

**Parshat Chayei Sarah**  
**When Will My Life Begin?**  
**Myriam Ackerman Sommer - Class of 2023**

When I was fourteen and *Tangled* was released in cinemas, I felt that I could really identify with Rapunzel and her query, as we both wondered: when does life *really* begin? Of course rational minds will tell you that life simply begins when one is born. Sure. But when does your life become meaningful enough for you to experience it as a fresh start, a new beginning, a spiritual or emotional rebirth? Did my life really begin when I left my home for college, when I graduated, when I got married, or when I started studying at Maharat? When did *your* life begin?

If you are a father or a mother, you might say that it was when you became a parent. And you would be right, in the sense that you would certainly be in line with most of the commentators of the Torah as they asked themselves the same question: “When did the life of Sarah Imenu really begin?”

It is quite noteworthy that the Hebrew word meaning “life”, חיים, is always in the plural form, as if to stress that all of us can have more than one life, that we can all reinvent ourselves. After all, did Sarai not become Sarah, and Avram Avraham? Their existence was not an undisturbed, continuous journey from Haran to Israel, from childlessness to the birth of a people, but rather a winding, meandering path fraught with moments of incredulity (Sarah’s laughter), pure joy (Abraham’s laughter), pain (the circumcision of Abraham and the male members of his household, the tensions between Sarah and Hagar), growth, and intense sorrow. In fact, a famous midrash (Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 32:8) points out that Sarah died of heartbreak during the Binding of her son Itz’hak, not realizing that he was to survive this ordeal.

But what is the measure of a life? This is what the first pasuk of our parsha addresses as it carefully recounts the years of Sarah’s lives. Literally: the Torah counts them twice.

*And these were the lives of Sarah: a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of the lives of Sarah.*

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים  
שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

You may have noticed that this sentence is somewhat repetitive, even redundant. Couldn’t the verse simply state “Sarah lived 127 years”? The commentators noticed this strange pattern and attributed it to the necessity of stressing how exceptional her life and traits were: at the age of 100, Rashi stresses, she was as ethically perfect as she was when she was twenty, and at twenty she had the child-like grace of a seven-year old girl. I believe that, this means that something of her previous lives always remained visible as she grew into a more mature, older woman over the years. Her previous qualities still influenced and informed who she was. We may try to keep this in mind as we wonder when our life will begin (again): even as we change over time and recreate ourselves, we should try to treasure and embrace the parts of our life that made us who we were now, and never let go of them. They still define us as who we are and will be.

Now, even as we have explained the repetition of the word “years” after each number, the reiteration of the phrase “חַיֵּי שָׂרָה” which frames the entire pasuk remains to be accounted for. This repetition is the reason why I chose to translate this segment as “the *lives* of Sarah”, in keeping with many an exegete.

For instance, both Chizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th century, France) and Daat Zekenim (a Torah commentary compiled by later generations of scholars from the writings of the Franco-German school of the Ba’alei Tosafot who lived in the 12th-13th centuries) argue that the repetition of “חַיֵּי שָׂרָה” indicates that she lived two lives: before she gave birth to her son, and after Itz’hak was born.

This is how the Chizkuni reads an allusion to these two lives into the text:



*Those who like to count Gematriot (the art of assigning symbolic meaning to words using their numerical value) say that the value of “ויהיו”, “and they were” (37) alludes to the 37 years from the day Itz’hak was born until the Akeidah, when Sarah died, but the ninety days before that are not called a life, because a person who has no children is as one who is dead (this is an allusion to a Talmudic saying in Nedarim 64).*

הרוצים למנות גימטריאות אומר כמנין ויהיו היו חייה הם שלשים ושבע שנים שמיים שנולד יצחק עד יום העקדה שמתה, אבל התשעים שנה שחיתה קודם לכן אינן חשובין חיים שמי שאין לו בנים חשוב כמת

Now, while the symbolism of giving birth to a child as the beginning of a new life sounds very meaningful to me, and reliable for many happy parents, I find it hard to accept the implication that the Torah is trying to highlight that only these last 37 years really counted, especially for people like me who struggle with fertility. Some of us do not, cannot, or choose not to, have children. Moreover, I find it hard to accept that the one and only reason why Sarah’s life was exceptional enough for the Torah to record her years of life this expressively and dramatically was her ability to give life to her son Itz’hak. Indeed, the Bechor Shor, another exegete, notices, none of the other women in the Torah is celebrated as much as Sarah was - regardless of whether they are mothers or not - “שהיא חשובה מכולם”, because she was more important than anybody else. Therefore, it seems fair to say that the value of our lives is not predicated solely on our parental role. So, going back to our original question: when do our lives begin?

Rashi makes this strikingly relevant comment about the twice mentioned “years of Sarah’s lives”, insisting that *כָּלֵן שָׁוִין לְטוֹבָה*, they were all equal in goodness. This foregrounds the sense of continuity at the heart of the process of change and growth. Sarah made every year count and remained true to who she was at each stage of her life. Interestingly, the Daat Zekenim links the counting of Sarah’s years to the years of Yishmael’s life and stresses that Yishmael paradoxically deserved a similarly emphatic account at the end of his life (and these were the days of Yishmael’s life: a hundred years and thirty years and seven years). According to this commentary, it is because the son of Abraham and Hagar was eventually able to do Teshuva, to repent from his evil ways and do good, that he was able to renew his life altogether. The Daat Zekenim compare this process to a conversion.

*A convert who converts is like a baby who is born, and all the years previous to their conversion and all the bad actions that they performed are not considered at all, and it was as they are as a personal who did Teshuva everyday.*

וגר שנתגייר כקטן שנולד דמי וכל השנים שהיו קודם לכן כל הרע שעשה לא נחשב לכלום והיה כמי שעשה תשובה כל ימיו

I think that there is a balance to be found between reinventing ourselves by erasing who we previously were (conversion, Teshuva as a new beginning, the paradigm of Yishmael or that of Sarah-as-mother in which previous years of life before our awakening simply “do not count”) and remaining true to the parts of us that led us to this point and enabled us to become who we are (the paradigm of Sarah as child and young woman - change without destruction, change that acknowledges that its seeds were planted in the past all along). Therefore, the obvious answer to the question of when our lives will begin, is: today. Every moment can make a change. May we have the purity of Sarah and the resolution of Yishmael as we grow and live out our many lives - *כָּלֵן שָׁוִין לְטוֹבָה*, and may all of our days be equal in goodness.



Myriam Ackermann-Sommer, was born and raised in France. She earned a B.A. in English, along with a minor in Hebrew at the Sorbonne while completing a degree in Humanities at the École Normale Supérieure, a selective French college. In her master’s degree in English literature, Myriam focused mainly on Jewish American authors and Jewish philosophy. Myriam has had an extensive training in teaching and translation, and regularly gives talks in Jewish as well as academic contexts, and, in 2017, founded a co-ed study group (“Ayeka”) for Parisian students and young professionals. A dedicated musician, Myriam has also earned a diploma in transverse flute and loves to enhance the spiritual dimension of Judaism by singing her heart out in prayer groups.