

**Parshat Chayei Sarah**  
**The Legacy of Sarah**  
**Susan Hornstein - Class of 2025**

---

Parshat Chayei Sarah— literally, The Life of Sarah— is not about Sarah’s life. Indeed, the very first *pasuk* of the *parsha* relates Sarah’s death, and the story continues with Avraham’s preparation for her burial. The rest of the *parsha* is about selecting a wife for Yitzchak. But, as Rivka joins the family, we find that the *parsha* actually is about Sarah’s life, or perhaps more precisely, her legacy.

For Yitzchak, this is a period of transition: he transforms from his role as obedient son to one who will start his own family and continue the dynasty. We think of childhood as the time when a person most needs their parents, and surely that is true. But young adulthood is also a time where parents play an important role. Young adults are both differentiating from and emulating their parents. Parents model how to be effective adults, effective parents, and effective partners. Yitzchak, alas, must navigate this transition alone. His mother has died. His father has nearly sacrificed him on an altar, and no further communication between them is recorded by the Torah. His older half-brother is estranged from him. It is up to Yitzchak to fill those gaps. It’s almost as if he must parent himself.

What might Yitzchak know about Avraham’s life? Avraham received the charge to spread monotheism directly from God, and dedicated his life to building the Jewish people. Additionally, Avraham is characterized by *chesed*, lovingkindness. This is demonstrated by his commitment to *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests, as seen in the episode where the angels visit him (Bereishit, Chapter 18). He is described as loving Yitzchak, but his love is even more apparent in his relationship with Yishmael, his older son, whom he is reluctant to disown. In this case, God has to warn him to listen to Sarah, whose prophetic vision for the future of the Jewish people was more accurate.

And what might Yitzchak have learned from Sarah’s example? Sarah is full partner to Avraham in building the Jewish people. Her commitment to this goal might explain her willingness to be presented repeatedly as Avraham’s sister, to protect Avraham and the dynasty. Once Yitzchak is born, Sarah is fiercely protective of him, insisting on the removal of Hagar and Yishmael from the household, again due to her prophetic understanding of what was needed to protect the dynasty. Even Sarah’s death demonstrates this commitment. The midrash explains that Sarah dies of anguish when she learns about the *Akeidah*, the episode in which Avraham nearly offers Yitzchak on the altar. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in her book about Bereishit, *The Beginning of Desire*, describes Sarah’s anguish as resulting from her realization that Yitzchak had nearly been killed, that life is so precarious, and that the dynasty could have been upended in a single moment.

Immediately after the *Akeidah*, the Torah records the birth of Rivka, prefiguring her selection as the wife for Yitzchak. Rivka is great-niece to both Sarah and Avraham. She is the granddaughter of Nachor, Avraham’s brother, and of Milka, Sarah’s sister. And indeed, she embodies some of the characteristics of Avraham, and many of the characteristics of Sarah.



Like Avraham, Rivka is all *chesed*. In our first glimpse of her, she offers to bring water for Avraham's servant and the servant's animals. Like Sarah, she holds the prophetic vision for perpetuating the dynasty – when her own children are born, she backs the right son, the one who will become Yisrael. The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah gives specific examples of the ways that Rivka is like Sarah. When Yitzchak and Rivka are married, the Torah says:

וַיבֹּאֶה יִצְחָק הָאֵהָלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רַבְּקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֵּאָהֲבָה וַיִּנָּחֵם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ:

Yitzchak then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rivka as his wife. Yitzchak loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death. (Bereishit 24:67)

Bereishit Rabbah 60:16 explains that this comfort came from Rivka's embodiment of Sarah's characteristics:

כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קְיָמָת הָיָה עָנָן קָשׁוּר עַל פֶּתַח אֶהָלָהּ, כִּיּוֹן שָׁמְתָה פֶּסֶק אוֹתוֹ עָנָן, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁבָּאת רַבְּקָה חָזַר אוֹתוֹ עָנָן. כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קְיָמָת הָיוּ דְלָתוֹת פְּתוּחוֹת לְרוּחָהּ, וְכִיּוֹן שָׁמְתָה שָׂרָה פֶּסֶקָה אוֹתָהּ הָרוּחָהּ, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁבָּאת רַבְּקָה חָזְרָה אוֹתָהּ הָרוּחָהּ. וְכָל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קְיָמָת הָיָה בְרָכָה מְשֻׁלַּחַת בְּעֶסֶה, וְכִיּוֹן שָׁמְתָה שָׂרָה פֶּסֶקָה אוֹתָהּ הַבְּרָכָה, כִּיּוֹן שֶׁבָּאת רַבְּקָה חָזְרָה. כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קְיָמָת הָיָה נֵר דּוֹלֵק מִלֵּיל שַׁבָּת וְעַד לֵיל שַׁבָּת, וְכִיּוֹן שָׁמְתָה פֶּסֶק אוֹתוֹ הַנֵּר, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁבָּאת רַבְּקָה חָזְרָה. וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁרָאָה אוֹתָהּ שֶׁהָיָא עוֹשֶׂה כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אִמּוֹ, קוֹצֵה חֲלָתָהּ בְּטַהָרָה וְקוֹצֵה עֲסָתָהּ בְּטַהָרָה, מִיַּד וַיִּבְאֶה יִצְחָק הָאֵהָלָהּ.

All the days that Sarah was alive, a cloud was connected to the entrance of her tent. When she died, the cloud stopped. And when Rivka came, the cloud returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were open wide. When she died, the wideness stopped. And when Rivka came, the wideness returned. And all the days that Sarah was alive, there was a blessing in her dough, and when Sarah died, that blessing ended. When Rivka came, it returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a candle that would burn from Sabbath Eve to [the next] Sabbath Eve, and when she died, the candle stopped. And when Rivka came, it returned. And as soon as Yitzchak saw her, that she did the deeds of his mother, separating her *challah* in purity and separating her dough in purity, he brought her into the tent. (Bereishit Rabbah 60:16)

In his own behavior, Yitzchak carries on in Avraham's footsteps, for better or for worse. He digs the wells that Avraham had dug before him, but that had been sealed up in the interim, and gives them the same names they had in Avraham's time. When there is a famine, Yitzchak tries to protect the dynasty by behaving like Avraham, asking Rivka to represent herself as his sister. When his own son's are born, he, like his father, backs the wrong son.

By bringing Rivka into his life, Yitzchak effectively fills the hole left in his life by Sarah's death. Sarah's legacy, via the blessings she brought to the tent, the prophetic vision, and the commitment to the dynasty, is perpetuated by Rivka. This comforts Yitzchak, helping

him to fill in the gap left by the absence of his parents and to carry on the charge of founding the Jewish people.

Talmud Berachot 18a says: אלו צדיקים שבמיתתן נקראו חיים, "These are the righteous, whom in their deaths are called alive." Through Rivka, Sarah's legacy goes on, and she, in her death, can be called alive.



Susan Hornstein is an educator and a lifelong student. Susan holds a BA from Brandeis University and a PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Brown University. She grew up in Boca Raton, Florida, where her family was instrumental in founding the Jewish community. Susan completed a long career in User Experience, designing computer systems and websites so that their users would be able to understand them. Susan has also spent many years as a Jewish educator. A passionate student of Jewish text and Hebrew language, she has learned at Hebrew University, Michlelet Bruria (now Ohr Torah Stone) and Yeshivat Har Etzion, and has taught in Hebrew Schools, synagogues, and groups around Central New Jersey. She has tutored several dozen Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, some of whom have gone on to tutor students of their own. Susan is a founder and gabbait of the Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley, where she works on education and inclusiveness. She has served on the boards of her Modern Orthodox synagogue and mikvah. Susan is also a musician, and is the conductor of the Central Jersey chapter of HaZamir, The International Jewish Teen Choir. She lives in Highland Park, New Jersey with her husband, and has three grown children, one in the Washington area, and two in Israel, all working in Jewish education.