

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

"TIn 1966 an eleven-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighbourhood in Washington.¹ Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, "I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here . . ."

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realise, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were colour-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. "In the Jewish tradition," he notes, such civility is called "hessed – the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of G-d." *Civility*, he adds, "itself

may be seen as part of hessed: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard." To this day, he adds, "I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever."

I never knew Sara Kestenbaum, but years after I had read Carter's book I gave a lecture to the Jewish community in the part of Washington where she had lived. I told them Carter's story, which they had not heard before. But they nodded in recognition. "Yes," one said, "that's the kind of thing Sara would do."

Something like this thought was surely in the mind of Abraham's servant, unnamed in the text but traditionally identified as Eliezer, when he arrived at Nahor in Aram Naharaim, northwest Mesopotamia, to find a wife for his master's son. Abraham had not told him to look for any specific traits of character. He had simply told him to find someone from his own extended family. Eliezer, however, formulated a test: Lord, G-d of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness [hessed] to my master." (Gen. 24: 12-14?)

His use of the word hessed here is no accident, for it is the very characteristic he is looking for in the future wife of the first Jewish child, Isaac, and he found it in Rivka.

It is the theme, also, of the book of Ruth. It is Ruth's kindness to Naomi, and Boaz's to Ruth that Tenakh seeks to emphasize in sketching the background to David, their great-grandson, who would

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in memory of our beloved mother
Chana Rosenberg A"H
on her third yartzeit
חנה בת יוסף ע"ה
נפטרה כ"ג מר חשון תשע"ב
bv Itzv and Ruchie Weisbera

¹ Stephen Carter, *Civility*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, 61-75.

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become Israel's greatest king. Indeed the sages said that the three characteristics most important to Jewish character are modesty, compassion and kindness.² Hessed, what I have defined elsewhere as "love as deed,"³ is central to the Jewish value system.

The sages based it on the acts of G-d himself. Rav Simlai taught: "The Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness. It begins with G-d clothing the naked: "The Lord G-d made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them," and it ends with Him caring for the dead: "And He [G-d] buried [Moses] in the Valley."⁴

Hessed – providing shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, assistance to the poor, visiting the sick, comforting mourners and providing a dignified burial for all – became constitutive of Jewish life. During the many centuries of exile and dispersion Jewish communities were built around these needs. There were hevrot, "friendly societies," for each of them.

In seventeenth century Rome, for example, there were seven societies dedicated to the provision of clothes, shoes, linen, beds and warm winter bed coverings for children, the poor, widows and prisoners. There were two societies providing trousseaus, dowries and the loan of jewellery to poor brides. There was one for visiting the sick, another bringing help to families who had suffered bereavement, and others to perform the last rites for those who had died – purification before burial, and the burial service itself. Eleven fellowships existed for educational and religious aims, study and prayer, another raised alms for Jews living in the Holy Land, and others were involved in the various activities associated with the circumcision of newborn boys. Yet others provided the poor with the means to fulfil commands such as mezuzot for their doors, oil for the Hanukkah lights, and candles for the Sabbath.⁵

Hessed, said the sages, is in some respects higher even than tzedakah: Our masters taught: loving-kindness [hessed] is greater than charity [tzedakah] in

² Bamidbar Rabbah 8: 4.

³ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, 44-56.

⁴ B. T. Sotah 14a

⁵ Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, London, Edward Goldston, 1932, 348-363.

three ways. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's person. Charity is done only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to the living and the dead.⁶

Hessed in its many forms became synonymous with Jewish life and one of the pillars on which it stood. Jews performed kindnesses to one another because it was "the way of G-d" and also because they or their families had had intimate experience of suffering and knew they had nowhere else to turn. It provided an access of grace in dark times. It softened the blow of the loss of the Temple and its rites: Once, as R. Yohanan was walking out of Jerusalem, R. Joshua followed him. Seeing the Temple in ruins, he cried, "Woe to us that this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel's iniquities." R. Yohanan said to him: "My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement which is no less effective. What is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness, about which Scripture says, 'I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice'" (Hosea 6:6).⁷

Through hessed, Jews humanised fate as, they believed, G-d's hessed humanises the world.

It also added a word to the English language. In 1535 Myles Coverdale published the first-ever translation of the Hebrew Bible into English (the work had been begun by William Tyndale who paid for it with his life, burnt at the stake in 1536). It was when he came to the word hessed that he realised that there was no English word which captured its meaning. It was then that, to translate it, he coined the word "loving-kindness."

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say, "When I was young I admired cleverness. Now that I am old I find I admire kindness more." There is deep wisdom in those words. It is what led Eliezer to choose Rivka to become Isaac's wife and thus the first Jewish bride. Kindness brings redemption to the world and, as in the case of Stephen Carter, it can change lives. Wordsworth was right when he wrote that the "best portion of a good man's [and woman's] life" is their "little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love."⁸ ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"This is how the field and its cave became the property of Abraham as a burial site, purchased from the children of Heth." (Genesis 23:20) We recently marked

⁶ B. T. Sukkah 49b.

⁷ Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 4.

⁸ From his poem, 'Tintern Abbey.'

one year since the passing of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the great halachic and political leader of millions of Jews throughout Israel and the world. Our portion this week devotes an entire chapter to the purchase of a gravesite for the burial of Sarah, Matriarch of Israel. What is the meaning behind Abraham's bargaining for a burial plot, and what connection, if any, does this biblical story have with Rabbi Ovadia's funeral last year?

Let us begin with our text. Abraham, an itinerant shepherd throughout the area which will one day become the Land of Israel, approaches the "Children of Heth" (the Hittites): "I am a stranger-resident among you," he says. "Give me possession of a gravesite so that I may bury my dead from before me" (Gen. 23:4).

The Children of Heth seem more than generous in their response: "You are a Prince of G-d in our midst; in the choicest of gravesites may you bury your dead. None of us will withhold his gravesite from you." (23:6)

Abraham is not satisfied. He requests a meeting with Ephron the son of Zohar, to whom he wishes to pay "top dollar and cash-in-hand" for the Machpela Tomb at the end of his field. The residents of Heth want to give Abraham a free burial plot; Abraham insists on paying a high price.

The "bargaining" begins. Ephron insists on giving the patriarch a free plot; but when he finally names a price, it is an excessive 400 silver shekels. According to the Code of Hammurabi, an average workingman's annual wages at the time were six to eight shekels. Abraham paid the equivalent of 70 years of wages for one burial plot.

What is the text teaching us? I would submit that Abraham is heaven-bent on establishing the unique Hebrew identity of his beloved wife, Sarah, no matter what the financial cost - an identity which will be defined and determined by her gravesite. You see, in the ancient world, a citizen of a specific locality received only one advantage as a result of his citizenship: a free burial plot in that locality (with the exception of Athens, where citizens had the right to vote).

Now we can understand Abraham's bargaining with the children of Heth. Abraham opens the conversation defining himself as an alien resident; on the one hand he is a Hebrew, not a Hittite, a stranger of a radically different religion and culture.

He is nevertheless an upright resident, ready to cooperate with the Hittite civil laws in every way. The children of Heth are happy to adopt this highly successful patriarch of a new tribe as one of their own, to "assimilate" him within their culture.

Abraham is ultimately willing to pay any price for Sarah's total independence from their surrounding civilization, for her persona as a Hebrew will be

expressed and established by the place and manner in which she is buried. Show me where you are buried and how you are mourned, and this will reveal volumes about the life that you lived. Given that the manner in which a nation reveres its dead goes a long way in defining its future, is it any wonder that the Hebrew word *kever* (burial plot) is used by the Talmudic authorities as a synonym for *rehem* (womb)?

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's funeral last year was undoubtedly the largest in Israel's history, estimated to have included some 800,000 mourners. It expressed the amazing power of Torah, the most authentic and eternal legacy of our people. Make no mistake: he was not being mourned as a politician; much the opposite, his politics were often divisive and even offensive. He was being mourned as a Prince of Torah, as the greatest unifying authority of Torah law in our generation, a unifying Torah respected and accepted by Ashkenazim as well as Sephardim, *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox), modern Orthodox and secular alike - for representatives from all walks of Israeli life came to his door to seek halachic advice and live by his rulings.

His Torah, true to the tradition of the greatest Torah leaders of the last 2,000 years, was unique in our generation. It was a Torah which breathed democracy, because although he came from Iraq and expressed the Iraqi (Babylonian) tradition, his was the ultimate word for Ashkenazim too - and so he gave standing and respect to a population which had previously been discriminated against by the ruling WASP ("White Ashkenazi Sabra Populace") of Israel.

His Torah was a Torah of peace and moderation - he ruled that in the interest of peace and the saving of human lives, we could give up Yamit in Sinai. His Torah was a Torah of inclusiveness - he ruled that the Jews of Ethiopia, considered to be of the lost tribe of Dan by the 16th-century authority Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Zimra), were legitimately Jewish and did not require conversion, and he ruled that all the military conversions were legitimate.

And his Torah was a Torah of compassion, which sought to solve problems rather than create them. I never brought him a problem of an *aguna* ("chained woman" seeking a divorce) or a *mamzer* (illegitimate offspring) for which he did not find a solution. May his memory and his way serve as a light that will continue to illuminate the future of our people. ©2014 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The loss of one's beloved spouse, especially after many years and decades of marriage and shared life, is always a traumatic and shattering blow. Those of us, who unfortunately have also experienced this in our own lives, can testify as to the emotional damage and even physical harm that this sad

experience can occasion.

We see from the life of our father Jacob that even decades later he reminds his children and himself of the pain and suffering caused by the death of his beloved wife, Rachel. In essence, it seems that Jacob never again was the same person after the death of Rachel.

Avraham apparently dealt with the death of Sarah in a more stoic fashion. The Torah itself indicates this by inference. In reference to Avraham's reaction to the tragedy, a small letter kaf is used to describe the grief and weeping of Avraham over the death of Sarah. It is not that Avraham is less grieved at the loss of Sarah than Jacob was at the death of Rachel. It is rather that after all of the challenges and trials that Avraham had endured his attitude towards life and its vicissitudes was affected – he now always looked forward and never dwelt on the past.

Those who live exclusively in the past are doomed to self-pity and great emotional angst. This only causes a sense of victimhood and hopelessness. It reflects itself in every aspect of later life and stunts any further spiritual, social, personal or societal growth.

The greatness of Avraham, as taught us by the Mishnah, was his resilience and continued spiritual and personal growth. Avraham constantly looked forward, ahead – never dwelling on past misfortune.

I heard an outstanding speech delivered by George Deek, who is a Christian Arab and member of the Israeli Foreign Office. In telling the story of his life, he describes how his family lived in Jaffa for many generations and how they fled to Lebanon during the 1948 War of Independence.

Sensing the squalor and political manipulation of the refugees by the Arab powers, whose sole goal was the destruction of Israel and not saving and resettling the refugees, his grandfather escaped Lebanon and somehow brought the family back to Jaffa and Israel. He regained his job with the Israel Electric Company and raised generations of successful professionals, all citizens of Israel.

He said that the Jewish refugees from Europe and the Moslem world attempted to forget their past and build a new future for themselves and their descendants when they arrived in Israel. The Palestinian Arab refugees, under the misguided leadership of their spiritual and temporal heads, reveled instead in their past defeats and in their legend of nakba.

In the main, they have devoted themselves to attempting to destroy Israel instead of rehabilitating themselves. This attitude and mindset has served them badly and cost them dearly. The past needs to be remembered and recalled, treasured and instructive to us. However, it is the future and what we make of it that ultimately determines our worth and our fate. That is one of the great lessons to be derived from the story of

the life of our father Avraham. ©2014 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 WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The two portions preceding this week's reading have two distinct characteristics. The portion of Lekh Lekha is nationalistic and Vayera is universal. A cursory glimpse of the narratives in each of these portions supports this thesis.

In Lekh Lekha, G-d chooses Avraham (Chapter 12) and Sarah (Chapter 17) to be the father and mother of the Jewish covenantal community. The specifics of the brit (covenant) are spelled out in detail in the covenant of the pieces (Chapter 15). The other chapters in Lekh Lekha are similarly particularistic. They describe how Avraham separates from those members of his family who have no role in the covenant. He parts with both his nephew Lot (Chapter 13) and his maidservant, Hagar, mother of his child, Yishmael (Chapter 16). The portion also describes how Avraham refuses to take any of the spoils from the King of Sodom. (Chapter 14) Throughout the portion, Avraham insulates himself from the rest of the world, and identifies himself solely as a Jew.

Vayera is quite different. The narrative is universal. Avraham tries to save the non-Jewish city of Sodom. (Chapters 18, 19) He establishes peace with the King of Philistea, Avimelekh. (Chapters 20, 21) He also shows emotion for his child Yishmael, who is not part of the Jewish covenant. (Chapter 21)

It can be suggested that in Vayera, Avraham becomes so involved in the universal that he forgets his nationalistic roots. This is understandable for so often it is the case that in caring about the larger world, we forget our own community.

In order to show Avraham the need to recapture his priorities, a corrective was needed. At the end of Vayera, we read the section of the binding of Isaac. The fundamental message of the episode is the message that if Yitzhak (Isaac) is killed, there is no future for the Jewish people. In other words, if you care about everyone, but, in the process, forget who you are-all is lost.

This trend of the corrective for Avraham reaches its crescendo in this week's portion, Hayei Sarah. Hayei Sarah is the narrative that translates the covenantal promises of land and children, into reality. Avraham buys land to bury his wife, Sarah. (Chapter 23) He insures continuity by having a wife chosen for Yitzhak. (Chapter 24) Avraham moves inward, reinforcing his relationship with Sarah and Yitzhak thus guaranteeing the future of Am Yisrael.

This is the sweep of the Avraham story. When becoming too universal, Avraham is at risk of forfeiting his nationalistic base. Hayei Sarah comes to remind Avraham that, to be a strong universalist, one must first be a strong nationalist.

It is often the case that people view nationalistic and universalistic agendas as contradictory. The truth is-a strong sense of who we are is a prerequisite for forging a commitment to the whole world.

I've always been wary of those who say they love everyone. When you love everyone, you don't have to love anyone. The movement of the Avraham narrative teaches that the pathway to caring about everyone is to address and insure family, and in this case, national and religious continuity. The path to loving everyone is to love someone. ©2012 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 DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd Yitzchok lived with B'er Lachai Ro'ee" (B'reishis 25:11). B'er Lachai Ro'ee is mentioned three times in Tanach, all three in Sefer B'reishis. Although it is mostly associated with Hagar, who, after fleeing from Sara, saw (and received divine communication from) G-d's angel(s) there, and she gave it its name (16:13-14), two of the three times it's mentioned, it is regarding Yitzchok. Why was Yitzchok drawn to B'er Lachai Ro'ee if its significance was based on what happened there to his half-brother's mother? And why did he live "with" B'er Lachai Ro'ee rather than "in" it?

The second time B'er Lachai Ro'ee is mentioned (24:62), where Yitzchok came from when he first met Rivka, Rashi tells us that Yitzchok was coming from there to bring Hagar to Avraham so that he could remarry her. If Hagar had been living at B'er Lachai Ro'ee because of the significance it had for her, this second mention is also more connected to Hagar than to Yitzchok. Nevertheless, Yitzchok decided to live there (with Rivka) after his father died, so it must have been significant to him as well. What was it about B'er Lachai Ro'ee that led Yitzchok to move there? Was Avraham's home less spiritual than where Hagar had one religious experience?

Midrash Aggadah says that Yitzchok moved to B'er Lachai Ro'ee in order to be with his father's widow, which once again makes the connection to Hagar, rather than to Yitzchok himself. Although we can understand why Hagar wanted to live there, we still need to understand why Yitzchok decided to join her there. Did he move there just to help her, or was there another reason? Midrash Or Ha'afeila (quoted in Torah Sh'laimah 25:44) says "Yitzchok lived in B'er Lachai

Ro'ee with Hagar, and placed her in Avraham's house, and she was supported from Avraham's estate, as is taught (see K'subos 49b), 'a widow is nourished from her husband's possessions.' Which makes our question two-fold; where do we find that Avraham lived in B'er Lachai Ro'ee that the Midrash says Avraham's house was there, and why did Yitzchok have to live there too instead of just supporting her (from Avraham's estate) while he lived elsewhere?

The Targum translates the names of the cities used as references for where Avraham lived in G'rar (20:1) the same way the cities that tell us where B'er Lachai Ro'ee is located were translated (16:14). Ramban (24:62) points out that by doing so, the Targum is indicating that B'er Lachai Ro'ee and B'er Sheva are one and the same. When Avraham planted an orchard and/or built hospitality suites (see Rashi on 21:33) in B'er Sheva in order to bring others closer to G-d, he did so on the same spot where Hagar had encountered the divine; B'er Lachai Ro'ee.

B'er Sheva being B'er Lachai Ro'ee has several implications. First of all, when Avraham called it "B'er Sheva" after he made a covenant with Avimelech and they swore allegiance to each other, he was changing the name from B'er Lachai Ro'ee to B'er Sheva. Secondly, apparently Yitzchok never acknowledged that name change, as when he came from there before meeting Rivka and when he moved there after Avraham died, it was still referred to as B'er Lachai Ro'ee (although this could have been done because of the connection it had with Hagar, who likely still called it by that name). Additionally, it explains why Yitzchok had to change the name to B'er Sheva a second time (26:33), as until then the family may have still referred to it as B'er Lachai Ro'ee (see page 3 of <http://tinyurl.com/kp489ae>). Finally, and most pertinent to our discussion, it means that it wasn't Yitzchok who gave the area prominence after Hagar's experience there, but Avraham. He made it his religious center, where he would introduce the many wayfarers passing through to G-d, after Hagar had encountered angels there. While this certainly explains how Avraham's house was in B'er Lachai Ro'ee (as the Midrash indicates), and why Yitzchok moved there after Avraham died, as it had been his father's residence as well as a major religious center for many years, the question now shifts from why Yitzchok chose to live there to why Avraham decided to make B'er Lachai Ro'ee the focal point of his religious mission.

When an angel first spoke to Hagar (16:8), she responded to the angel's query, telling him that she was fleeing from her master, Sara. The next communication (16:9), however, when she was told to return to her master and suffer under her, elicited no response. This led to a third communication (16:10), when she was told that she would have many, many descendants, but Hagar still didn't respond. During the fourth

communication (16:11-12), Hagar was told that she was pregnant (or would become pregnant), what name to call the son she will give birth to (Yishmael), that G-d was aware of her suffering, and what her son would be like. It was only after this fourth communication that Hagar reacted (16:13), acknowledging that she had been the recipient of divine communication.

It was not one long communication, as evidenced by the introductory "and he said" before each new message. As a matter of fact, our sages, of blessed memory, tell us that each communication was delivered by a different angel (see Rashi on 16:9), indicating that each was a new and totally different message. Understanding why separate communications were necessary may help us understand why Avraham (and Yitzchok) were so taken by her experience.

When Hagar was first told to return to her master, she was supposed to do just that. But she didn't. She ignored the instructions given to her by the angel, and stayed right where she was. Therefore, G-d had to send another angel, with the message being that although she would suffer (which was included in the previous message), things would turn out okay, as she would be the matron of a large nation. That still wasn't enough to convince her to return, so G-d had to send yet another angel, this time telling her that she is pregnant (or would become pregnant), and that not only won't her suffering lead to a miscarriage (or to another miscarriage), but G-d is aware of what she is going through and her progeny will even the score (see Ramban on 16:16). Hearing that suffering under Sara would not be in vain (as she will become pregnant, or see this pregnancy through), and that G-d would be with her throughout her ordeal, Hagar decided to return to her previously intolerable situation.

Hagar's experience wasn't only powerful because she experienced divine communication, but because despite her initial refusal to act upon that divine communication, G-d didn't give up on her. Even after being told that things would eventually work out she didn't follow G-d's instructions, yet G-d still didn't give up on her. Only after being told what G-d wants her to do (return to Sara even though it means suffering), that things would eventually work out (as she would become the mother of a large nation) and that ultimately she will benefit from her suffering (having a child whose name will always remind her that G-d was with her as she suffered) did she do what she should have done right away. And yet, G-d stayed with her, despite her initial failures.

Avraham wanted to bring others closer to G-d, but it's difficult to convince others to give G-d a chance if they're not convinced that G-d will give them a chance (or another chance). Telling them that they can eventually reach spiritual heights is rarely enough to get them to start the climb. Explaining how good things will

eventually be if they do the right thing is often not enough to motivate them to make the sacrifices needed to do what's right. Hagar's experience showed that not only will things eventually work out, but that the hard work necessary to get there is worthwhile. It showed that G-d is patient with us, and helps us succeed even after early failures. And it showed that G-d is not only there waiting for us when we reach the top of the mountain, but is with us when we start the climb and while we are climbing. Therefore, after Hagar returned from her experience, Avraham moved his outreach organization to B'er Lachai Ro'ee, where these lessons were palpable.

After Avraham died, Yitzchok took over the "family business" of hosting guests and bringing them closer to G-d. Hagar/Keturah was still a big part of that, as she could relate to the guests first-hand what happened to her there. Since Yitzchok not only lived there, but continued to promote what B'er Lachai Ro'ee meant conceptually, he is described as living "with" it, not just "in" it. © 2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah teaches us an important lesson about Divine providence. Dovid Hamelech suddenly aged and withdrew from the affairs of his kingdom. This development created a significant void in the parliament and opened the door to minority groups and conspiracy. Adoniyahu, a son of the king seized the opportunity and began grooming himself for the throne. This was in direct opposition to the king's wishes who publicly declared his son Shlomo as his successor. Dovid's choice was rooted in a prophecy received years earlier that he would be granted a son named Shlomo who would be his successor. In fact, Dovid secured this issue from the outset and promised Shlomo's mother, BasSheva, that her son would be the next king. Now, in Dovid's aged state this matter took a mean turn and Adoniyahu secretly and rapidly developed a strong following. The king's closest advisors discovered this plot and corroborated with Shlomo's mother to appeal to the king. After hearing the severity of the situation the king responded and ordered the immediate coronation of Shlomo. Adoniyahu's attempt gave rise to an unprecedented experience and Shlomo succeeded his father during Dovid Hamelech's own lifetime.

These drastic measures reveal serious concern over Shlomo's actual reign. The Sages reflect upon this situation and raise a perplexing question. Further in this chapter Scriptures tell us that Dovid Hamelech's order to anoint Shlomo met great trepidation. B'nayahu, the presiding member of Sanhedrin responded and said, "Let it be Hashem's will that the mission is successful." (M'lachim 1:36) The Sages question the need for a blessing at this point. It suggests that B'nayahu was

uncertain of the mission's worthiness in Hashem's eyes. They question, "Didn't Hashem promise Dovid from the outset that Shlomo would be the next king?" Now that this prophecy was in the midst of fulfillment what could possibly affect it? They answer that although Hashem's original promise was but moments away from fulfillment many impediments would present themselves prior to its actual realization. (Breishis Rabba 76:2)

These words teach us an important lesson about Divine providence. Although Shlomo's reign was pre-ordained and promised to Dovid Hamelech these did not guarantee its reality. The sages explain that prophetic statements of this nature are subject to change. They are given in accordance to the individual's worthiness and depend upon his maintaining standards of piety and perfection. They draw proof to this from our Patriarch Yaakov who was severely frightened by his wicked brother Eisav's pending encounter with him. They explain that although Hashem promised earlier to protect Yaakov he did not feel secure. He was concerned that he may have unintentionally committed some fault and forfeited His protection. Apparently, Dovid Hamelech shared a similar concern that he may have forfeited some of his merits and no longer deserve that Shlomo be his successor. (see Maharzu's comment ad loc)

Ramchal however deduces a second dimension from this Midrash. He sternly warns us against delaying to perform a mitzva and states, "When a mitzva opportunity presents itself one must immediately act upon it. There is no greater danger than this because every moment another impediment may arise and inhibit one from fulfilling the mitzva." He quotes the above Midrash and seems to interpret it in the following light. Although Shlomo's reign was pre-ordained and promised to Dovid Hamelech it remained subject to human action or the lack of thereof. Every act of mitzva is subject to opposition and challenge and must be enacted as soon as possible. The mere fact that one is lax in fulfilling a mitzva gives rise to his forfeiting its opportunity. Hashem's promise to Dovid merely meant that opportunity will be made available for Shlomo to succeed his father. Whether this would actually transpire depended on numerous factors. The greatest of them was Dovid Hamelech's commitment to this promise and his deliberate action towards its realization.

True, Hashem's plan called for Shlomo to reign but it required human involvement to bring it to fruition. When the appropriate moment arrived Dovid Hamelech was expected to do everything within his power to secure Shlomo's reign. Any delay of Dovid Hamelech could have caused him to forfeit Hashem's promise. Similarly, B'nayahu and the Sanhedrin were required to execute the king's order as soon as possible. Any delay in their process could give rise to unknown impediments and render their mission quite difficult to

fulfill. B'nayahu, the head of Sanhedrin understood this well and consequently expressed his sincere plea to Hashem. He asked that it should be Hashem's will that Dovid's loyal servants faithfully respond to their call thereby securing their efforts with success. (see Path of the Just ch. 7)

The Sages share with us a similar perspective about prayer and our false sense of security. Says Rabba bar Rav Shila, "One should daven to Hashem for a peaceful stay in this world up to the last bit of dirt thrown into his grave." (Mesichta Brachos 8a) The Sages are telling us that nothing is guaranteed in this world. One may enjoy a peaceful and tranquil life but things may drastically change during his last moments. In fact, even after one's life closes strife and quarrel can develop over his internment. One requires Hashem's assistance for virtually everything in life and afterwards and is not even guaranteed a peaceful burial. The Sages remind us that present predicaments are deceiving and should never be used to gauge the future. Our single answer is t'fila. After sincerely approaching Hashem we can at least hope that Hashem will respond and bring His intended plans to fruition.

This approach to Divine providence appears throughout this week's sedra. At the close of last week's sedra Hashem informed our Patriarch Avrohom that Yitzchok's ordained wife, Rivka was born. (see Rashi to Breishis 22:20) Avrohom waited until for her to mature and then engaged immediately in securing this marriage. He summoned his devoted student and trustworthy servant Eliezer to fulfill this invaluable mission. He proceeded and bound Eliezer with an oath to faithfully adhere to his master's command. He sternly warned him to go directly to Avrohom's family in pursuit of a proper match and reiterated that under no conditions will Yitzchok marry a Canaanite lady or leave the land of Israel. Although Avrohom knew that Rivka was pre-ordained to marry Yitzchok he went to great lengths to secure this.

Indeed, the Sages reveal that Eliezer considered his daughter as an eligible candidate but Avrohom rejected the notion. Yet, this could give rise to Eliezer's bias and inhibit him from faithfully fulfilling his mission. Consequently Avrohom did everything in his power to secure that Yitzchok marry his pre-ordained spouse. (see Rashi ibid 24:39) True, Heaven decreed this marriage but this did not guarantee that it would happen. Who knows what could stand in the way and interfere with Hashem's proposal?! Avrohom therefore demanded from his trustworthy servant a heavy oath in attempt to secure his faithful fulfillment of his mission.

We learn from this the importance of capitalizing on our mitzva opportunities. They may often represent special privileges Hashem is granting us. However, such privileges are prone to opposition and impediments and we must therefore do all we can to

secure their realization. As we have seen, the working formula for this is to immediately engage ourselves into action and pray to Hashem. After these we can hope that Hashem will respond favorably and bring His intended plans to fruition. ©2014 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

In this week's Parsha, Chaye Sara, Avraham instructed Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak from Aram. Commentators ask why Abraham the Patriarch preferred a wife from his birthplace for his son Isaac rather than a woman from Canaan. After all, both were places of idolatry, and Abraham and Isaac were living in Canaan.

Rabbeinu Nissim answers that in Canaan, people mistreated each other. In Abraham's birthplace, they may have sinned against G-d, but there was respect and love between people. Avraham recognized that Derech Eretz (respect) is the prerequisite to any lasting relationship, both among people as well as between us and G-d. ©2014 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

This week's parashah begins with the death and burial of the Matriarch Sarah. Midrash Rabbah applies to Sarah the verse (Tehilim 37:18), "Hashem knows the days of the temimim / wholesome ones, their inheritance will be forever." Says the midrash: "Just as they are wholesome, so their years are wholesome."

R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) asks: What is the connection between the first part of the verse, "Hashem knows the days of the wholesome," and the second part of the verse, "their inheritance will be forever"? He explains:

The Torah says (Devarim 33:28), "Yisrael shall dwell securely, solitary, in the likeness of Yaakov, in a land of grain and wine." The Jewish People can be secure only when they stand apart from the nations of the world. Sarah was the first person to express this, saying (in last week's parashah--Bereishit 21:10), "For the son of the slave-woman shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak."

Sarah also represents another "first." Her burial place was the first Jewish-owned land in Eretz Yisrael, as described in this week's parashah. Says R' Kook: These two "firsts" are alluded to in the two parts of the verse, "Hashem knows the days of the temimim, their inheritance will be forever." The first part refers to Sarah's understanding that Jewish wholesomeness is attained through Jewish solitariness. The second part refers to Sarah's role in securing the inheritance of the

Jewish People in Eretz Yisrael. (Shemuot Ha'raayah)

"Va'yihyu chaye Sarah" / "Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years..." (23:1) R' Yehoshua ibn Shuiv z"l (Spain; early 14th century) observes: Sarah lived for 37 years after Yitzchak was born, and these were no doubt the happiest years of her life. This is alluded to in the verse: "Va'yihyu chaye Sarah," which could be translated: "Sarah's lifetime was 'va'yihyu'." The gematria of the word "Va'yihyu" (vav-yud-heh-yud-vav) is 37, alluding to the prime years of Sarah's life. (Derashot R' Yehoshua ibn Shuiv)

"Grant me an estate for a burial site with you, that I may bury my dead from before me." (23:4) If, at first, Avraham asked that a burial site be granted to him, why did he later insist on paying for it? R' Yochanan Luria z"l (15th century) explains:

Just as Avraham was pleased to perform kindness for others, he believed that it would please others if he received kindness from them. Of course, Avraham's request from them was minimal; he asked only a burial place for Sarah--"that I may bury my dead (singular) from before me."

They answered, "In the choicest of our burial places (plural) bury your dead." They offered him a family plot for his descendants. But, they immediately followed this by saying, "Any one (singular) of us will not withhold his burial place (singular) from you." Seeing the size of their offer decline, Avraham realized that their kindness was not sincere, so he offered to pay for Sarah's burial place.

In contrast, R' Luria continues, one who is sincerely kind always delivers more than he offered. In last week's parashah, Avraham offered the angels bread, but he brought them also cheese and meat. Similarly, in this week's parashah, Eliezer asks Rivka for a drink of water and she promptly offers to water his camels as well.

R' Luria adds: This is why Avraham made very clear (in verse 13) that he was buying the entire field from Efron, not just the burial cave. Halachah states that a seller is presumed to be generous, i.e., if a person sells a plot of land which is surrounded on all sides by the seller's field, we presume that the seller intends to give the buyer a right-of-way to his plot. But, that is only a presumption. Where, as here, the seller has demonstrated his stinginess, the presumption might not apply. (Meshivat Nafesh)

