

Drash for Shabbat Chayei Sarah

by Margie Kendle

For readers trolling for bedtime stories, the higher purpose of Genesis may be casually thought to be to handle the creation of the universe and to pose some uncomfortable theology in the Garden. The creation account is truly brilliant, but for us, and I'll argue, for the redactors, the foremost task of the first book of the Torah is to traverse the complex dynamics that lead to the formation of Israel. The weight of this is felt 320 pages later when Jacob - think of his name as being a plural noun at this point - fills Joseph's wagons "with all his progeny and the possessions they had amassed." Chayei Sarah can be noted to be an important bridge to this phenomenon, with information buttressing familial security even into the final chapters of B'reishit.

The parashah with Sarah's namesake doesn't hold back on contributing to the continuum of primeval history overtaken by ancestral history. The most evident element is the narrative explaining the attainment of a wife for Isaac, which needs no spoiler alert. An aside is our introduction to Jacob's future in-laws, but Rebecca's willingness is an essential step in strengthening the line of Abraham. Without this transaction, we cannot even have the next Parasha, Tol'dot. As Gunther Plaut translates, "This is the line (*tol'dot*) of Isaac son of Abraham: Abraham begat Isaac..." By the end of Genesis, these genealogical tallies become quite formidable, if not intimidating to the one they may fall on to read on their Aliyah.

Then there is the matter of Sarah's death. As the ancestral history drives into the future, what concerning Sarah's death could foreshadow the hope of future family security? The account of our first Matriarch's death and Abraham's bereavement is accomplished with a brevity which is extreme even for the Torah. Continuing without pausing for our wounded sensibilities, the text, by sheer volume of words emphasizes the purchase of a familial burial site, which moreover is referred to 5 additional times in Genesis including key details. Plaut elevates its value further by arguing that the Cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre-now Hebron-in the land of Canaan (Genesis 23:19) "symbolizes the hopes of the couple's descendants - the readers of the story."