

The Life, Death and Legacy of Sarah

Parshat Chayei Sarah 5784/2023

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation, Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein

At my cousin's Bar Mitzvah last weekend in Washington DC, a question lingered throughout the entire weekend: how much should we be celebrating at a time like this? My cousins are especially serious when it comes to *s'machot*. It is a full-body experience for them and all those in attendance as well, complete with numerous l'chaims and roasts, divrei Torah, singing and dancing.

At every juncture, the genuine joy of the *simcha* was tinged with sadness, as Israel, the hostages, and the events of October 7th were close to mind. Though it was not a wedding, I felt like we were suspended in the last few moments of a chuppah after the glass is shattered, when we remember the brokenness that pervades Zion and our larger world and erupt into song.

My experience this past weekend was emblematic of a new phase that we have entered. Many of us now engage in a complex juggling act. In one hand, we hold tragedy close: my social media feed remains filled with pictures of hostages, and an image of a gan in Israel, with a *gannenet* and jumbled of toddlers, all of whom were murdered. At the same time, we must attend to the very real business of life, be it the mundane trip for groceries as well as the more unique experiences, like a family *simcha*.

Holding sorrow and joy, death and life, together is not a simple task, yet it is vitally important. It is this juggling act which takes center stage in our parsha, Chayei Sarah.

There are two ways to read the opening of our parsha:

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים חַיֵּי שָׂרָה: וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה
בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבִכְתָּהּ: וַיָּקָם
אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פָּנָיו מֵתוֹ וַיִּדְבֹּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-חֵת לֵאמֹר:

Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites...

On the surface, Sarah's passing sounds like a "good death." She died at the ripe old age of 127. The simple *pshat* reading is that Sarah died and Avraham mourned and eulogized her as any spouse would after a long life together. Then Avraham, conjuring images of a 1950s breadwinner, realizes that he has other affairs at home to which he must attend. He must make arrangements for burying his wife Sarah and he must find a partner for his son Isaac. There is a certain logic and deliberateness to these behaviors, as we imagine Avraham putting his estate in order.

Rashi however references a midrashic tradition, which intuitively suggests a more troubling cause of Sarah's death, linking it to the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac. As Rashi says,

לספוד לשרה ולבכיתה. ונסמכה מיתת שרה לעקדת יצחק לפי שעל ידי בשורת העקדה, שנצדמן בנה לשחיטה וכמעט שלא נשחט, פרחו נשמתה ממנה ומיתה:

The narrative of the death of Sarah follows immediately on that of the Binding of Isaac, because through the announcement of the Binding — that her son had been made ready for sacrifice and had almost been sacrificed — she received a great shock (literally, her soul flew from her) and she died (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 32).

In this telling, Sarah heard about the Akeida - she heard that her son was going to be sacrificed - was almost sacrificed, and died from shock. Sarah was traumatized.

Reflecting on Rashi's comment, the scholar Avivah Zornberg notes that this "midrashic tradition holds at its core a poignant thesis: Sarah is the true victim of the Akedah, her death is its unexplicated, inexplicable cost."

Certainly, Zornberg's reading takes on new meaning for us in our present moment. There is a real impact to hearing terrible news, what *halakha* terms *shmu'ah rechoka* [hearing of someone's death far away], or even the possibility of it. There is real loss and trauma, which we have felt acutely these last few weeks.

Within this reading, Avraham's subsequent actions take on a greater urgency and force. Sarah has just tragically died, and let's remember that Isaac is out of the picture as well; father and son never spoke again after their journey to mount Moriah. Avraham's partner of many years is gone, and he has also lost any link to Isaac. The whole project of the covenant with God and the Jewish people is suddenly in peril.

Death, even some traumatic ones, can be deeply clarifying, for they force us to do an accounting of sorts. The loss of a loved one highlights what they stood for, inspiring us to examine our priorities and identify our deepest truths.

We see Avraham doing this, in his negotiations for *Ma'arat HaMachpela*, the cave of machpelah which follows Sarah's death. To summarize it briefly: Avraham goes to the local tribe, the Hittites, and eventually arranges to purchase a particular plot of land from Ephron the Hittite. (I once heard someone call it a masterclass in business negotiations.)

Some readings of these pesukim highlight the fact that when Avraham purchases a burial plot for Sarah, he is establishing his claim to the land of Israel. As Rabbi Yudan bar Simon says in Breishit Rabba (79:7):

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹדֵן בַּר סִימון זֶה אֶחָד מִשְּׁלֹשָׁה מְקוֹמוֹת שָׂאִין אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם יְכוּלִין לְהוֹנוֹת אֶת
יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹאמַר גְּזוּלִים הֵן בְּיָדְכֶם

This is one of the three places about which the nations of the world cannot taunt Israel, saying, these are stolen lands.

Other texts (Midrash Hagadol) consider this negotiation one of Avraham's ten tests, and that having to buy a burial plot is a lesson in Avraham's humility, since even Avraham was not above the logistical task associated with funeral arrangements.

I would like to share a slightly different approach this morning, from the University of Chicago ethicist Leon Kass and a related thought from Rav Soloveitchik as well.

Kass has a wonderful book called The Beginning of Wisdom which is basically a running commentary on Breishit. In it, he explores the evolution of morality and specifically, how the relationship with God and the moral code that accompanies it is transmitted through Avraham's family. Kass writes that:

"Abraham has his mind also and especially on what is needed for future generations, beginning with Isaac...Even without further instruction, Isaac at the time of his father's death will be directed to reunite his father with his mother and to recognize in their union the wondrous source of his being. He will be compelled to think of himself as standing in their lineage. He will be moved to recall their deeds. He will be encouraged to try to walk thereafter in their ways...

...The nascent nation of Israel is thus tied to the land not by conquest or agriculture, and not even by God's promise, but also by ancestral piety, by reverence for those who embarked on the new way in special relation to God's promise...the Holy Land is holy first because it is the land where my fathers and mothers died.

...The way to the political future is linked in sacred memory to the venerable beginnings, beginnings themselves defined by and suffused with a relationship to the Truly Venerable [God].

In Kass' reading, Avraham was not only (or perhaps primarily) establishing a claim to the land. Avraham was establishing a claim of peoplehood on Isaac, and all his future descendents, down to us. Having a burial plot was not just strategic or political but pedagogically critical, for it forces Isaac to remember and consider what Avraham and Sarah stood for, and what the Jewish people stand for.

Rav Soloveitchik develops a similar idea which I heard recently, which I've been thinking about as many of us prepare to go to Washington DC on Tuesday. The Rav notes that there were two distinct junctures at which the Jewish people emerged, representing two different covenants, two *britot*. We are familiar with *Brit Sinai*, the covenant forged between God and the Jewish people at Sinai. This covenant centers around the observance of Mitzvot and adherence to the Torah.

However there was an earlier covenant which Rav Soloveitchik termed "Brit Avot," the covenant of the patriarchs and matriarchs. As Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider explains, "The Rav taught that Brit Avot constitutes the unique relationship that the Jew maintains with one another and with God. It represents a distinct fate or historical path that the nation of Israel will travel and, oftentimes, endure, together..."

...Brit Avot "does not tell a Jew what to do (i.e. observe mitzvot) but rather how to feel and what to aspire to and long for." More than anything, it conveys a "palpable sense that they were part of a single story."

As part of this approach, the Rav identified four areas of Jewish life that emerge from this notion (Majesty and Humility, Zielgler p. 284-285):

- 1) No matter the social station or land of residence, we as Jews share a common history and fate; all will rise and fall together.
- 2) Since we share a common circumstance, we must share in one another's suffering as well. Wherever in the world a Jew is in pain a fellow Jew feels their pain.
- 3) Feeling another's suffering means that there is shared responsibility. This idea is plainly seen in the Halachic principle - "All Jews are guarantors for one another" (Shevuot 39a).
- 4) Finally, the charity and aid that we offer others in need is given not only as a fulfillment of requirement but from a sense of compassion and connection.

The idea of “Brit Avot” speaks to the very nature of what is required to live an authentic Jewish life, and what it means to be a part of the Jewish people. (“Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: Brit Avot and Brit Sinai,” by Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider, in *Torah Tidbits*)

We are in the midst of a profound “Brit Avot” moment. I can’t remember ever feeling so connected to my fellow Jews, both locally and around the world. It is this covenant, the very roots of Jewish peoplehood, that was planted in the wake of Sarah’s death. In a moment of grief and loss, that which was most important became clear, that as much as a place, Avraham and Sarah’s descendants would need to be deeply connected to each other.

Over the last few weeks, I have felt this deep sense that the Jewish people are one big extended family. Many of us are going to a family reunion on Tuesday, a miracle when you think about how this family can bicker and squabble with one another, and worse.

This family, which took real shape only after her passing, was Sarah’s true legacy. It was meant to instruct and comfort Isaac, and support future generations through the travails of Jewish history.

I felt this sense of family deeply last Shabbat, as we sang and danced and celebrated my cousin becoming a Bar Mitzvah, an adult member of this family. The joy was all the more poignant as we realized that this is what it was all about: to be able to pray and live lives in relationship with God and for the betterment of others.

Our family is together at this moment, even though we may disagree about so much, including how to relate to Israel, its government or the war in the present moment. Still, our family is coming together as it has so many times before. We are entangled and enmeshed together, and we are not alone.

On Tuesday, we will hold each other and strengthen one another, as the Jewish people have done for many generations and will continue to do for generations to come.