place for her. He comes before the leaders of the Hittites, who then occupied the Land of Israel, and asks them if he might purchase a plot of land.

They bargain with him according to the traditions of the ancient Middle East. First they flatter him. “You're a great man,” they tell him. “Please bury your dead in the best place in our burial grounds.”

Abraham responds by thanking them for their offer. Then he requests that he be permitted to purchase the cave of Machpelah, owned by Ephron, son of Zohar. He says to them: “Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst.”

Ephron hears his request and makes a big show by offering the cave for free to Abraham. In doing so, however, he cleverly announces to everyone listening the worth of the land. “A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead.”

Abraham refuses the gift. He does not want a free piece of land. Instead, he insists on paying

the full price. And he does so, publicly—“in the hearing of the Hittites.”

Ramban (Nachmanides)



“I will give it to you . . .”

Nachmanides points up the careful steps that Abraham took in order to establish his “legal” claim to the land. “First he paid the full price, then he took symbolic legal possession of the field and cave. In that way he established them as his possession in the presence of the people of the city, of all who sat on the council of his town, the merchants and the residents who happened to be there, and after that he buried her.” (Genesis 23:11)

Malbim



In his commentary, Malbim writes: “Abraham said, ‘Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me. . . ? That, too, was wisely said. For after Ephron had given him the land . . . he might have changed his mind. . . . So Abraham said to him, ‘If it were a gift, you could cancel it. For a gift is really not a legitimate possession. But, if it is purchased by an appropriate sum of money, the law is on our side. . . .’”

Most biblical scholars point out that four hundred shekels of silver was a very high price and that Ephron was taking advantage of Abraham's grief and need to find a burial place for Sarah. Despite the price, however, Abraham wanted official title to the land. He did not want a gift that might be taken back or one that might obligate him to Ephron sometime in the future.

So Abraham followed all the correct and formal

procedures of purchase. As a result, the field and cave “passed from the Hittites to Abraham”—and to the Jewish people—as the first purchased possession of the Land of Israel.

Paying for what we purchase

They tell the story of a pious Jew who entered a store to purchase some item he desired. When he asked the price, the merchant quoted a very low amount. The pious Jew understood that the merchant had recognized him and wanted to pay him special respect and honor. For that reason he had lowered the price of the item he wanted to purchase. So the pious Jew said to him, “I have come to you to buy at market value, not at a price set by the fear of God.”

For the pious Jew, paying the “price set” was the just thing to do. He did not want to take advantage of the merchant’s respect or to owe him any favors.

Abraham was not only willing to pay the full price, but he insisted upon it. Was he foolish? Should he have taken advantage of the Hittites’ respect for him? Should he have tried to bargain with Ephron or even taken the burial place as a gift?

Most commentators argue that, by paying the full price even though Ephron’s price was high, and by following the correct legal procedures of purchase, Abraham made certain that no one could later come along and raise questions about his rightful ownership of the land. Had he taken the land as a gift, or at a reduced price, he might have felt himself obligated to do favors for Ephron, or others might have questioned the right of his family to the land.

PEREK GIMEL: *Rebekah’s Beauty*

The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah was arranged by Abraham’s servant. After Sarah died, Abraham sent his servant back to his homeland to choose a bride for his son. The challenge for the servant was a difficult one. How do you find the most suitable marriage partner? What standards do you

use? How do you judge that a person will be loving and loyal?

When the servant arrived in Aram-naharaim he met Rebekah at a well. The Torah describes her as *tovat mareh*, “very beautiful.” By that description most readers would assume that the Torah is commenting on her appearance, emphasizing that Rebekah was a physically attractive woman.

That may be so. Then, again, the expression *tovat mareh* may mean much more than “good looks.”

Defining Rebekah’s real beauty

Rebekah deliberately planned her kindness to the servant. . . . First she provided him with water, then she ran to get water for his animals. In doing so she prevented the servant from feeling that he needed to help her. (Chaim ibn Attar, 1696–1748, Or ha-Chaim)

Meklenburg



Rebekah carefully thought about each word she spoke so as not to offend anyone. She did not repeat the same words used by the servant. She had said, “Drink, and I will also water your camels.” She was sensitive about equating him with his animals, so she said, “Drink, my lord.” Later on, after he had enjoyed his fill of water, she offered to give some to his animals. (Jacob Tsvi Meklenburg, 1785–1865, Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabbalah)

She stopped the servant from drinking too much because one must be careful not to have too much cold water after being in the heat and sun. But, in order to prevent him from thinking that she did not want him to have enough water to drink, she told him, “I will draw water for your camels until they finish drinking.” In that way the servant knew that she was not selfishly holding back water from either him or his animals. (Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Judah Berlin, Ha-Emek Davar)

For the teachers of Torah, Rebekah is *tovat mareh*. She is not only physically beautiful, but she is a beautiful “person.” She is kind and helpful to the servant even though he is a stranger. She is thoughtful of his feelings and careful of what she says to him. And her concern is not only about him but also about his animals.

Her beauty is not in what she is wearing. There is no description of her clothing. Nor are we told about her complexion—whether her skin was soft—or whether she was thin or plump, tall or short. The details we are given are about how she treats other people, how she speaks to them, how she offers hospitality, and how she reaches out to aid a stranger and a wanderer in her land.

Before Rebekah knows who the servant is, or that he represents Abraham and has come seeking a bride for Isaac, she demonstrates that she is a generous and giving person. That is what defines her as *tovat mareh* in the servant’s eyes—and in the considered opinion of Jewish tradition.

PEREK DALET: *What Does the Torah Mean by “Love”?*

The Isaac-Rebekah romance seems to have begun with “love at first sight.”

After a long journey from Aram-naharaim, Abraham’s servant and Rebekah enter the Land of Israel and arrive in the area of Beer-lahai-roi in the Negev. It is near sunset and Isaac is out walking in the field. He is alone, still in sorrow over his mother’s death.

Rebekah is riding on her camel and sees the lonely figure walking in the field. “Who is that man walking in the field toward us?” she asks the servant. He recognizes Isaac and tells her, “That is my master.”

Rebekah and Isaac meet. The servant tells him about his journey and, afterwards, Isaac takes her to Sarah’s tent. Then the Torah tells us “he took Rebekah as his wife, and Isaac loved her. . . .”

It’s a strange twist for high romance. One would have thought that love came before marriage. Here, however, it seems to come afterwards.

Hirsch



Love is blind

A mere glance into the novels of true life teaches us the vast difference between love before marriage and after. . . . Such love [before] is blind, and therefore every step into the future leads to new disappointments. Jewish marriage, however, is described here as follows: He married Rebekah, and he loved her. The wedding is not the summit but only the seed of future love. (Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808–1888, Timeless Torah, Phillip Feldheim, Inc., New York, 1957, on Genesis 24:67, pp. 53–54)

Another view about love

The meaning of the words, “he took Rebekah as his wife, and Isaac loved her. . . .” are meant to indicate that he was deeply grieved by his mother’s death and found no real comfort until he found love with Rebekah. It was that love that really comforted him.

In the Targum Onkelos, an early Aramaic translation of the Torah used in the synagogue, we read: “And Isaac brought her into the tent and, behold, she was like Sarah his mother.” That is why the Torah mentions that Isaac “loved her.” It is meant to teach us that, because of Rebekah’s righteousness and the kindness of her deeds, Isaac loved her and was comforted by her. (Nachmanides on Genesis 24:67)

Those who comment on the Torah’s description that Isaac first married Rebekah and then he loved her do not mean to deny that there is “love at first sight.” What they are saying is that there is a significant difference between “infatuation” and the evolution of mature love.

In his book *Consecrated Unto Me*, Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn writes that there are four differences between *infatuation* and *love*. “The first is the test of time. . . . Except for the rare instance where infatuation leads to love, it begins more dramat-

ically, develops far more rapidly, and expires while love may still be incubating." The second test "is to see whether the emphasis is on the self or the other person, on getting or on giving." The third test is whether the couple is "interested exclusively in themselves." Finally, "infatuation is a purely physical experience while love is both physical and spiritual."

Defining love

Love is a consuming desire to share one's whole life both physically and spiritually with another person . . . to share that person's sorrows and pains no less than his/her pleasures and joys. In love one is at least as anxious to give as to receive. Love is a relationship in which each partner is able to develop his/her own abilities and fulfill his/her own hopes in far greater measure than either could have done alone. (Roland B. Gitelson, Consecrated Unto Me, UAHC, New York, 1965, p. 19.

According to the biblical story, Isaac and Rebekah quite obviously began their relationship with "infatuation." They were attracted to each other. They wanted to spend time exclusively with each other. Yet, according to the commentators, their powerful attraction grew into a mature commitment and a readiness for marriage. Rebekah comforted Isaac about the loss of his mother, Sarah. He may have supported her in those moments when she longed for her family in distant Aram-naharaim. They learned how to reconcile their differences and to respect each other. Finally, through time and sharing, they came to love each other.

Jewish tradition teaches that, while our romantic meetings may be the miraculous work of God, and that we may be fortunate enough to

"fall in love at first sight," the real success of our love relationships depends upon how we work at them. Love must be nurtured and negotiated each day. There are no instant and magic guarantees that love will grow and mature. It all rests on the quality of the commitment, honesty, trust, and openness both people build into their relationship.

In a time when the stress is on "romance" and immediate gratification, the Jewish wisdom that "the wedding is not the summit but only the seed of future love" is a significant warning and lesson.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the lessons this Torah portion teaches us about preparing for the death of a loved one and about dealing with our loss? How are the mourning customs of Jewish tradition helpful to us in times of sorrow?
2. We are all tempted "to buy at the best price." Should we take discounts and deals from friends? What are the benefits and the problems that come from accepting such bargains?
3. From what the commentators say about Rebekah, can we define a Jewish view of "beauty"? How do the views of "beauty" in Jewish tradition compare with those of our modern society?
4. Abraham's servant devised a test by which he could determine Rebekah's values and the values of her family. What are your most important values? How can you determine whether or not your partner in a possible long-term romantic relationship shares those values? What test or questions should be considered when choosing such a partner?