

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**A**nd Abraham was old, well-stricken in age.” (Genesis 24:1) The death of Sarah at the beginning of the portion of Chayei Sarah leaves Abraham bereft as a single parent, looking after his home and caring for Isaac, his unmarried son. We are already familiar with their unique father-son relationship from the traumatic biblical account of Isaac’s binding, where ‘the two of them [father and son, Abraham and Isaac] walked together.’ In addition to their shared ideals, their symbiotic relationship includes a remarkable likeness in physical appearance. Our commentaries explain this by reflecting on Isaac’s miraculous birth when Abraham is almost one hundred years old. We can imagine that every town gossip cast aspersions about Abraham’s paternity, hinting that a younger, more potent man must have impregnated Sarah. Just the leers and the stares would have caused unnecessary shame to Abraham and threatened Isaac’s equanimity. Hence, suggests the Midrash, to prevent a trail of whispers and sly innuendos, God created Isaac as an exact double of Abraham, like ‘two drops of water,’ so that no one could possibly ever imagine anyone other than Abraham as the biological father.

Interestingly, one of the consequences of their physical similarity is the basis for one of the strangest comments in the Talmud. On the verse in the portion of Chayei Sarah, ‘Abraham was old, well-stricken in age’ [Gen. 24:1], our Sages conclude that at this point in time, the symptoms of old age were introduced to the world [Bava Metzia 87a]. The reason? They suggest this very identical resemblance between Abraham and Isaac. The Sages describe how people seeking out Abraham would mistakenly address Isaac, and those seeking out Isaac would approach Abraham. Disturbed by the confusion, Abraham pleads for God’s mercy to make him look old, and Abraham’s plea is answered: a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old man will never again look like his twenty-year-old son!

How do we begin to understand why Abraham was so upset by this case of mistaken identities? After all, what’s wrong with being mistaken for your son?

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Doesn’t every aging parent dream of slowing down the aging process and remaining perpetually young? What’s the problem if father and son appear to be the same age?

We find the answers hidden between the lines of this Midrash in which the dialectic of the complex relationship between father and son is expressed. Despite our desire for closeness between the generations, a father must appear different from his son for two reasons. Firstly, so that he can receive the filial obligations due to him as the transmitter of life and tradition. This idea is rooted in the biblical commandment that the younger generation honors the elder. In fact, the last will and testament of the sage of the Middle Ages, Rabbi Yehudah the Pious, forbade anyone from taking a spouse with the same first name as that of their parents. This, explained, Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik, zt”l, was to avoid giving the impression that a child would ever address a parent by their first name. We may be close to our parents, but they are not to be confused with our ‘buddies’.

Secondly, the son must appear different from his father so that the son understands his obligation to add his unique contribution to the wisdom of the past. Abraham pleads with God that Isaac’s outward appearance should demonstrate that he is not a carbon copy of his father, but rather a unique individual. After all, when Isaac becomes a patriarch himself, he will represent *gevura*, that part of God’s manifestation of strength and justice which provides an important counterbalance to Abraham’s *hesed* or loving-kindness. Abraham, the dynamic and creative world traveler, was a contrast to the introspective and pensive Isaac who never stepped beyond the sacred soil of Israel. With great insight, Abraham understood that unless the confusion in appearance ceased, Isaac might never realize the necessity of ‘coming into his own’ and developing his own separate identity.

A Talmudic discussion of the pedagogic relationship between grandparents and grandchildren illustrates the importance of a dynamic and symbiotic relationship between the generations. In discussing the importance of teaching Torah to one’s children and grandchildren, our Sages insist that teaching your own child Torah is equivalent to teaching all your child’s unborn children down through the generations [Kiddushin 30a]. R. Yehoshua b. Levi adds that ‘teaching one’s grandchild Torah is equivalent to having received

it from Sinai.' He proves this by quoting from two consecutive verses in Deuteronomy: the first highlights the commandment to '...teach thy sons, and thy son's sons' and the following verse begins with, 'The day that you stood before the Lord your God in Horev-Sinai...' [Deut. 4:9, 10]. The message is crystal clear: our parents are our link to Sinai, the place of the initial divine revelation of Torah. When the younger generation learns Torah from the previous generation, it is as though they were receiving the words from Sinai. Such is the eternal bond which links the generations and one of the powerful reasons for children to respect and learn from their parents.

Interestingly, in that same Talmudic passage, R. Hiya bar Abba makes a critical word change in R. Yehuda's interpretation. R. Hiya states, 'Whoever hears Torah from his grandchild [not whoever teaches his grandchild] is equivalent to having received it from Sinai!' What does it mean for a grandchild to teach his grandfather Torah? Obviously, this will make any grandfather proud, but this concept also reveals that the line from Sinai to the present can be drawn in the opposite direction. Not only do grandfathers pass down the tradition to their children and grandchildren, but grandchildren pass up the tradition to their forebears. In contemporary times, this could certainly refer to the phenomenon of the ba'alei teshuva, the return of the younger generation to the traditions, where in many cases, the grandchildren literally are teaching their grandparents. But it might also be alerting us to the additional insights into Torah that we can and must glean from the younger generations.

Consider one of the most puzzling Talmudic passages which describes how, when Moses ascended on high to receive the Torah from the Almighty, the master of all prophets found God affixing crowns (tagim) to the holy letters of the law [Menahot 29b]. When Moses inquired about their significance, God answered that the day would arrive when a great Sage, R. Akiva the son of Joseph, would derive mounds of laws from each swirl and curlicue. Moses asked to see and hear this rabbinic giant for himself, and the Almighty immediately transported him to R. Akiva's Academy. Moses listened, but felt ill at ease almost to the point of fainting; the arguments used by R. Akiva were so complex that they eluded the understanding of the great prophet. However, when a disciple asked for R. Akiva's source, and he replied that it was a law given to Moses at Sinai, the prophet felt revived.

How is it possible that Moses could not understand a Torah lecture containing material that was given to him at Sinai? The answer is embedded within the same Talmudic text. Moses was given the basics, the biblical words and their crowns, the fundamental laws and the methods of explication and extrapolation (hermeneutic principles). R. Akiva, in a later generation, deduced necessary laws for his day, predicated upon the

laws and principles which Moses received at Sinai.

This is the legitimate march of Torah which Maimonides documents in his introduction to the interpretation of the Mishna, and it is the methodology by which modern-day responsa deal with issues such as electricity on the Sabbath, brain-stem death and life-support, and in-vitro fertilization. The eternity of Torah demands both the fealty of the children to the teachings of the parents, as well as the opportunity for the children to build on and develop that teaching. This duality of Sinai enhances our present-day experience.

Abraham prays for a distinctive old age to enable Isaac to develop his uniqueness. Sons and fathers are not exactly the same, although many fathers would like to think that they are. Only if sons understand the similarity, and if fathers leave room for individuality, can the generations become truly united in Jewish eternity. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. ©2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In truth, our mother Sarah, like many other mothers past and present in Jewish life, has not quite received her due. Rashi, quoting Midrash in describing Sarah's life, states that all the years of Sarah's life were "for good." He must mean "for good" in a spiritual and holy sense, for in her physical worldly life there was little good that she experienced. Wandering over the Middle East by following her visionary husband to a strange and unknown destination; being forced into Pharaoh's harem; being unable to conceive children; having her maidservant Hagar marry Avraham and attempt to usurp her position in the household; kidnapped by Avimelech, the king of the Philistines; seeing her precious son's life threatened by an aggressive and violent step-brother, Yishmael; and passing away almost fifty years before her husband – this does not make for a happy resume of a life that was "all good." In fact, it raises the eternal question of why bad things happen to good people.

But powerless as we are to really answer that question cogently and logically, we should, in retrospect, view our mother Sarah with a renewed sense of awe and appreciation. Lesser people would have been crushed by such a cascade of events in one's lifetime. The Mishna speaks of the ten tests in life that befell Avraham - and that he rose above all of them. We should also make mention of the tests in life that our mother Sarah endured in her existence and that she too rose above them. "The wisdom of women builds their home," said King Solomon. That certainly must be said of the house of Avraham, the founding home of the Jewish people. It was Sarah's wisdom and fortitude that was the foundation of that home.

In everyone's life there are moments of danger, frustration, disappointment and even tragedy. Who amongst us can say in truth that all the years of our life were "all good?" This being the case we must revert to the understanding that since the "all good" in the life of our mother Sarah must perforce be interpreted in a spiritual sense – in a sense of continual service to God and man and a commitment to a higher level of living than mere physical existence and an optimistic frame of mind – so too must we search for such an "all good" interpretation in our individual lives as well. The striving for finding such an "all good" approach to life is the essence of Torah and Jewish ritual. I once had to attend a rabbinical court here in Israel in order to register as being married. As often happens in government offices here the wait to be serviced was long and the ambience was not very pleasant. The clerk handling the matter was rather surly and disinterested in my problem.

Finally a wonderful rabbi came out of his inner office and took care of me and my need expeditiously and warmly. When I was foolish enough to begin to complain to him about the long wait and the less than forthcoming clerk, the rabbi gently shushed me and said: "Here in the Land of Israel all is good!" And when one is on that level of spiritually that is certainly true. ©2023 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

That a man's gifting of something of worth to a woman can effect a marriage if both parties agree is derived through exegesis from, of all places, Avraham's purchase of a burial site for his wife Sarah (Kiddushin, 2a).

A strange derivation, to be sure. But since techias hameisim, revival of the dead, is a tenet of Jewish belief, burial, through Jewish eyes, should be seen not as the disposal of a body but rather a safekeeping or, better, a "planting," for eventual "regrowth."

(For millennia, the idea of rejuvenating a physical body seemed a notion beyond credulity... until the discovery of DNA and, more recently, the successful cloning of higher organisms.)

Thus, the burial/marriage comparison is somewhat more comprehensible than it might have been at first thought. For marriage is the means of "seeding" the next generation. (The term kever, "grave" used as a euphemism for rechem, "womb," as in Niddah 21a, further supports that idea.)

The earliest burials at the Me'aras Hamachpeila were of Adam and Chava, the latter of whom was given her name, which means "the source of all life," ironically, only after she and her husband had made death part of

nature. Immortality of a sort, even before techyas hameisim, can be achieved through the creation of future generations.

And so, it is meaningful that the parsha describing the burial of Sara is called by its opening words, Chayei Sarah - the Life of Sarah.

For just as children are keys to generational immortality, so is burial a prelude to life. ©2023 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Words have the power to express ideas. But, as expressive as words can be, they can sometimes be limiting. Often, music can give soul and meaning to ideas that words cannot.

This concept is also true with respect to the trop (melody or cantillation) used to read the Torah. The tune actually acts as a commentary on the text itself.

The highest and most prolonged trop is called the shalsholet. The word shalsholet is from the word shalosh (three). The sound of this cantillation curves upward and then down three successive times. Commentators suggest that a shalsholet indicates a feeling of hesitation by a character in the text.

For example, in Parashat Vayeshev, when Mrs. Potiphar attempts to seduce Joseph, Joseph refuses: "Va'yema'en" (Genesis 39:8). Although he says no, Joseph may momentarily have considered giving in to temptation, thus hesitating on the language of refusal. The word va'yema'en is read with the shalsholet trop.

Similarly, in Parashat Vayera, the angels instruct Lot and his family to leave Sodom. The Torah tells us that Lot lingered: "Va'yitmahmah" (19:16). After all, Lot and his family were leaving their home, which could not have been easy. And so, even as they left, they hesitated. In the end, Lot's wife looks back and is overtaken by the brimstone and fire, turning into a pillar of salt. Atop va'yitmahmah is the shalsholet, a trop that itself forces readers to linger on the word.

Parashat Chayei Sarah, however, contains a shalsholet with a less obvious rationale. Eliezer, Abraham's steward, is at the well, seeking a wife for his master's son, Isaac. The Torah states, "And he said [va'yomar]," the woman who will not only give me water, but also give my camels to drink is kind and hence suitable for Isaac. Rebecca passes this test (24:12–15). Atop the word va'yomar is the shalsholet. One wonders why. What type of hesitation takes place in this moment?

Perhaps, as some suggest, deep down, Eliezer did hesitate. In his heart of hearts, he may not have wanted to succeed. Failure would mean Isaac would not marry, and Eliezer, as the closest aide to Abraham, would be the next in line to carry on the covenant. Alternatively, as the Midrash suggests, Eliezer may have hoped that Isaac would end up marrying Eliezer's own daughter (Bereishit Rabbah 59:9). Either way, lack of

success on this mission could have personally benefitted Eliezer.

No wonder Eliezer's name never appears in the chapter. When he identifies himself to Rebecca's family, Eliezer declares, "Eved Avraham anochi" (I am Abraham's servant; 24:34). It is extraordinary that Eliezer does not identify himself by name, privileging his role in Abraham's family above his personal identity. But this omission makes sense, as Eliezer works selflessly for Abraham, even at the risk of sacrificing his own personal gain.

Most often, when people become involved in an endeavor, they ask, "What's in it for me?" Eliezer may have asked this most human question, but the message of the shalshet is clear. There are times when we are called upon to complete tasks that may not be in our best self-interest, but we nonetheless must do them. In a world of selfishness, this musical note teaches the importance of selflessness.

Interestingly, the shalshet looks like a crooked line that begins on the ground and reaches upward. Its shape reminds us that personal feelings are real and human, coming from our inner, deeper selves. When a given action is not in our best interest, hesitation is understandable. But the shalshet also teaches that we should do all we can to abandon those natural human inclinations, as Eliezer does, and reach high, beyond ourselves, to do what is right. Then we will be able to reach the heavens. ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Hashem, G-d of the Heavens, Who took me from my father's house... He shall send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there." (Berachos 24:7) Avraham's trusted servant Eliezer was now given a special mission, charged with finding a wife for Yitzchak from Avraham's family. Eliezer asked what to do if the girl was unwilling to come to Canaan, and Avraham replied that Hashem would help in the quest. By sending His angel along, it would ensure Eliezer was able to convince her to come back to Canaan with him.

Upon arriving in Avraham's homeland, Eliezer came to the community well, and there he prayed. He asked, "Hashem, G-d of my master Avraham, be present before me today, and do kindness with my master Avraham." (24:12) Why did Avraham bless Eliezer that an angel should assist him, while Eliezer asked for Hashem, Himself, to assist him in his mission?

It may be that because Avraham was not going on this mission himself, but sending a messenger, he felt he could not ask Hashem to "go" Himself, but only to send a messenger, as Avraham had done. However,

Eliezer, as the one who had undertaken the trip, could ask Hashem to act in kind, and appear before him to guide him "in person" (so to speak.)

There is also an explanation given by the Bais HaLevi as to why Hashem saved Yitzchak from the Akeida with an angel instead of doing it Himself, though Avraham had accepted the command to sacrifice his son and was carrying it out personally. Though Avraham deserved it measure-for-measure, Hashem was saving that for the time of Yetzias Mitzrayim, when Hashem took the Jews out Himself, not through an angel.

However, there is yet a third approach that could explain Eliezer's boldness in not being satisfied with an angel accompanying him. The Gemara in Taanis (2a) says there are three keys Hashem does not entrust to others (at least not all of them, and not forever.) They are the keys to rain/parnasa, to child birth, and to Techias HaMaisim, reviving the dead. These are managed by Hashem, Himself, as it says, "You will know Me when I open your graves," and similar verses.

Eliezer said, "I am the servant of Avraham. That is my purpose in life. Whether I will be able to accomplish my goal is a matter of life and death! Therefore, Hashem, YOU should be the one to make me successful and not entrust it to a lesser being."

The lesson for us all is that we are servants of Hashem, and we should view serving Him as a matter of life and death. For then, we will truly be able to live.

R' Yechezkel Levenstein was the Mashgiach of the Mirrer Yeshivah during their flight from the Nazis through Siberia to Shanghai. Shortly before the war began, the Jews were apprehensive about the times ahead. There was great uncertainty about which enemy was the worse of two evils, the Germans or the Russians. A palpable sense of doom was felt everywhere. The yeshivah students had already heard ominous rumors about the vicious behavior of the Russians, and their hatred of everything religious.

R' Levenstein gave a shmuesh shortly before Rosh Hashanah of 1939, which was also shortly before the official beginning of World War II. R' Chatzkel was aware that he was facing a beis hamedrash filled with b'nai Torah with great fear in their hearts, but he was not pleased with the source of the fear.

He said, "It is not the Russians you need to fear. It is only the Yom HaDin that you need to fear." The absolute conviction in R' Chatzkel's voice helped instill emunah and bitachon in the heart of each person present, and fortified them for the difficult times ahead.

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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Story, but Not the Story

We have seen in previous drashot, that there are many rules which help us to understand the

Torah: what is said and what is not said, the order of words or phrases, the spelling of words in either full form or with absent letters, and many more. Our parasha this week is one of the only places in the Torah where an entire story is repeated but in different form. This repetition should indicate that there is something special to learn from it. Eliezer, Avraham's servant, was sent to find a wife for Avraham's son, Yitzchak. He traveled to Avraham's family back in Haran, where he found Rivka at the town Well. Several miracles took place which showed Eliezer that she was the right wife for Yitzchak. The problem he then faced was convincing her family to allow her to return to Canaan with him. Two different versions of the same story are recorded in the Torah; one that actually took place, and the second which was a version of the story, doctored by Eliezer, which he related to Rivka's family.

There are several kinds of adjustments to the actual story that Eliezer made. Eliezer was aware that Avraham's relatives still worshipped many gods, so he was careful not to insult them about their gods for fear that they would not allow Rivka to leave with him. Avraham told Eliezer, "And I will have you swear by Hashem, the Elokim of the heavens and the Elokim of the earth...." Eliezer adjusted this to say to Lavan and his mother, "And my master made me swear," downplaying the designation of Hashem as the Elokim of the heavens and the earth.

Other omissions, additions, or changes were made by Eliezer to emphasize Avraham's wealth and status, while at the same time diminishing his acceptance among the people where he lived. The Torah stated that, "Hashem had blessed Avraham with everything." Eliezer specified Avraham's wealth by changing his story to say, "And Hashem had blessed Avraham greatly; and He had given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and manservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses." Eliezer believed that he needed to emphasize all the different aspects of Avraham's wealth since this would impress Lavan, whom we already know was infatuated with material things. Eliezer also explained that Avraham had given over everything he possessed to his son, Yitzchak, the intended groom. At the same time, Eliezer changed the wording given him when Avraham made him swear, "that you not take a wife for my son from among the Canaanites, among whom I dwell," to "in whose land I dwell." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that after Hashem had given Avraham the land for his children, Avraham no longer wished to call the land by its Canaanite designation. Eliezer did not want to make public Hashem's promise and feared that Lavan might not wish to associate with someone who would expel others from the land. This appears to have been designed also to lower any feelings of jealousy that Lavan might harbor towards Avraham's success.

Another concern that Eliezer understood was

that the miracles that he witnessed done for Rivka could not be disclosed to Lavan, or he might have insisted on an even greater payment for her. When Rivka went to the Well to draw water for her family, the Torah states, "(Rivka) was coming out with her jug on her shoulder ... She descended to the spring, filled her jug, and ascended." Rashi points out from a Midrash that Rivka did not lower her jug (from her shoulder) to the water, but instead, the waters came up to her and filled her jug. When Eliezer retold the story, he told Lavan that Rivka "drew water" from the spring, indicating that she must have lowered her jug to draw the water. This did not disclose the miracle he had witnessed.

Eliezer wanted to impress upon Lavan that Hashem had set these happenings in motion, showing the greatness of Hashem, but also, that the choice of Rivka as a bride for Yitzchak was guided by a Divine plan. Eliezer told Lavan that Avraham sent him away with the words, "Hashem, before Whom I have walked, will send His angel with you and make your journey successful, and you will take a wife for my son from my family and my father's house." Eliezer also told Lavan of his prayer to Hashem: "I came today to the spring and said, 'Hashem, The Elokim of my master Avraham, if you would please make successful my way on which I go.'"

Eliezer also stressed that Avraham had wanted the bride for Yitzchak to come from his family. This was not the actual case. Avraham told Eliezer to go to the "land of my birth ... and you will take a wife for my son from there." Eliezer presented Rivka with gifts even before he knew that she was from Avraham's "family." When retelling the story to Lavan, however, Eliezer said that he first asked Rivka her family background, and only then gave her gifts. The Ohr HaChaim explains that Eliezer also specified which gifts he gave to Rivka so that her father would understand that they belonged to her alone and he could not lay claim to them. Eliezer wished to convince Lavan that Avraham wanted the girl to come from his family: "You go to my father's house and to my family and take a wife for my son." Eliezer also said, "Then I bowed and prostrated myself to Hashem and blessed Hashem, Elokim of my master Avraham, Who led me on a true path to take the daughter of my master's brother for his son." The answer given Eliezer showed how astute Eliezer had been in adjusting his words carefully: "Then Lavan and Betuel answered and said, 'The matter stemmed from Hashem! We are unable to speak to you either bad or good.'"

Though most of the commentators insist that Eliezer skillfully retold the events in such a way as to compel Lavan and his family to allow Rivka to leave with Eliezer, the Radak is not convinced that Eliezer changed anything in his story on purpose. "The recapitulation involves merely a variation in wording, but the sense is the same. This is unavoidable in reported speech – it preserves the sense but not the exact wording." HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch differs with this

understanding: "The reason for all the little differences can at once be seen to be based, either on considerations of politeness ... or to make it more plausible to his hearers whom Eliezer seems to have perfectly understood.... Eliezer satisfied himself with just sharply stressing the striking evident dispensation of Divine Providence in this matter, against which even a Lavan, from his point of view, would be loath to offer opposition."

Two things work against the Radak's understanding. First, we must ask why the story is retold in such detail. Let the Torah say, "and Eliezer told Lavan all that had taken place." Remember, the Torah is always concise. Secondly, we must ask why those were the parts that appear to have been changed. But all of that is the delight of Torah study. It is important to understand both arguments to fully appreciate that Hashem sends us many messages for us to decipher. Every sentence of the Torah deserves our full attention. ©2023 Rabbi D. Levin

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Onen

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When a person loses a close relative (for whom he is required to mourn) and the relative has not yet been buried, the mourner is called an *onen*. An *onen* is exempt from performing positive commandments (*mitzvot aseh*) such as praying, putting on *tefillin*, and reciting *Keriat Shema*. However, he may not transgress any negative commandments (*mitzvot lo ta'aseh*).

Acharonim disagree as to his status when it comes to commandments that have both a positive and a negative component. For example, is an *onen* exempt from destroying his *chametz* before Pesach? On the one hand, this is a *mitzva* which requires taking positive action. On the other hand, destroying the *chametz* is also done to make sure that one will not transgress the negative prohibition of owning *chametz* (commonly referred to as *bal yera'eh u-bal yimatzei*).

An additional question pertains to an *onen* as well. May an *onen* choose to be stringent and fulfill the positive commandments from which he is exempt?

The answers to these questions depend upon the reason an *onen* is exempt from performing these. If the exemption is meant to give honor to the deceased and show that nothing else is important to the mourner at this point, then even if he wishes to perform these *mitzvot* he would not be permitted to do so. However, if the reason for the exemption is to enable the mourner to take care of the burial, then if he is able to arrange for someone else to take care of it (such as the local *chevra kadisha*), he would be permitted to perform these *mitzvot*. Alternatively, if the exemption is based on the principle that one who is already involved in performing one *mitzva* is exempt from performing another one (*ha-*

osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva), then if the mourner feels able to perform both *mitzvot*, he would be allowed to do so.

In Parshat Chayei Sarah, Avraham was an *onen* before Sarah was buried. Yet not only did he acquire a grave for her, he also purchased the field where the cave was situated, thus fulfilling the *mitzva* of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (Settling the Land of Israel). Perhaps we may conclude that just as Avraham involved himself in additional *mitzvot* even while he was an *onen*, so too any *onen* who wishes may choose to perform the positive commandments from which he is exempt. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Abraham, the sages were convinced, was a greater religious hero than Noah. We hear this in the famous dispute among the sages about the phrase that Noah was "perfect in his generations," meaning relative to his generations: "In his generations" - Some of our Sages interpret this favorably: if he had lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous. Others interpret it derogatorily: In comparison with his generation he was righteous, but if he had lived in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance. [Rashi to Gen. 6: 9]

Some thought that if Noah had lived in the time of Abraham he would have been inspired by his example to yet greater heights; others that he would have stayed the same, and thus been insignificant when compared to Abraham, but neither side doubted that Abraham was the greater. Similarly, the sages contrasted the phrase, "Noah walked with God," with the fact that Abraham walked before God.

"Noah walked with God" - But concerning Abraham, Scripture says (Gen 24:40): "[the Lord] before Whom I walked." Noah required [God's] support to uphold him [in righteousness], but Abraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness by himself. [Rashi to Gen. 6: 9]

Yet what evidence do we have in the text itself that Abraham was greater than Noah? To be sure, Abraham argued with God in protest against the destruction of the cities of the plain, while Noah merely accepted God's verdict about the Flood. Yet God invited Abraham's protest. Immediately beforehand the text says: Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (Gen. 18: 17-19)

This is an almost explicit invitation to challenge the verdict. God delivered no such summons to Noah.



So Noah's failure to protest should not be held against him. If anything, the Torah seems to speak more highly of Noah than of Abraham. We are told: "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6: 6). Twice Noah is described as a righteous man, a tzaddik: Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.(6:9)

The Lord then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation." (Gen. 7: 1) No one else in the whole of Tenakh is called righteous.¹ How then was Abraham greater than Noah? One answer, and a profound one, is suggested in the way the two men responded to tragedy and grief. After the Flood, we read this about Noah: Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, making himself drunk, and uncovered himself in the tent. (9: 20-21) This is an extraordinary decline. The "righteous man" has become a "man of the soil." The man who was looked to "bring us comfort" (5: 29) now seeks comfort in wine. What has happened?

The answer, surely, is that Noah was indeed a righteous man, but one who had seen a world destroyed. We gain the impression of a man paralyzed with grief, seeking oblivion. Like Lot's wife who turned back to look on the destruction, Noah finds he cannot carry on. He is desolated, grief-stricken; his heart is broken; the weight of the past prevents him from turning toward the future.

Now think of Abraham at the beginning of this week's parasha. He has just been through the greatest trial of his life. He had been asked by God to sacrifice the son he had waited for, for so many years. He was about to lose the most precious thing in his life. It is hard to imagine his state of mind as the trial unfolded. Then, just as he was about to lift the knife, came the call from heaven saying, Stop. The story seemed to have a happy ending after all.

But there was a terrible twist in store. Just as Abraham was returning, relieved, his son's life spared, he discovers that the trial had a victim after all. Immediately after it we read of the death of Sarah. The sages said that the two events were simultaneous. As Rashi explains: The account of Sarah's demise was juxtaposed to the binding of Isaac because as a result of the news of the "binding," that her son was prepared for slaughter and was almost slaughtered, her soul flew out of her, and she died. (Rashi to Gen. 23: 2)

Try now to put yourself in the position of Abraham. He has almost sacrificed his child. And now, as an indirect result of the trial itself, the news has killed his wife of many years, the woman who stayed with him through all his travels and travails, who twice saved his life, and who in joy gave birth to Isaac in her old age. Had Abraham grieved for the rest of his days, we would surely

have understood - just as we understand Noah's grief. Instead, we read the following: And Sarah died in Kiriat-arba - that is, Hebron - in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her. And Abraham rose up from before his dead. (Gen. 23:2-3) Abraham mourns and weeps, and then rises up and does two things that secure the Jewish future, two acts whose effects we feel to this day. He buys the first plot - the field and cave of Machpelah - in what will one day become the land of Israel. And he secures a wife for his son Isaac so that there will be Jewish continuity.

Noah grieves and is overwhelmed by loss. Abraham grieves, knowing what he has lost, but then rises up and builds the Jewish future. There is a limit to grief: this is what Abraham knows and Noah does not.

Abraham bestowed this singular ability on his descendants. The Jewish people suffered tragedies that would have devastated other nations beyond hope of recovery: the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile; the destruction of the Second Temple and the end of Jewish sovereignty; the expulsions, massacres, forced conversions and inquisitions of the Middle Ages; the pogroms of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; the Shoah. Yet somehow the Jewish people mourned and wept, and then rose up and built the future. This is their unique strength, and it came from Abraham as we see him in this week's parasha. Kierkegaard wrote a profound sentence in his Journals: "It requires moral courage to grieve; it requires religious courage to rejoice."² Perhaps that is the difference between Noah the righteous, and Abraham the man of faith. Noah grieved. Abraham knew that there must eventually be an end to grief. We must turn from yesterday's loss to the call of a tomorrow we must help to be born. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd he took Rivka to be his wife, and he loved her, and Yitzchok was consoled over [the loss of] his mother" B'reishis 24:67. Since Sara (his mother) had died three years earlier (see Rashi on 25:20), it is bit curious that it took so long for Yitzchok to be consoled. The very notion that getting married was how he became consoled needs an explanation. Many commentaries connect Rivka's righteousness, and specifically how it matched Sara's, with his finally being consoled, but this too needs an explanation. Was he inconsolable because the world was lacking someone on her spiritual level, and was therefore consoled when he

¹ Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journal*, (edited Alexander Dru), Dover Publications, 67.

² Amos uses the phrase, "they sold the righteous for silver" (Amos 2: 6), which the sages understand as a reference to Joseph, but the text itself does not say so explicitly.

saw that there was someone comparable to Sara?

The Midrash (Tanchuma Sh'mos 10) tells us that three of our forefathers, Yitzchok, Yaakov and Moshe were paired with their spouses through (literal "from") a well. And this is clearly true, as Eliezer met Rivka in Charan by a well (B'reishis 24:11-15), Yaakov met Rachel by the well in Charan (29:2-6), and Moshe met Tziporah by a well in Midyan (Sh'mos 2:15-16). However, when the Midrash references verses as proof texts that all three met their spouse through a well, rather than quoting the verse where Eliezer first met Rivka, it quotes a verse from when Yitzchok first met her (B'reishis 24:62), albeit before they actually met, "and Yitzchok came from coming from (or to) B'er Lachai Ro'ee." This is puzzling on several fronts. For one thing, when this well is mentioned, Yitzchok hadn't met Rivka yet. He "went out to the field to pray" (see Rashi on 24:63) after leaving B'er Lachai Ro'ee, and that's where/when he first saw Rivka (24:63) and she first saw him (24:64). Secondly, the location given attribution for the pairing should not be where they met after the match had already been made, but the location where the pairing was made (in this case, the well in Charan). Additionally, even if B'er Lachai Ro'ee was also (somehow) integral to the match being made, given the choice of mentioning a well, shouldn't it be the one in Charan? [Even though Sh'mos Rabbah (1:32) does mention the well in Charan, it is secondary to B'er Lachai Ro'ee (as after mentioning B'er Lachai Ro'ee it adds, "and also, Rivka was ready for Eliezer at a spring").] Why is B'er Lachai Ro'ee given such prominence, to the extent that it overshadows the well in Charan?

Last year (<http://tinyurl.com/noyzul4>) I discussed why Yitzchok was so drawn to B'er Lachai Ro'ee, even though its significance was the divine communication that Hagar, the mother of his half-brother (Yishmael), had experienced there. B'er Lachai Ro'ee was the location Avraham, and then Yitzchok, re-named B'er Sheva (see Ramban on 24:62), the place where Avraham offered food and lodging to everyone in order to help them recognize the Creator. Midrash Aggadah tells us that Yitzchok moved to B'er Lachai Ro'ee in order to be near Hagar. B'er Lachai Ro'ee is mentioned when Yitzchok was introduced to Rivka because he had just come from bringing Hagar back to his father so that he can remarry her (see Rashi). And if Hagar was living in B'er Lachai Ro'ee even before she remarried Avraham, she must have also been committed to bringing others closer to G-d (including relating her experience at B'er Lachai Ro'ee to them). Just as when Sara was still alive "Avraham converted the men and Sara converted the women" (see Rashi on 12:5), after Sara's death it was Hagar who "converted the women."

Aside from the reasons I presented last year, I would add one more reason why B'er Lachai Ro'ee was so important to Yitzchok. Although it would make sense for Yitzchok to be there in order to continue his father's

mission ("converting the men"), another reason he wanted to be near Hagar might have been so that she can help him find an appropriate spouse, and mentor her after they were married. Yitzchok was very concerned about being able to find the right person to help him further the family's monotheistic mission, and had been counting on his mother, Sara, to help him find the right person to marry and to then show her what it means to be a Matriarch. After she died, he was hoping that Hagar, who knew firsthand how the "Avinu" household was run and was still involved in the family mission, could fulfill that role. This could be why Yitzchok wanted to be near Hagar, and why, after he heard that Eliezer was going to Charan to find a wife for him, he wanted Hagar to remarry his father (see Midrash HaGadol 24:62), as now she could mentor his wife from within the household. Until then, he was hoping that Hagar would find a star pupil to be his wife, after which she could mentor her, but if Eliezer came back with someone from Charan, Hagar would still be needed as a mentor.

It is therefore possible that the Midrash focused on B'er Lachai Ro'ee more than on the well in Charan because of the role Yitzchok thought Hagar would have to have in his marriage, a role based on his concern about finding and mentoring his spouse without his mother. This concern impacted his prayers to G-d about finding the right spouse, which might be another reason we are told that "he went out to the field to pray" immediately after mentioning B'er Lachai Ro'ee. When the Midrash refers to B'er Lachai Ro'ee regarding Yitzchok being one of the forefathers who were paired with their wives "from the well," it could be referring to how the concerns that brought him to B'er Lachai Ro'ee (and Hagar) also brought extreme urgency to his prayers, which helped their being answered. [Additionally, even after meeting Rivka, Yitzchok had some serious concerns about her righteousness (see Torah Sh'laimah 24:237); it's possible that Hagar, who was with them when Eliezer returned from Charan if Yitzchok was in the process of bringing her back to Avraham, helped alleviate these concerns.]

Even though Sara had passed away years earlier, Yitzchok was constantly reminded of his loss because of his concern about finding the right spouse without her, and because he didn't know how to compensate for her ability to mentor his wife after they were married. However, after he married Rivka and saw that her actions matched those of his mother, and that the three miraculous "signs" that were always present when Sara was alive had returned (see Rashi on 24:67), these concerns went away. He had found the right spouse even without his mother's help, and she didn't need her mentoring in order to attain the level of spirituality necessary to become a Matriarch. With these concerns no longer there, "Yitzchok was (finally) consoled over (the loss of) his mother." © 2015 Rabbi D. Kramer