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21 Cheshvan 5778 | November 10, 2017

Parshat Chayei Sarah
Listening to Trauma
Rabbanit Leah Sarna - Class of 2018

Originally published in [The New York Jewish Week](#)

[This Dvar Torah was originally delivered at Harvard Hillel on Shabbat Parashat Chaye Sarah in 5776. One in five women and one in sixteen men on college campuses experience sexual assault, and so in that context, it felt important to share some Torah about how to be a support to the people around us who are victims. Unfortunately, this topic has only become more relevant today. I present it here, in 5778, in an edited and updated form.](#)

In the past few weeks, many women and men in our community and around the United States have come forward as victims of sexual harassment and assault. How do we respond when friends and family write #MeToo posts, identifying themselves as members of the community of victims? In this Dvar Torah, I look to Rivka and Yishmael in this week's parasha as models for how to behave as friends and allies in the aftermath of #MeToo.

Last week's parasha ended in trauma. We don't know what happened to Yitzhak after the *akeda*. We saw him tied up, on a *mizbeach*. And then we hear about how Avraham sacrificed the ram instead, and Hashem blessed Avraham. For all we know, Yitzhak is still there on the mountain. We know that Avraham left alone.

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba. (Genesis 22:19)

There's nothing ambiguous about this verse. Yitzhak didn't go with him. The world moves on, and Yitzhak isn't there. Sarah dies, Avraham mourns her and bargains for a burial plot. Yitzhak doesn't even seem to have a hand in his own affairs. Avraham decides what kind of woman Yitzhak should marry, and sends his servant to go find her. But throughout, Yitzhak is absent.

The midrash asks – where was Yitzhak?

“So Abraham returned to his young men” Rabbi Berachya in the name of the Rabbis over there says: he was sent to the beit midrash of Shem to learn Torah from him. (Bereshit Rabbah, Parashat Vayera, Chapter 56)

By the Midrash's account, Yitzhak was sent away. But there's textual evidence to believe that Avraham didn't do this – that Avraham kept him close. We know for sure that by the time the servant returns with Rivkah, Yitzhak was close by, because the verse in Bereishit 25:67 tells us that he brought Rivka into the tent of Sarah his mother. A tent near Avraham.

But what does seem clear is that either way, whether Yitzhak was close or far, he was isolated. When we see Yitzhak for the first time in this week's parasha, he has gone out into the field, by himself. “And Yitzhak went out *lasuach* in the field” (24:62). There are many different translations of the word *lasuach*. Rabbi



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Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg, a student of Rabbi Akiva Eiger wrote a commentary on the Torah called HaKtav v'HaKabbalah. He wrote that the usage of *siach* here is to mark that it's a type of speech which helps the soul.

That the soul may be helped by means of speech, or that the speech comes from internal suffering, like this example from Iyyov: "I will *lasuach* with the bitterness of my soul." Each of these prooftexts is about speech as an activity which relieves a strong internal feeling, and to bring it out, through abundant and ongoing introspection. (HaKtav v'HaKabbalah, Bereshit 24:63)

This is a picture of Yitzchak out in the field, talking to himself. He was hurting, and he himself was his only resource up to that moment. Avraham, a participant in the traumatic incident, couldn't be of help. Sarah might have been, but she had passed away, perhaps, as Rashi suggests, out of her own experience of this traumatic event (Rashi on Genesis 23:2).

Feelings of isolation are common after traumatic incidents. Either the victim doesn't tell anyone about the incident – and this might happen for a whole host of reasons – or worse, people sort-of know about the incident and then distance themselves from the victim. Cerebrally, one might say, "what kind of horrible person would ever do that?" but the truth is that this reaction is natural. It's pretty much a reflex. When we see someone else hurting, a voice inside says, "I don't want to hurt like that – I'm afraid to take in the other person's hurt, because then I might hurt too" – and we flee. But when we run away, we make the victims feel even more isolated than they ever did before. And this leads to a cycle, where victims are afraid to speak out because they are afraid of how it will feel if they aren't heard – so then they don't seek care, and the isolation deepens.

In this week's parasha, we see two characters who break Yitzhak's isolation: Rivka and Yishmael.

Rivka meets Yitzchak in a beautiful scene – he looks up from his *siach* in the field and sees the caravan coming:

Rivka raises up her eyes and sees Yitzchak and she fell off of her camel. (Genesis 24:64)

Rivka really saw Yitzchak. She saw that he was off in the field, hurting, by himself. And the sight was overwhelming – Rashi says she was *toha* – she was dumbfounded. But instead of running away, instead of giving in to the fear that his hurt would become her hurt, she continued to see him, she continued to be present for him, and she comforted him, the verse tells us, in the way that Sarah might have been able to comfort him. And for that, Yitzchak loved her.

The other character to interact with Yitzchak in this week's parasha is Yishmael. He comes back to bury Avraham. The verse tells us in 25:9 that Yitzchak and Yishmael buried Avraham. Commentators wonder why Yitzchak is mentioned first, since Yishmael is the eldest. Rashi says that this comes to teach us that Yishmael did Teshuva from his former ways, and upon his return, he had Yitzchak walk before him. Literally, this just means that he allowed Yitzchak to play some kind of larger role in the burial of Avraham. But there is metaphorical meaning in "walking someone before you" – there's an element of inspection involved in that. An element of – I'm putting you where I can look at you. Where I can see you in a deep way, and perhaps

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provide some comfort in this extraordinarily complicated moment of burying Avraham. Rivka and Yishmael gave Yitzchak permission to break out of his isolation. That permission is only the beginning, but it's a huge step.

Over the past few weeks, New York Times published an investigation of Harvey Weinstein, and any number of other public figures have been outed as perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault. In the wake of these articles, people have started to share. And that makes it our job to listen. If you vaguely know the person who wrote an article or a tweet or a Facebook post, you might be tempted to ignore it when you see them just because you don't know what to say. That temptation is normal, but I think we ought to fight that instinct. When someone tells their story, we should thank them for it. Their post or article is a gift of confidence, a gift of intimacy – and it's a courageous gift to give.

Receiving that gift of intimacy, though, comes with a certain degree of responsibility. Our responsibility is to support that person in their next steps, and encourage them to take next steps towards healing. Whether that is to find a therapist, seek medical attention or possibly do nothing.

But there are also limits to that responsibility. Our responsibility is *not* to push them to continue to tell their story if they don't want to, and certainly not to report it on their behalf. Our responsibility is also not to be the sole caretaker of that individual.

Our responsibility *is* to take care of ourselves, to seek help for ourselves. Trauma spreads out in circles, and just because you didn't go through the traumatic incident doesn't mean that the trauma hasn't affected you. When Rivka first saw Yitzchak's trauma, she veiled herself. She found a moment of privacy, to take care of herself as well. That's healthy and important.

We live in a world full of hurting, traumatized people. Bereishit itself is a book full of people who are hurting, and who hurt each other. And for generations, Bereishit has been teaching the Jewish people how to live better, hurt each other less, and help each other more. May those who are hurting find comfort, and may we be blessed with the opportunity to build a safer community and a healed world.



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