



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

### **Parashat Chaye Sarah**

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Shalom!

#### Introduction

Like many parashiot (pl. of parasha), this week's parasha, Chaye Sarah, has more than one "story" in it. "Chaye Sarah" means "the life of Sarah" so it is ironic that the parasha opens with the account of Sarah's death and Abraham's subsequent purchase of a burial site for her. Our tradition has taken great pride in noting that this parcel of land in present day Hebron, the first piece of the Promise Land to be owned by Abraham or his descendants, was purchased. According to the narrative, Abraham insisted on paying "full purchase price" for the land despite the offer of it being given to him as a gift.

The second story in the parasha occurs after Sarah's death when Abraham sent his servant to find a bride for Isaac. Abraham did not want Isaac's wife to come from among the Canaanites so he sent his servant to the land of his birth. When Abraham's servant asked how he would know whom to bring back, Abraham told him that God would provide a sign. The servant prayed to God, asking that the sign be a gesture of generosity and tzedakah. Later, at the well, Rebecca presented herself as one possessing such generosity, inviting the servant to drink and then insisting on drawing water for his camels as well.

The third story in this week's parasha is the death of Abraham himself, at the age of one hundred and seventy-five years. What is of interest to us is that both Isaac and Ishmael, Abraham's first son by Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, come together to bury their father. Although the Torah does not speak about the relationship between the two half-brothers, they were both promised to be fathers of great nations. Through Isaac, we Jews would come. Through Ishmael, the Arab nations. Here, the Torah tells us that they came together to bury their father, Abraham, in the same place where Sarah was buried.

## Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Shabbat, you might want to discuss the following issues and questions:

### 1. The issue of ownership.

Abraham's negotiation with Ephron for the purchase of Sarah's burial site has a ritualistic pattern but the end result is that Abraham *purchased* the land at full price. Do you think that Abraham felt differently about the land having purchased it than he would have felt had he received it as a gift? Think about some of your own possessions. Do you feel differently about those things you've earned versus those things you've received as gifts? How does this understanding change the way we think about tzedakah? We know from Maimonides' "Eight Levels of Tzedakah" that the highest level of giving is providing the means by which a person should no longer have to receive charity. Does this correspond with your own feelings? With the feelings you attribute to Abraham?

### 2. Life cycle events and family relationships.

Although the relationship between the descendants of the two half-brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, Jews and Arabs, seems to beg our attention, I think we should personalize this narrative rather than politicize it. Many of us live in complicated, far-flung families. We have family members we don't see or even speak to for years. And yet, we often gather for significant family life cycle events. What are some of the life cycle events that bring your family together? Do you feel differently about family members after sharing these important events together than you felt beforehand?

## Some Texts to Wrestle With

- ✧ Maimonides' "Eight Levels of Tzedakah" (copies of which can be found on the Internet – search: "Maimonides," or; from your Synagogue School.)
- ✧ The dynamics of Abraham's family can be found in several verses: Having had no children herself, Sarai instructed Avram to conceive a child with her handmaiden, Hagar (Gen. 16:2). When Avram enters into the covenant with God, he a *brit* (circumcision) on himself and on his son, Ishmael, and on his entire household (Gen. 17:23). After Isaac's birth, Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out (Gen. 21:9-14). [Note the change in names from Sarai to Sarah and Avram to Abraham.]

## Towards an Action Agenda

- ☆ Make a list of the various charities in which your family is involved. List the various ways that these charities help people. Use Maimonides' "Eight Levels" to prioritize the charities that receive your time, energy and money.
- ☆ Draft an update on what is happening in your family and send it to all the members of your extended family and invite them to do the same. Make this the beginning of an on-going family newsletter.

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact us at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: [www.bjeny.org](http://www.bjeny.org)

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