

## **Chayei Sarah: The Flutters of a Broken Heart** **Adina Roth, Class of 2024**

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In Mary Oliver’s poem “Don’t Hesitate,” she makes an understated case for joy in the face of tremendous suffering. She writes, “*If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate/Give in to it/There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.../Still life has some possibility left.*” In the last few weeks, a specter of horror has broken through our world and it feels as if we are huddling together, feeling pain in layered circles of intensity. In the face of this gaping sorrow, we are all wondering what life looks like in this new reality. How can there be healing beyond rupture?

Sarah’s death, at the beginning of *parshat* Chayei Sarah, takes place in the aftermath of a great rupture, the Akeidah. Our rabbinic tradition suggests that the Akeidah leaves sorrow in its wake, connecting Sarah’s death to the near-sacrifice of Yitzchak. The Midrash in Pirkei De’Rabbi Eliezer 32:8 tells us that Sarah died because she heard *besorat ha’akeidah* (news of the Akeidah), that her son was killed or about to be killed, and her soul flew from her. From Sarah’s perspective in the Midrash, the idea of Avraham sacrificing their beloved son cracks her world open, taking her back to a primordial *tohu*. *Tohu* is the word used to describe the nothingness that precedes creation and is often translated as chaos or void. It seems upon hearing this news, Sarah moves into a state of utter desolation and rupture. This brokenness is not only Sarah’s load to bear. Avraham names the altar of the Akeidah “*Hashem Yeira’eh*,” “God will see,” indicating that God has ‘seen’ to providing a substitute, the ram for Yitzchak. The Midrash Tanchuma 23:8, however, suggests that God actually ‘sees’ something of Yitzchak’s ashes on the altar. The Midrash offers an extension to the *peshat* of the story: Yes, Yitzchak’s life is saved, but his ashes stay on the altar. The image of Yitzchak’s ashes on the altar suggests that no one leaves the experience unscathed; Avraham sees what could have happened to Yitzchak as *if* it did happen, while something in Yitzchak is charred from the experience.

Yitzchak’s experience of trauma is characterized in our tradition as a kind of inertia. The Mei Hashiloach<sup>1</sup> observes that Yitzchak embodies the notion of “*shev ve’al ta’aseh*,”

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<sup>1</sup> Volume I, Genesis, Chayei Sara 4.

caught in a kind of passivity, stuck and immobile to the flow of life. He cannot get up and seek his own life, or pursue the continuity of life in any way because he is “*shoresh l’chol ha’yivot sheba’olam*,” “the root of all fear in the world.”

This notion that Yitzchak represents fear links to an underlying sensitivity expressed in the Midrash that Yitzchak is in part frozen in time by the Akeidah. If his ashes remain at the altar and if he is defined by the position of sitting and inaction, Yitzchak is stuck in fear. He is unable to enter into the flow of the living. Yet, as the *parsha* continues, Avraham recognizes that, on some level, life must go on. And what more represents the flow of life than the prospect of a marriage? Avraham asks Eliezer, his trusted servant, to go to Haran and seek a wife for Yitzchak. The Mei Hashiloach sensitively contrasts Yitzchak’s frozenness with Avraham and Eliezer’s efforts and energy as they conspire towards life’s continuity. It is as if a flurry of goodness-seeking happens around Yitzchak, while he remains stuck. Then, just before he meets Rivkah, we notice a chance: “*Veyetzeh Yitzchak lasuach ba’sadeh lifnot arev*,” “And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening” (Genesis 24:63).

Amidst his sitting and his stuckness, Yitzchak gets up to dialogue in the fields. Why? What impels him to go?

Bereishit Rabbah (60:14) tells us that Yitzchak was impelled to pray. The Midrash explains that “*sicha*” is “*lashon tefillah*,” the language of prayer, and cites Tehillim 102:1 as its source, “*yishpoch sicho*,” “he shall pour forth his dialogue.” The original context of this verse is instructive in the quality of this “*sicha*.”

תַּפְּלָה לְעַנִּי כִּי־יִשְׁפֹּךְ וְלִפְנֵי ה' יִשְׁפֹּךְ שִׁיחוֹ:

A prayer of the poor man, when he is low and before God he pours his dialogue/prayer. (Psalms 102:1)

The verse in Tehillim which allows Rashi to link *sicha* to *tefillah* is about a person who is “*ataf*,” drooping or made low. An additional meaning of *ataf* is to be wrapped up. Both meanings apply. It is as if the man who moves to prayer starts out entwined in his lowly state. From his place of grief and *atifut*, the person reaches towards God. The

reach towards *tefillah* or *sicha* is the indication of a spark of life, the flutter of a broken heart.

Yitzchak, similarly, is wrapped in grief, yet something in him compels him to go out to the field and pour out his yearnings. The Mei Hashiloach understands that Yitzchak's struggle is profoundly existential. It is a grappling with the question of life itself in the face of utter rupture that tears through every known underpinning. He continues that, at that moment, Yitzchak had a realization. He understood,

לֹא־תֵהוּ בְרֵאָה לְשֹׁבֵת יִצְרָה

God did not create the world for *tohu*—for desolation and chaos—but rather for settlement, for life. (Isaiah 45:18)

Yitzchak's getting up is linked to a realization that ultimately the world was not created for *tohu*, for rupture, chaos and desolation—but for life. The healing power of this recognition is reinforced by the Mei Hashiloach who describes this moment of Yitzchak's recognition as *hitore'rut libo*, the awakening of Yitzchak's heart. According to the Mei Hashiloach, Yitzchak's return to life is not simply about the arrival of Rivkah. It is about his own courage, a turning of his heart and a recognition that in spite of his own encounter with *tohu*, something in him can still “give in” to the good, allowing for a return to the flow of life. In Mary Oliver's words, this is the human spirit, our way of fighting back. Yitzchak's stirrings reflect the magnificently tremulous human impulse to turn away from *tohu* and towards life, even in the darkest and most dismal of times.

Even before Rivkah arrives on the scene with her sensitivity and her energy, Yitzchak's stepping out to the field to dialogue with God is the beginning of his willingness to think about love and life again. It is a moment of profound courage, the quiet step before the actual meeting with another person. Like Yitzchak's moment in the field, Mary Oliver's poem that quietly encourages us to trust in joy again is a little prayer, a grasp towards the good in the face of gaping suffering.

Like Yitzchak, the Jewish people are traversing the land of bewilderment and grief. In *parshat Chayei Sarah*, we find a quiet moment in a field, where Yitzchak reaches out to

dialogue with God. This moment, characterized by the Mei Hashiloach as an awakening of the heart, is the reorienting towards life, before Yitzchak goes on to experience *ahavah* (love) and *nechamah*, (comfort) with Rivkah. As Yitzchak's heart flutters open and awake, he becomes unstuck and slowly enters the flow of life again. *Tefilah*, *tzedakah*, and *chesed* are all indications that our broken hearts too are already aflutter. Yitzchak in the field reminds us that the burden and gift of life carries with it tremors of longing and vulnerability. Over and over again, like sunflowers, we remember that the world was created for much more than this rupture and we reach toward the good. If right now the thought of comfort feels too soon, let us take rest in the barely imperceptible stirrings of fluttering hearts.

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