

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

The name of our parsha seems to embody a paradox. It is called Chayei Sarah, “the life of Sarah,” but it begins with the death of Sarah. What is more, towards the end, it records the death of Abraham. Why is a parsha about death called “life”? The answer, it seems to me, is that – not always, but often – death and how we face it is a commentary on life and how we live it.

Which brings us to a deeper paradox. The first sentence of this week’s parsha of Chayei Sarah, is: “Sarah’s lifetime was 127 years: the years of Sarah’s life.” A well-known comment by Rashi on the apparently superfluous phrase, “the years of Sarah’s life,” states: “The word ‘years’ is repeated and without a number to indicate that they were all equally good.” How could anyone say that the years of Sarah’s life were equally good? Twice, first in Egypt, then in Gerar, she was persuaded by Abraham to say that she was his sister rather than his wife, and then taken into a royal harem, a situation fraught with moral hazard.

There were the years when, despite God’s repeated promise of many children, she was infertile, unable to have even a single child. There was the time when she persuaded Abraham to take her handmaid, Hagar, and have a child by her, which caused her great strife of the spirit.<sup>1</sup> These things constituted a life of uncertainty and decades of unmet hopes. How is it remotely plausible to say that all of Sarah’s years were equally good?

That is Sarah. About Abraham, the text is similarly puzzling. Immediately after the account of his purchase of a burial plot for Sarah, we read: “Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything” (Gen. 24:1). This too is strange. Seven times, God had promised Abraham the land of Canaan. Yet when Sarah died, he did not own a single plot of land in which to bury her, and had to undergo an elaborate and even humiliating negotiation with the Hittites, forced to admit at the outset that, “I am

a stranger and temporary resident among you” (Genesis 23:4). How can the text say that God had blessed Abraham with everything?

Equally haunting is its account of Abraham’s death, perhaps the most serene in the Torah: “Abraham breathed his last and died at a good age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people.” He had been promised that he would become a great nation, the father of many nations, and that he would inherit the land. Not one of these promises had been fulfilled in his lifetime. How then was he “satisfied”?

The answer again is that to understand a death, we have to understand a life.

I have mixed feelings about Friedrich Nietzsche. He was one of the most brilliant thinkers of the modern age, and also one of the most dangerous. He himself was ambivalent about Jews and negative about Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Yet one of his most famous remarks is both profound and true: He who has a why in life can bear almost any how.<sup>3</sup>

(In this context I should add a remark he made in *The Genealogy of Morality* that I have not quoted before. Having criticised other sacred Scriptures, he then writes: “the Old Testament – well, that is something quite different: every respect for the Old Testament! I find in it great men, heroic landscape and something of utmost rarity on earth, the incomparable naivety of the strong heart; even more, I find a people.”<sup>4</sup> So despite his scepticism about religion in general and the Judaeo-Christian heritage in particular, he had a genuine respect for Tanach.)

Abraham and Sarah were among the supreme examples in all history of what it is to have a Why in life. The entire course of their lives came as a response to a call, a Divine voice, that told them to leave their home and family, set out for an unknown destination, go to live in a land where they would be strangers, abandon every conventional form of security, and have the faith to believe that by living by the standards of righteousness and justice they would be taking the first step to establishing a nation, a land, a faith and a way of life that would be a blessing to all humankind.

<sup>1</sup> I deliberately omit the tradition (Targum Yonatan to Gen. 22:20) that says that at the time of the binding of Isaac, Satan appeared to her and told her that Abraham had sacrificed their son, a shock that caused her death. This tradition is morally problematic.

<sup>2</sup> The best recent study is Robert Holub, *Nietzsche’s Jewish Problem*, Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Maxims and Arrows*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 107.

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Biblical narrative is, as Erich Auerbach said, "fraught with background," meaning that much of the story is left unstated. We have to guess at it. That is why there is such a thing as Midrash, filling in the narrative gaps. Nowhere is this more pointed than in the case of the emotions of the key figures. We do not know what Abraham or Isaac felt as they walked toward Mount Moriah. We do not know what Sarah felt when she entered the harems, first of Pharaoh, then of Avimelech of Gerar. With some conspicuous exceptions, we hardly know what any of the Torah's characters felt. Which is why the two explicit statements about Abraham – that God blessed him with everything, and that he ended life old and satisfied – are so important. And when Rashi says that all of Sarah's years were equally good, he is attributing to her what the biblical text attributes to Abraham, namely a serenity in the face of death that came from a profound tranquillity in the face of life. Abraham knew that everything that happened to him, even the bad things, were part of the journey on which God had sent him and Sarah, and he had the faith to walk through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil, knowing that God was with him. That is what Nietzsche called "the strong heart."

In 2017, an unusual book became an international bestseller. One of the things that made it unusual was that its author was ninety years old and this was her first book. Another was that she was a survivor both of Auschwitz, and also of the Death March towards the end of the war, which in some respects was even more brutal than the camp itself.

The book was called *The Choice* and its author was Edith Eger.<sup>5</sup> She, together with her father, mother and sister Magda, arrived at Auschwitz in May 1944, one of 12,000 Jews transported from Kosice, Hungary. Her parents were murdered on that first day. A woman pointed towards a smoking chimney and told Edith that she had better start talking about her parents in the past tense. With astonishing courage and strength of will, she and Magda survived the camp and the March. When American soldiers eventually lifted her from a heap of bodies in an Austrian forest, she had typhoid fever, pneumonia, pleurisy and a broken back. After a

year, when her body had healed, she married and became a mother. Healing of the mind took much longer, and eventually became her vocation in the United States, where she went to live.

On their way to Auschwitz, Edith's mother said to her, "We don't know where we are going, we don't know what is going to happen, but nobody can take away from you what you put in your own mind." That sentence became her survival mechanism. Initially, after the war, to help support the family, she worked in a factory, but eventually she went to university to study psychology and became a psychotherapist. She has used her own experiences of survival to help others survive life crises.

Early on in the book she makes an immensely important distinction between victimisation (what happens to you) and victimhood (how you respond to what happens to you). This is what she says about the first: We are all likely to be victimised in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimisation. It comes from the outside.

And this, about the second: In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimisation. We develop a victim's mind – a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy limits or boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview on the publication of the book, she said, "I've learned not to look for happiness, because that is external. You were born with love and you were born with joy. That's inside. It's always there."

We have learned this extraordinary mindset from Holocaust survivors like Edith Eger and Viktor Frankl. But in truth, it was there from the very beginning, from Abraham and Sarah, who survived whatever fate threw at them, however much it seemed to derail their mission, and despite everything they found serenity at the end of their lives. They knew that what makes a life satisfying is not external but internal, a sense of purpose, mission, being called, summoned, of starting something that would be continued by those who came after them, of bringing something new into the world by the way they lived their lives. What mattered was the inside, not the outside; their faith, not their often-troubled circumstances.

I believe that faith helps us to find the 'Why' that allows us to bear almost any 'How'. The serenity of Sarah's and Abraham's death was eternal testimony to how they lived. *Covenant and Conversation 5780 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl*

<sup>5</sup> Edith Eger, *The Choice*, Rider, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

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**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron in the Land of Canaan. And Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep over her." (Genesis 23:2) What was Sarah doing in Hebron? According to a simple reading of the text, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac lived in Beersheba. The text even tells us that Abraham had to "come" to weep over her; he apparently wasn't with her when she died.

In order to understand Sarah's whereabouts, it is first necessary to realize that her prophetic powers were greater than Abraham's. You will remember that when Sarah tells Abraham to banish the handmaiden and her son, the issue was "very grievous in the eyes of Abraham," but God says to the patriarch: "Let it not be grievous in your eyes. Whatever Sarah says to you, listen to her voice." (Genesis 21:10-12). Rashi cites the Midrash Raba, "We learn from here that Abraham was second to Sarah in prophetic power."

The truth of the words of the Midrash are borne out by the subsequent text. Abraham, being 10 years older than Sarah, was 137 when Sarah died; he lived another 38 years – years when he was still vigorous enough to marry at least one other wife and father six sons (Genesis 25:1-6). Nevertheless, there is not one biblically transmitted conversation between God and Abraham during all these years. Indeed, the only recorded event is Abraham's desire to choose a wife for Isaac, but in the absence of Sarah he leaves the choice to Eliezer, his Damascene steward. Apparently, in no small measure Abraham was the *rav* (rabbi) because Sarah was the *rebbitzin* (rabbi's wife).

From this backdrop, let us take a fresh look at the drama surrounding the akeda. Abraham rises "early in the morning" to set out with Isaac, the two householders (Eliezer and Ishmael as previously mentioned), firewood, a slaughtering knife and a minimum of 10 days' supply of food and drink. It is inconceivable that they all left without waking Sarah. A discussion certainly ensued. "Where are you going?" asks Sarah. "To do God's bidding," answers Abraham. "What did God ask you to do?" asks Sarah. "To make a sacrifice," answers Abraham. "So why do you need our son, Isaac?" asks Sarah, "and where is the lamb?" she demands, with a nearly hysterical tremor in her voice.

And so Abraham repeats God's precise command: "Take now your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and bring him up there as a dedication [ola] on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you" (Genesis 22:2). Sarah is beside herself. "You don't need the slaughtering knife," she cries. "You are misinterpreting God's words. The Almighty God, who taught us that 'one who sheds innocent blood shall have his blood spilled, since the human being was

created in the Divine image,' told Cain that 'his brother's blood is crying out from beneath the ground,' could not possibly have meant for you to slaughter our innocent Isaac. And besides, God promised you, in my presence, that 'through Isaac shall be designated your special seed.' I tell you that you are misinterpreting God's command."

Abraham refuses to listen. After all, he heard God's words, and *ola* – although built upon a verb which means to ascend and dedicate – in actual practice means "a whole burnt offering." Abraham has no choice but to leave the house with Isaac, the firewood and the slaughtering knife – hearing Sarah's muffled sobs as he closes the door.

In fact, Sarah was correct. Yes, God purposely conveyed an ambiguous command because our Bible is an eternal document, and subsequent generations of Jews – subject to exile, persecution and pogrom – would be forced to see their children slaughtered on account of their faith; these future fathers and children would find inspiration in the figures of Abraham and Isaac as symbols of devotion unto death, as ensigns of Jewish willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for God, Torah and Israel. But such martyrdom is not the *ab initio* desire of our compassionate God.

The sages of the Talmud (B.T. Ta'anit 4a) corroborate the thrust of the words I put in Sarah's mouth; they interpret a verse in the book of Jeremiah (19:5) regarding human sacrifice: "I did not command them, I did not speak of them, they did not enter My mind." It is on this basis that Rashi comments on the word "And lift him up" (Genesis 22:2): "[God] did not say 'slaughter him' because the Holy One, blessed be He, did not want Isaac slaughtered; He merely said 'lift him up,' on the mountain to make of him a dedication, and once he [Isaac] agreed to be dedicated [in life], He [God] said he was to be brought down" (Bereshit Raba 56, 8). And indeed Isaac is referred to in the Midrash as a "pure dedication – *ola temima*" for the rest of his life.

If I may continue my fanciful "midrash," I would suggest that once Sarah realized that she couldn't convince her husband, her only recourse was to attempt to convince the Almighty to step in and prevent a tragedy. She leaves her home in Beersheba and goes to pray in Hebron, at the Cave of the Couples (Tomb of the Patriarchs, known in Hebrew as Ma'arat Hamachpela) where Adam and Eve were buried. It was important for her to pray in Hebron, because that was the place of the "Covenant between the Pieces" when God promised Abraham eternal progeny, and that was where God had sent his messengers to tell Abraham that he and she would miraculously have a son "through whom his special seed would be designated."

Sarah prayed until her heart gave out. She died in Hebron, and Abraham came there to bury, eulogize and weep over his beloved wife, without whom he understood that his life with God was over, but through

whom the destiny of Israel had been secured forever.  
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### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## **Wein Online**

**I**t is very difficult to sum up the experiences, worth and influence of an individual purely in words. That is why many times at funerals people who hear eulogies of the deceased feel that somehow the words of the tribute really did not capture the essence of the individual being memorialized. In the Torah reading this week, Abraham is said to have eulogized his beloved wife Sarah. The Torah does not describe for us the words that he used in speaking about her. However, Rashi, in commenting as to why the Torah listed her life as consisting of 100 and then 20 and then seven years, states that all of her lives – the one that was 100, the one that was 20 and the one that was 7 – were devoted to goodness.

That simple statement is the true eulogy for our mother Sarah. Everything was for the good, and, therefore, all her life was devoted to being and creating good for her family and for others. When people say that the person was "a person of goodness", that phrase encompasses many details and many actions. However, enumerating an individual's actions of goodness is really unnecessary, because we understand what a person of goodness is and does. This is a state of mind, an emotion of the soul that drives human behavior and actions. When we say someone was or is a good person everyone immediately knows what is meant by that statement, and, therefore, no further explanations or illustrations are necessary.

We often mistakenly associate the trait of goodness with a certain weakness of character and a compromise of willpower. We think that good people must automatically be soft people, and in a world that is often harsh and hard, softness is not always a virtue. Nevertheless, when we review the life of our mother Sarah, we cannot help but be impressed by the fact that she was a strong-willed and powerful personality. She took severe and painful steps to safeguard her son Isaac from the ravages of his half-brother Ishmael.

Even when her husband Abraham seemed to be in doubt as to how to treat the matter, she stayed firm, and, eventually, the Lord, so to speak, told Abraham to listen and obey whatever Sarah instructed him to do. Goodness should never be seen as weakness. Rather, it is to be seen as the search for the ultimate benefit the person himself or herself and for the general society. In a good society, justice is done, and corrective measures are taken to make certain that evil will is not allowed to flourish or go unpunished and unchallenged.

This is the type of world that Abraham and Sarah were striving to build, and it was the influence of

their personalities that marked their generation and gave it a stamp of goodness and purpose. That task of accomplishing goodness has been the challenge to the Jewish people for millennia and remains our mission and goal in our time as well. © 2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

## **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**A**s he buys a burial plot for his wife Sarah, Avraham (Abraham) identifies himself as a ger toshav. (Genesis 23:4) The term is enigmatic. Ger means alien while toshav means resident. How could Avraham be both when those terms seem to be opposites?

On a simple level, Avraham tells the children of Heth that he initially came to their community as a stranger, but now he has finally settled in.

Alternatively, the Midrash interprets Avraham declaring: "I am prepared to conduct myself as a stranger and pay for the burial plot. If, however, you rebuff me I will take it as a citizen who already owns the land that God had promised to His children."

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik sees it differently. For him, Avraham is defining the status of the Jew throughout history living amongst foreigners. No matter how comfortable a Jew may feel among others, in the end, the Jew is a stranger and is viewed as an other by his neighbors.

Another thought comes to mind. Avraham was a very successful man. He introduced the revolutionary idea of monotheism—and, indeed is chosen to be the father of the Jewish nation. Still, as he buries his wife, he emotionally cries out that as accomplished as he may be, in the end he is vulnerable, with glaring weaknesses and frailties—just like everyone else.

Hence, ger toshav resonates one's outlook on life. As much as one may feel like a toshav, like a resident who is in control of life, one, in the same breath is a ger, a stranger—here one day and gone the next.

The reverse is equally true. Even if one feels like a stranger (ger), unsure of his or her status or abilities, one should try to develop a belief that all will be well – like a toshav, a sojourner, comfortable and certain of one's standing.

Once again, ger toshav reflects an approach to life. Even in moments of uncertainty, when feeling like a ger, one should never lose faith in oneself. Thus, the phrase ger toshav speaks to the complexities of human nature and the need for the opposite feelings of ger and toshav to live in sync and sometimes in tension with each other. © 2019 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat

*Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale*

**RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ Z"L**

## Shabbat Shalom Weekly

**E**liezer arrives in Charan. Rivka gives him water to drink. The Torah states, "And she finished giving him to drink. And she said, 'Also for your camels I will draw water until they finish drinking'" (Genesis 24:19). Why does the Torah specify that she will "draw water" rather than writing, "I will give the camels to drink"?

The great Spanish Rabbi, the Abarbanel, tells us that Rivka was meticulously careful not to say anything that would be untrue. Therefore, she said she would draw water, as if to say, "I don't know for sure if they will drink or not, but I will draw water for them. If they want to, they can drink."

Rabbi Shmuel Walkin adds that we see here how careful we should be to keep away from saying anything untrue. He cites as an example Rabbi Refael of Bershid who was always very careful to refrain from saying anything that was untrue. One day he entered his home while it was raining outside. When asked if it was still raining, he replied, "When I was outside it was raining." He did not want to mislead in case it had stopped raining from the time he entered his home.

This may seem to be ridiculous or inconsequential. However, if a person is careful with keeping to the truth in such instances, he will definitely be careful in more important matters. On the other hand, if a person is careless with the truth, he can even be tempted to lie in major ways! *Dvar Torah Based on Growth Through Torah by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin © 2019 Rabbi K. Packouz z"l*

**RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## Eliezer Rules!

**I**n this week's portion, there is an amazing characterization of Avraham's servant, Eliezer. The Torah tells us that in finding a wife for his son Yitzchak, Avraham relied upon Eliezer. But the Torah describes Eliezer in conjunction with that event in a very noteworthy manner. It tells us that "Avraham turned to Eliezer, the elder of his household, who ruled over all his possessions," and asked him to go find a wife for Yitzchak (Genesis 24:2). What connection does ruling over possessions have to do with matchmaking? Even a financial guru can be a dunce when it comes to matching the appropriate marital needs of a budding patriarch. After all, Warren Buffet does not run the Fields Agency!

Also the words "ruled over all of Avraham's possessions" needs explanation. Rulers are in complete control as the word rule connotes an imperial role. Why did the Torah use such an expression to depict the function of the administrator of an estate?

Further, why would dominion over fiscal matters have any bearing on matters of matrimony? What is the connection between Eliezer's financial finesse and the charge to find a wife for Yitzchak?

I once sat on an overseas flight next to a talkative executive who was skeptical about his own Jewish heritage. During the first hours of the flight, the man peppered me with questions, mostly cynical, about Judaism.

Then the meal came. I was served a half-thawed omelet that seemed to be hiding under a few peas and carrots. The half-cooked egg was nestled between a small aluminum pan and its quilted blanket of tape and double-wrapped aluminum foil. Next to me, the executive was served a steaming piece of roast pork on fine china, with a succulent side dish of potatoes au gratin and a glass of fine wine.

As if to score big, the executive tucked his napkin into his collar and turned to me. He stared at my pathetic portion and with sympathetic eyes sarcastically professed, "I'd love to offer you my meal, but I'm sorry you can't eat it!"

I did not buy into his gambit. "Of course I can eat it!" I smiled. "In fact I think I'll switch with you right now!" His smile faded. He was famished and in no way did he want to give away his portion. But he was totally mystified at my response. I saw the concern in his face. He was looking forward to eating this meal.

"I can have it if I want it. And if I don't want it I won't eat it. I have free choice and control over what I eat and what I don't. The Torah tells me not to eat this food and I have made a conscious choice to listen to the Torah. I therefore choose not to eat it."

Then, I went for broke "Now let me ask you a question. Can you put the cover back on the food and hold yourself back from eating it?"

He smiled sheepishly and said, "you are not allowed to eat it. I, however, cannot not eat it." And with that he dug in.

The Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Lunshitz, a very profound commentator who lived in the 1600s, explains that the criterion for objective and unbiased decisions is the ability to be in total power of any influencing impediment. Eliezer ruled over all of Avraham's possessions. They did not rule over him. That is why Avraham knew that Eliezer would not be unduly influenced in his thought process and decision-making. He ruled over the mundane, and no money could influence his pure objectivity. He would not be bribed, cajoled or lured with gifts or cash by any prospective suitors. He would make his choice with a clear frame of mind Avraham's.

The question we all must ask is, do we rule over the temporal, or does it rule over us?" Is the desire to get the latest gadget, buy the sleekest car, or acquire the most exquisite piece of jewelry ruling over us and controlling our lives or, like Eliezer, do we approach the

beauties of this word with a calm, controlled attitude? Before we set our goals and our rules we must ascertain that we have goals and that we rule! © 2019 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

**RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN**

## The Double Cave

**T**he Torah does not often go into detail about a transaction in business. It sets general business rules, the specifics of which are passed down in the Oral Law, the Mishnah and Talmud. What is amazing then in our parasha, is the detail of not only the actual transaction but the negotiations involved. There are many subtleties in these negotiations which one can easily miss without consulting the meforshim, the commentaries. From a glance, the negotiations appear pleasant and simple, but there is much exchanged in subtle nuances.

Avraham returns from the Binding of Yitzchak to learn that Sarah has died. After eulogizing her, he proceeds to purchase a gravesite for her. The Torah says, "Avraham rose up from the presence of his dead and spoke to the children of Heth, saying, 'I am an alien and a resident among you; grant me a holding for a grave with you, that I may bury my dead.'" And the children of Heth answered Avraham saying, 'Hear us, my lord, you are a prince of Hashem in our midst. In the choicest of burial places bury your dead, any of us will not withhold his burial place from you, from burying your dead.' Then Avraham rose up and bowed down to the members of the council, to the children of Heth. He spoke to them saying, 'If it is your will to bury my dead from before me, hear me, and intercede for me with Efron son of Zohar. Let him grant me the Double Cave (Machpeila) which is his, on the edge of the field; let him grant it to me for full price, in your midst, as a holding (permanent burial site) for a grave.' Now Efron was sitting in the midst of the children of Heth, and Efron the Hittite responded to Avraham in the hearing of the children of Heth, for all who come to the gate of the city, saying, 'No my lord, hear me, the field I have given to you and the Cave that is in it, I have given it to you; in the view of the children of my people I have given it to you, bury your dead.' So Avraham bowed down before the council of the people. He spoke to Efron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, 'Rather if only you would heed me! I have given you the money of the field, take from me that I may bury my dead.' And Efron replied to Avraham saying to him, 'My lord, hear me! Land worth four hundred silver Shekalim, between me and between you, what is it...and go bury your dead.' Avraham listened to Efron and weighed out to Efron the money that he had mentioned in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred silver shekalim in negotiable currency. And Efron's field that was in the Double Cave, that was facing Mamre, the field and the cave within it and all the

trees in the field within its boundary and all around, as Avraham's, as a purchase in the view of the people of Heth with all who came to the gate of the city. And after that Avraham buried Sarah, his wife, of the field of the Double Cave, facing Mamre, which is Chevron in the Land of Canaan. And the field and the cave that is therein was established unto Avraham for a permanent burial site by the children of Heth."

The Ramban explains Avraham's first problem. He was an "alien and a resident" even though he was promised the land. It was customary among the people that each family which dwelled in a city had its own cemetery, while a separate cemetery was used for the burial of all outsiders. Avraham did not own any land so he was technically an outsider. But Avraham was also a resident which granted him some rights. Still the people's answer to him was that he was a lord and could command any place that he desired. Avraham understood that this would be a temporary ownership that they were offering, but it is clear that he wanted an achuzah, a permanent ownership of land. Avraham knew that this would be his family's burial place where his son and grandson and their wives would be buried. He needed permanence. The people of Heth were reluctant to grant him this permanence. If he owned land within their area, it afforded him citizenship and additional rights. The people called him King and Lord, but they did not wish to be subservient or even equal to him.

Rashi downplays the negotiations as kind gestures made from one great man to another. He does not report intrigue or reluctance, but instead the usual barter found in the Arab shuk. He attributes the answers given to Avraham both by the people and Efron as the usual flattery and praise which leads to a good selling price. Rashi does fault Efron for demanding such a high price after appearing to be so generous, but he still attributes his actions to common forms of negotiations. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin views the negotiations in light of the promise made to Avraham by Hashem. Hashem promised Avraham that his children would be given the entire land of Canaan and a large area of the surrounding lands as an inheritance forever. Sorotzkin explains that Avimelech accepted this prophecy but negotiated a treaty with Avraham which would put off any change for at least three generations. The children of Heth had an opposite reaction and decreed that it was unlawful to sell any land to Avraham. In light of this, the key words of the negotiations become much clearer. In each request from Avraham we find the phrase "achuzat kever, a permanent burial place." Each time that the council and Efron acquiesce to his request, they scrupulously avoid using that same phrase while agreeing to everything else. In the end, however, Avraham is successful and the land passes to him as a permanent site, albeit for an overly inflated price.

Why was this nuance so crucial that Avraham should insist on this understanding and the children of Heth continued to avoid it? HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term achuzah comes from the word "to grasp". This verb is always used in the passive form which indicates here that it is not the person who grasps the land, but the land which grasps the person. A person can only hold a moveable object, but land holds the person to it. Hirsch explains that the Double Cave, which was the burial site of Adam and Eve, was to be the burial site of our forefather couples except for Rachel. "The thought of the value of the family tie which attaches the heart of husband to wife, and children to parents was henceforth inseparably connected with the Jewish land, formed henceforth the fundamental trait of the character of the Jews, and enabled them to become what they became." The city was then known as Chebron (Hebron), a name which speaks of that intimate relationship.

In Israel today there has been a fiery discussion whether the country should be a "land for the Jewish People" or a "Jewish State". It is clear from Hirsch that it is not a "land for the Jewish People" but a land that itself is Jewish in nature. That is one of the reasons that the Arab countries are so reluctant to accept that nomenclature. We cannot be a land which is only inhabited by Jews (a temporary condition), but instead a land which itself is Jewish. May we learn from Avraham this subtlety, and insist on an achuzah which grasps us. © 2019 Rabbi D. Levin

#### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Aninut

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit  
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**B**efore burial, the mourner is classified as an "Onen", in which he is exempt from performing any positive commandments ("Asseh") such as prayer, Tifillin, and "Kriat Shema". However with regard to any prohibition ("Lo Taaseh") one is still commanded to adhere to.

One may wonder whether this applies to a "Lo Taaseh" that is also associated with an "Asseh" ("Lav Shenitak Laaseh")? For example, is a "Onen" exempt, from destroying his "Chametz" on Pesach eve (an active Mitzva, thus an "Asseh"), since it is also associated with the "Lo Taaseh" of not being permitted to have Chametz (Leaven) in one's possession on "Pesach" ("Baal Yeraeh Ubaal Yimatze")? In addition if an "Onen" wishes can he be stringent upon himself and fulfill the Mitzvot that he is exempt from performing?

The answers to these questions are dependent on the reason an "Onen" is relieved from performing these Mitzvot. If it is to give honor to the deceased then he cannot be stringent and perform these Mitzvot. However if the reason is that he should be available to performing the necessary preparations for the burial, in

such a case if there is someone else that is available, he would be able to be stringent on himself and perform these mitzvot as well. Finally, if this exemption is based on the fact that one who is involved in performing a Mitzva is exempt from performing another ("Haosek B'mitzva Patur Min Hamitzva"), then should the mourner feel that he has the ability to perform both Mitzvot, he should be permitted!

In our Parsha, Avraham is involved in the preparations to bury his wife Sarah. He not only purchases the cave for the burial, but also the field that this cave is situated on, and also bargains the price with Efron (the owner of the property) and as well becomes involved in the Mitzvah of settling Eretz Yisrael ("Yishuv Eretz Yisrael"). Thus we might conclude that just as Avraham involved himself in extraneous mitzvot while he was an "Onen" so also if one feels he is able, he can also be stringent upon himself and perform the Mitzvot "Asseh" that he is ostensibly free from performing. © 2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

#### RABBI NAFTALI REICH

## Legacy

**I**f old people could live their lives over again, would they do things any differently? Would they once again expend so much time and energy on building castles and mansions in which to pass the fleeting moments of their brief sojourn on this earth? Or would they instead turn away from material pursuits and focus on the great treasures of the spirit? Most likely not.

When the Torah, in this week's portion, sums up Sarah's life, we are told, "And the days of Sarah's life were one hundred years and twenty years and seven years, these were the years of Sarah's life." What is the meaning of the repeated phrase "these were the years of Sarah's life"?

According to the Midrash, the Torah is telling us that all Sarah's years were equal in their goodness. She did not awaken to righteousness in her ripe old age. She was good from the very beginning, and remained good consistently throughout her whole life.

This is considered extraordinary praise for Sarah, a very uncommon achievement. Most people, however, are not like that. They spend their youth in an oblivious daze, often without even a passing thought about their inevitable mortality. Why is this so? Why do people behave as if they are going to live forever?

The commentators explain that it is a simple matter of denial. Coming to terms with the reality of all our existence, that life is but a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more, would require making some hard and difficult choices. It would require a reduction in material indulgence and a heightened awareness of the spiritual side of life. But our desire for physical pleasure is too strong to be denied, and therefore, we refuse to think

about our ultimate responsibility and accountability. We refuse to acknowledge the inevitable end of all journeys until it is staring us in the face. But by then, we have missed the best opportunities of our lives. Sarah's greatness lay in the clarity of vision that led her to cherish every year of her life as if it were her last.

A young man was living an aimless life in a sleepy seaside town, whiling away the hours with all sorts of frivolous activities. It happened once that a great sage arrived in the town for a short stay. One day, the young man saw the sage walking with his disciples.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "Can I ask you a quick question?" The sage peered at him for a few moments, taking his measure. "Ask your question, young man," he said. "Could you tell me the meaning of life?" asked the young man.

"Life, my young friend, is like a postcard," the sage replied. "Did you ever notice that the edges of the postcard are always crammed with text while the beginning has a lot of space. At first, people do not realize how limited they are in space, but when they get near the end they suddenly try to cram everything in. Just as a postcard is limited in space, life is limited in time. Unfortunately, young people like you have a tendency to waste it."

In our own lives, we often stop and ask ourselves where the years have gone. We are so busy getting settled and established that we do not have the time to really live. Worse yet, when we do have a little spare time, we lack the emotional and spiritual stamina to spend it in a way that will bear long term rewards. Instead, we indulge ourselves with physical pleasures that vanish by tomorrow, leaving nothing of value behind. But let us stop and reflect for a moment. None of us will live forever. So what will be the sum total of our lives when it is time to go? The decisions we make now will determine the answer. Material pleasures and indulgences will not appear on that bottom line, only the accomplishments of the spirit. © 2019

*Rabbi N. Reich and torah.org*

### **RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## **Migdal Ohr**

"**A**nd Avraham took another wife, and her name was Ketura." (Beraishis 25:1) Once Yitzchak was married, it was time for Avraham to marry again, as we learned regarding Adam, "It is not good for a man to be alone." Let's take a few moments to understand what was happening here and how this message is important for us, Avraham's descendants from Yitzchak.

Who was Ketura? Rashi tells us this was Hagar, the Egyptian woman who bore Yishmael to Avraham, who had been sent away, and who had gone back to the idolatrous ways of her father's house. Why was she called Ketura? Because her deeds were as pleasing as the Ketores incense and also because she

remained "tied" to Avraham and didn't marry anyone else when she left his home.

If she had gone back to her idolatrous roots then how can we say her actions were as pleasing as the Ketores? Because she, like Yishmael, did Teshuva. Just as the Ketores is pleasing because it atones for the Jewish People after they have sinned, her later behavior showed that she had repented from her evil ways and thus even her previous sins were now merits because she had abandoned them.

Perhaps the fact that she remained connected to Avraham Avinu was the key to this repentance, since they are both alluded to in her name. The lesson for all of us is that as long as we realize we have a connection to Hashem, we can always come back to Him.

But why did Avraham take her back? The clue is in the word, "Vayosef, and he added." True, it tells us that he took her "again" but it also tells us that Avraham wanted to "add to Avraham" and be a better person. The Ketores was offered each day, half a measure in the morning and half a measure in the afternoon. Each day we are to remember that we are not yet complete and there is room to improve ourselves.

When the posuk in Beraishis says it is not good for man to be alone, the word 'heyos' meaning to be, can also mean 'to come into being.' Having a partner would help Avraham continue to grow. Interestingly, Sarah's essence reflected the Divine attribute of Justice which balanced Avraham's trait of Chesed. Ketores, says the Zohar in Vayikra (quoted by Ramban Shemos 30:1) also represents the Midas HaDin, hence Ketura would continue the job Sarah had begun to complement Avraham's Chesed.

Avraham was an old man; he had everything. Yet he wasn't satisfied to sit back on a rocking chair and relax. He realized that every day was an opportunity, no, a command!, to grow and be better than the day before. He married because he also wished to sire more children to fulfill the mitzvah to populate the world and contribute to society. This is the message of Ketura, and the reminder that we should each constantly seek to grow and add to the person we were yesterday, for as many todays as we are granted.

When the Manchester Rosh Yeshiva lived with his daughter, he asked what he could do to help her each morning. She replied that she did not want him to serve her as he was her father and it was her job to respect him, not the other way around.

R' Segal z"l said softly, "When your mother was alive, I would make her a cup of coffee each morning before I went to daven. That way, I had a chesed in my pocket when I approached the Ribono Shel Olam.

Now that she is gone, I have no one else to do chesed with, so I want to do something for you in the morning." He understood that every day there is room to grow and achieve. © 2019 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

