

Parshat Chayei Sara: The Price of Piety Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

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This week's *parsha*, *Chayei Sarah*, or "The life of Sarah," begins with the death of Sarah.

And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah.

And Sarah died in Kiriath Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. (Genesis 23:1-2)

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעַת
שָׁנִים שָׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:
וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ: (בראשית
כג:א-ב)

This final phrase--"וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ"--marks one of the saddest moments in Tanach. Sara dies and Avraham *comes* to eulogize her. He does not live by her side as she fades. He does not hold her hand as she dies. Too late, he must be summoned from afar to bury her.

Rashi tells us that Avraham came all the way from Beer Sheba to Hebron to bury his wife. Indeed, according to the previous chapter of Breishit (22), Avraham dwelt there after the *Akeidah*. It seems that after the near-sacrifice of his son, he could not return home. He could not face his previous life or his wife. And so she died, having never confronted the man who nearly took away her son.

Of Avraham after the *Akeidah* we are told:

And Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer Sheba; and Abraham remained in Beer Sheba. (Genesis 22:19)

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל
בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע:
(בראשית כב:יט)

This image is a tragic one. Avraham, who ascended the mountain "*yachdav*"--together with his son--descends without him. Yitzchak survives, but it seems that the father-son relationship did not. Relieved, but also bereft and maybe a bit broken, Avraham embarks on a different journey now, together (*yachdav*) with his servants, his *naarav* who are not his *naar*, not his beloved Yitzchak. Before the trek up the mountain, Avraham had said to his servants,

...Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will prostrate ourselves and return to you. (Genesis 22:5)

...שָׁבוּ לָכֶם פֹּה עִם הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי וְהַנֶּעֱר גִּלְכָּה עַד לָה
וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם: (בראשית כב:ה)

But this was not meant to be. Avraham did not return with his son, nor did he return to his wife. In the aftermath of all the pain of the *Akeidah*, he chose to walk with other *naarim* away from all that he knew, away from Hebron. "וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו"--Together they settled in Beer Sheba.

This moment of familial rupture echoes in the lonely death of Sarah that headlines our *parsha* and also, subtly, in the death of Avraham himself, which is also read this week.

And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life that he lived: one hundred years and seventy years and five years. And Abraham expired and died in a good old age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which faces Mamre. (Genesis 25:7-9)

וְאֵלֶּה יְמֵי שְׁנֵי-חַיֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר-חַי מֵאֵת שָׁנָה
 וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים:
 וַיָּגוּעַ וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבַע וַיֵּאָסֶף
 אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ:
 וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו אֶל-מְעַרְתַּת הַמְּכַפְלָה
 אֶל-שְׂדֵה עֶפְרָן בֶּן-צֹחַר הַחִתִּי אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא:
 (בראשית כה:ז-ט)

Avraham dies--ripe and ready--seemingly after a good long life, and yet the burial scene belies this claim somewhat. Heartwarming as it is to see Yitzchak and Yishmael reunited to honor their father, this joining in death only highlights its absence in life. After the *Akeidah*, the Torah records no contact between any of these parties. Avraham did not have any relationship with his children (nor did they have any relationship with each other). He would never again walk "*yachdav*" with Yitzchak and certainly not with Yishmael. Indeed, only with him gone can they all be together. Just like Sarah's death forced or maybe re-opened Avraham's engagement with his wife; so too his own death enabled his children to re-engage with him. *Maarat Ha'machpelah* became the site of reunion and maybe of posthumous repair.

Rashi, quoting Breishit Rabbah, draws together our *parsha* and the one that precedes it telling us that the cause of Sarah's death was Yitzchak's near-death.

The account of Sarah's demise was juxtaposed to the binding of Isaac because as a result of the news of the *Akeidah*, that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died. (Genesis 23:2)

לספוד לשרה ולבכתה: ונסמכה מיתת שרה לעקידת
 יצחק, לפי שעל ידי בשורת העקידה שנזדמן בנה
 לשחיטה וכמעט שלא נשחט, פרחה נשמתה ממנה
 ומתה: (בראשית כג:ב)

I would like to suggest that Sarah's fatal heartbreak resulted not only from the content of her son's trials but also from the *way* that she came to hear of it. "*Besorat Ha'akeidah*"--the news of the *Akeidah*--seemingly came her way from the outside, maybe by way of a messenger or a rumor. Neither her husband nor her son were there to soften the blow, to contextualize it, or to support her through it. Alone, horrified, sickened, and afraid, her soul could no longer function and she gave out.

The deaths of Sarah and Avraham serve as a cautionary postscript to the *Akeidah* story. The binding of Yitzchak was, it turns out, a story of sacrifice after all: The sacrifice of family on the altar of God. Perhaps we ought to understand from this very messy tale that we threaten to sacrifice human relationships when we privilege the God-relationship overly much. This is no doubt a spiritually challenging message, but I believe that it is an important one. There is a price to be paid for too much piety.



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