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**Parshat Chayei Sarah:
Life, Death, or Both**
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Chayei Sarah - literally the life of Sarah - opens with her death.

We read in Beresheit 23:1-2

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵים שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:
וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:
And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.. Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba, now Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.

Rashi, on this pasuk, teaches that the word years is repeated at the end of the pasuk to emphasize that they were all good. Sarah lived a good life. So, if we are talking about death - why are we talking about life?

Perhaps, it is because how one dies can be a reflection of how one lives, or at least there is the opportunity for it should we open ourselves to the conversations. There is a rise in popular culture around this subject with best sellers like [Being Mortal](#) by Dr. Atul Gawande and [When Breath Becomes Air](#) by Dr. Lucy Kalanithi; and communities nationwide are bringing in [The Conversation Project](#) and [Respecting Choices](#). Meanwhile projects like [Death Over Dinner - Jewish Edition](#) and [What Matters: Caring Conversations About End of Life](#) are adding Jewish influences to the conversations. But, our tradition has taught the importance of both living and dying well, for ages.

The Talmud in Kiddushin 31b teaches about how to honor one's father and mother, in their life and in their death in a way that makes them seem connected:

ת"ר מכבדו בחייו ומכבדו במותו.

בחייו כיצד הנשמע בדבר אביו למקום לא יאמר שלחוני בשביל עצמי מהרוני בשביל עצמי פטרוני בשביל עצמי אלא כולהו בשביל אבא.

במותו כיצד היה אומר דבר שמועה מפיו לא יאמר כך אמר אבא אלא כך אמר אבא מרי הריני כפרת משכבו והני מילי תוך שנים עשר חדש מכאן ואילך אומר זכרונו לברכה לחיי העולם הבא.

The Sages taught: One honors his father in his life and honors him in his death.

How does he honor him in his life? One who goes to a place on the command of his father should not say to the people to whom he has been sent, to hurry them along: Send me on my journey on my own behalf, or: Hurry up on my own behalf, or: Allow me to take leave of this business on my own behalf. Rather, he should say all of the above in the following manner: Act in this manner on Father's behalf, as a mark of respect for his father.

How does he honor him in his death? If he says a matter he heard from his father's mouth, he should not say: So said Father. Rather, he should say: So said Father, my teacher, may I be an atonement for his resting soul. And this halakha applies within twelve months of his death. From this time onward he says: May his memory be for a blessing, for the life of the World-to-Come. (Translation by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz.)

We are commanded to show respect in our words and actions to our parents - not only in their life, but also in their death.

When Avraham fell to his knees and wailed, then picked himself up and went about planning for Sarah's burial - do you think he knew what she wanted? When your parents die - will you know what they want? What about when they are suddenly ill or slip slowly into dementia? Don't wait to have the conversation. It is hard, but it is the ultimate way to honor your loved ones. Immediately after this devastating loss, Avraham gets up and proceeds to move forward, as we read in Beresheit 23:3-4

וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי מֵתוֹ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-חֵת לֵאמֹר: 4 גְּרֻתוֹשֶׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם תָּנוּ

לִי אֶחְזֹת-קֶבֶר עִמָּכֶם וְאֶקְבְּרָה מֵתִי מִלְּפָנַי:

Then Avraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial."

While his heart was filled with sadness, Avraham knew that he had to accept Sarah's death and move forward with planning her burial and the challenges of his life. Grief is not endless. We too must get up and move forwards, with our loved ones in our hearts and continue to honor their lives.



Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez combines her personal, professional, and educational experiences to establish meaningful Jewish experiences and connections wherever she goes. She currently serves as the Community Camp Ambassador for the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, working to increase the number of children attending Jewish overnight summer camp by stewarding a scholarship and incentives program, coordinating community marketing, and serving as a central camp resource. Rabba Melissa holds undergraduate degrees in Psychology & Social Behavior and Sociology from the University of California, Irvine and received a Masters in Social Work with a health care concentration from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.