



Around the Shabbat Table Chaye Sarah 5764

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Introduction

“Sarah’s lifetime - the span of Sarah’s life - came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.” (Gen.23:1) I’ve always thought it ironic that a portion entitled “The Lifetime of Sarah” begins by recording her death! Plaut writes in The Torah: A Modern Commentary (pg. 158): “A Midrash says that we hear of Sarah’s death in connection with her lifetime because her years were truly filled with life and that is one of the reasons why the Hebrew text expresses her life span of 127 years in an unusually extended fashion...” Sarah not only had years added to her life, but life added to her years, a profound lesson from the very first verse of this *parasha*!

Abraham’s first dilemma following his mourning period for Sarah was where to bury her because a resident alien, such as Abraham, was usually not allowed to purchase land. In this case however, his honorable and impeccable reputation enabled him to circumvent this obstacle. Abraham requested permission to buy land containing a cave that belonged to Ephron, the Hittite. At first Ephron offered the land as a gift but Abraham immediately refused. After a brief period of bargaining and discussion, witnessed by Ephron and other Hittites, Abraham purchased, at full value, from Ephron the cave and the land as a burial site for Sarah. Tourists who travel to the city of Hebron can visit the Cave of Machpelah where according to tradition all the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and all the Matriarchs except Rachel (Sara, Rebecca, and Leah) are buried.

Our Torah Portion then continues with a story of love and marriage. The aged Patriarch Abraham wished to see his son Isaac married, however he insisted that the prospective bride be chosen from extended family, not from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom Abraham lived. Abraham sent his trusted servant, probably Eliezer, to find a wife for Isaac.

When Eliezer arrived at his destination it was evening and the daughters of the city were coming to the well to draw water. Eliezer decided to ask for a drink, setting the condition that the woman who offered water to him and his camels as well, will be the maiden that God has decreed for Isaac. Rebecca, the great niece of Abraham, a beautiful girl, fulfills all of Eliezer’s requirements. He accompanied her home to ask her father’s permission for Rebecca to marry Isaac. Laban, Rebecca’s brother, after seeing the gifts given to his sister, eagerly welcomed Eliezer to their home. Laban and Rebecca’s father, Bethuel, both supported the proposed marriage and felt that “The matter was decreed by the Lord” (Gen. 24:50). Eliezer wanted to

return immediately while Rebecca's family favored a short period of preparation. At this point Rebecca was consulted and she consented to go with Eliezer immediately.

Sometime afterwards Isaac was walking in the fields in the afternoon and saw the returning caravan. Rebecca saw Isaac and modestly veiled herself. Isaac led Rebecca into the tent of his mother Sarah and took her as his wife. Isaac loved Rebecca and found comfort for the death of his mother.



Questions for Your Family's Discussion

1. There is probably more than one reason why Abraham declined to accept the Cave of Machpelah as a gift. Why do you think Abraham refused? (You may want to reread Genesis 23!) Have you ever declined to accept a gift from someone? Why?
2. Abraham commands his servant not to find a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites. These words are the first hint of what later becomes Judaism's stand against intermarriage. Interestingly enough, Abraham's own second wife, as well as his concubine, are not from his own people. Why do you think Abraham wanted a wife for his son from among his own people? Were his concerns those of creating a certain cultural or religious environment? Do you think Abraham's possible reasons are still valid today? Has the attitude of Judaism towards intermarriage changed in modern times? Is it important to you or to your family that your spouse be Jewish? Is it possible to remain Jewish and raise Jewish children if you marry a non-Jew?
3. Rebecca said to Abraham's servant, "Drink, my lord...When she had let him drink his fill, she said, 'I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking'" (Gen. 24:18-19). Eliezer had 10 camels, and a single camel can drink 25 or more gallons of water after a long trip. Do you think this story demonstrates that Rebecca would make a good wife for Isaac? What does the scene at the well show us about the kind of person Rebecca was? What qualities do you feel are most important in a potential husband or wife?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

1. This parasha tells us that “Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre-the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field-passed to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town.” (Gen. 23:17-18) Why are these verses so important in establishing Israel as the legitimate homeland of the Jews?
2. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik said that Abraham expressed the dual role that every Jew must play. On the one hand, he is a resident of his country, and as such he must work and pray for its welfare...But on the other hand, the Jew in this world is always an alien, for his allegiance is to God and his goals are set forth in the Torah. A Jew must always be ready to be a lonely alien, resisting the culture that surrounds him and maintaining his unique responsibility. What do you think Soloveitchik means by “resisting the culture that surrounds him?” Does the establishment of the State of Israel influence or invalidate this statement? Does this statement affect us as American Jews? How?
3. According to Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, Jews live in two civilizations, a Jewish civilization and an American civilization. Kaplan expressed the idea that there is much that is good and much that is compatible between the two civilizations. The challenge as Kaplan saw it was how to live simultaneously in both worlds. Do you think Kaplan would agree that, like Abraham, Jews are always aliens? What differences do you see between the philosophies of Kaplan and Soloveitchik?
4. Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on Jewish marriage 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, Timeless Torah, Philip Feldheim, Inc. N.Y. 1957, on Genesis 24:67, pp. 53-54) What do you think Hirsch means? How would you define or describe an ideal marriage?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. The Rabbis believed that Sarah’s years had been filled with life. How could your family help to fill an older person’s days or years with life?
2. Today’s Jewish marriage ceremonies are very different from Rebecca’s. Learn more about Jewish marriage through reading from any of the books listed below:

For Adults:

Donin, Rabbi Hayim Halevy. To Be a Jew. New York: Basic Books, Inc.1972. p 287-291.

Goodman, Philip and Hanna. The Jewish Marriage Anthology. Philadelphia: 1965.

Jacobs, Louis. The Book of Jewish Practice. West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc.1987, p 41-46.

Schauss, Hayyim. The Lifetime of a Jew. New York City: UAHC.1960, p 125-206.

Siegel, Richard, Strassfeld, Michael, Strassfeld, Sharon. The Jewish Catalog. Philadelphia: JPS 1973, pp158-166.

For Children:

Gersh, Harry. When a Jew Celebrates. West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, Inc.1971. p 44-55.



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