

Torah Talk חיי שרה - Chayei Sarah

Gen. 23:1

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים שָׂגִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.

Rashi THE YEARS OF SARAH'S LIFE — The word years is repeated and without a number to indicate that they were all equally good. כָּלן שָׂוִין לְטוֹבָה.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l Rashi was puzzled by the description of Sarah – “Sarah lived to be 127 years old: [These were] the years of Sarah's life” (23:1). The last phrase seems completely superfluous. Why not just tell us that Sarah lived to the age of 127? What is added by saying that “these were the years of Sarah's life”? Rashi is led to the conclusion that the first half of the verse talks about the quantity of her life, how long she lived, while the second tells us about the quality of her life. “They – the years she lived – were all equal in goodness.”

Yet how is any of this conceivable? ... If you ensure that your children will continue to live for what you have lived for, then you can have faith that they will continue your journey until eventually they reach the destination. Abraham did not need to see all the land in Jewish hands, nor did he need to see the Jewish people become numerous. He had taken the first step. He had begun the task, and he knew that his descendants would continue it. He was able to die serenely because he had faith in God and faith that others would complete what he had begun. The same was surely true of Sarah.

To place your life in God's hands, to have faith that whatever happens to you happens for a reason, to know that you are part of a larger narrative, and to believe that others will continue what you began, is to achieve a satisfaction in life that cannot be destroyed by circumstance. Abraham and Sarah had that faith, and they were able to die with a sense of fulfilment.

To be happy does not mean that you have everything you want or everything you were promised. It means, simply, to have done what you were called on to do, to have made a beginning, and then to have passed on the baton to the next generation. “The righteous, even in death, are regarded as though they were still alive” (Berakhot 18a) because the righteous leave a living trace in those who come after them. That was enough for Abraham and Sarah, and it must be enough for us.

Gen. 23:2

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסֹפֵד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ:

Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.

ונסמכה מיתת שרה לעקידת יצחק, לפי שעל ידי בשורת העקידה שנזדמן בנה לשחיטה וכמעט שלא נשחט, פרח נשמתה ממנה ומתה:

Rashi (Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 32, Tanhuma Vayera 23)

TO BEWAIL SARAH AND TO WEEP FOR HER – The narrative of the death of Sarah follows immediately on that of the Binding of Isaac, because through the announcement of the Binding – that her son had been made ready for sacrifice and had almost been sacrificed – she received a great shock (literally, her soul flew from her) and she died.

Avivah Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, p.127 When Rashi says, therefore, that Sarah dies of the news that her son was all but killed, he is very precisely indicating the full paradox of the midrashic narrative. She dies not simply because she cannot endure to the end of the story: that would constitute a relatively primitive tragic irony. She dies of the truth of *kime'at shelo nishhat* - of that hair's breadth that separates death from life. This is what Sartre calls "contingency," the nothingness that "lies coiled in the very core of being, like a worm." Maharal explains the concept of Sarah's death from contingency in his own terms: "This is the human reaction of panic, on realizing that *only a small thing* separated one from such a fate" (This is a literal translation of *kime'at shelo nishhat*).

Gur Aryeh Gen.23:2 (Maharal of Prague 16th cent)

נראה מפני ששמעה דכמעט נשחט, ודבר מועט היה שלא נשחט, לפיכך נבהלה, שכן דרך אדם להיות נבהל כאשר ישמע כי בדבר מועט היה נעשה לו ענין זה:

Be'er Mayim Chayim, 1760-1816 the kaf is diminutive. It's brought in a midrash (Breishit Rabbah 44) that "a capable wife is a crown for her husband" (Proverbs 12:4 - אִשְׁת־חַיִּיל עֵטְרַת בַּעֲלָהּ וְכִרְקָב - בְּעֵצְמוֹתָיו מְבִישָׁה: A capable wife is a crown for her husband, But an incompetent one is like rot in his bones). This is Sarah. He, Abraham, was crowned through her and she was not crowned by him. When Sarah died, he lost the crown from his head. The letter "kaf" hints to the crown, and thus the "kaf" is written in a diminutive fashion, since the crown was removed from his head).

The small kaf reflects that Abraham only wept for Sarah a little. The Sages taught that the Akeidah occurred on Yom Kippur, and to reach Mt. Moriah Abraham walked three days ("On the third Abraham looked up and saw the place" Gen. 22:4). If so, Sarah's death happened on Erev Sukkot and she was buried that day, therefore weeping and mourning occurred only for one day because Yom Tov cancels the period of mourning. Therefore the *kaf* in *l'vkotah* is written dimunitively.

BT Moed Katan 27b

(ירמיהו כב, י) אל תבכו למת ואל תנודו לו אל תבכו למת יותר מדאי ואל תנודו לו יותר מכשיעור הא כיצד שלשה ימים לבכי ושבעה להספד ושלשים לגיהוץ ולתספורת מכאן ואילך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא אי אתם רחמנים בו יותר ממני

The Sages taught in a *baraita* with regard to the verse that states: "**Weep not for the dead, neither bemoan him**" (Jeremiah 22:10): "**Weep not for the dead**" is referring to **excessive** mourning;

“neither bemoan him” more than the appropriate measure of time. How so? What is the appropriate measure? Three days for weeping, and seven for eulogizing, and thirty for the prohibition against ironing clothing and for the prohibition against cutting hair. From this point forward the Holy Blessed One, says: Do not be more merciful with the deceased than I am. [If the Torah commands one to mourn for a certain period of time, then that suffices].

Gen. 23:3

וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם מֵעַל פְּנֵי מֵתוֹ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי־חֵת לֵאמֹר:

Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying,

Abarbanel (Portugal/Italy, 1437-1508) Weeping in a mournful lament, he had been literally bending over the body of his departed wife. Now he stood up.

Minhat Ani (R. Yaakov Ettlinger, Germany, 19th cent) In general, tragedy and catastrophe break a person’s body. A person simply bends under the suffering of their afflictions. A person falls and descends from their rung (*madreigato*) and despair overcomes them. But regarding Abraham it’s written, “Abraham rose from beside his dead.” He rose to his full height.

Gen. 23:4

גֵּר־וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם תְּנוּ לִי אַחֲזֵית־קֶבֶר עִמָּכֶם וְאֶקְבְּרָה מֵתִי מִלְּפָנַי:

“I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”

Rashi

גֵּר וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם I AM A STRANGER AND A SETTLER WITH YOU – A stranger having come from another land, but I have settled down amongst you. A Midrashic explanation is: if you agree [to sell me the land] then I will regard myself as a stranger [and will pay for it], but if not, I shall claim it as a settler and will take it as my legal right, because the Holy Blessed One said to me, (12:7) “Unto your seed I give this land” (Genesis Rabbah 58:6).

גֵּר מֵאֶרֶץ אַחֲרַת וְנִתְּיִשְׁבֵּתִי עִמָּכֶם. וּמְדַרְשׁ אֲגַדָּה אִם תִּרְצוּ הֲרִינִי גֵר, וְאִם לֹא אֶהְיֶה תוֹשֵׁב וְאֶטְלָנָה מִן הַדָּיון, שְׂאֵמֶר לִי הַקֶּבֶר הַזֶּה לְזַרְעֶךָ אֵתְנָן אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת:

Gen. 23:7

וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ לְעַם־הָאָרֶץ לְבְנֵי־חֵת:

Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites

Avraham ben HaRambam (b.1186, Egypt) In gratitude, not servitude.

Gen. 24:15

וְהָיְתָה יוֹאֵב טָרָם כְּלָה לְדִבֶּר וְהָיָה רִבְקָה יֹצֵאת אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֵלְדָה לְבִתְוָאֵל בֶּן־מִלְכָּה אִשְׁתֵּי נְחוֹר אָחִי אַבְרָהָם וְכִדָּה עַל־שִׁכְמָה:

He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.

Rashi

עדיין לא כלה על דרך והיה טרם יקרא ואני אענה:

טרם כלה, he had not yet finished. This is what Isaiah 65:24 had in mind when he said that God answers a prayer before it has been articulated.

Isaiah 65:24

וְהָיָה טָרָם יִקְרְאוּ וְאֲנִי אֶעֱנֶה עוֹד הֵם מְדַבְּרִים וְאֲנִי אֶשְׁמַע:

Before they pray, I will answer; While they are still speaking, I will respond.

Gen. 24:14

וְהָיָה הַנְּעִר אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלָיָהּ הִטִּי־נָא כַדָּרְךָ וְאֶשְׁתֶּה וְאֹמְרָה שְׂתֵה וְגַם־גַּמְלִיךָ אֶשְׁקָה אַתָּה הַכַּחֲתֵל לְעַבְדְּךָ לִיצְחָק וְכִּי־אֵדַע כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם־אֲדֹנָי:

Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

Rashi

כי עשית חסד - אם תהיה ממשפחתו והוגנת לו אדע כי עשית חסד:

THAT YOU HAVE DEALT GRACIOUSLY – if she is of his family and a fit companion for him I shall know that you have shown kindness/graciousness (to my master).

Jewish Study Bible, p. 45-48 The phrasing rather precisely recalls God's original commandment to Abraham in 12:1. Similarly, Rebekah's consent ("I will [go]" v.58) recalls God's first word to Abraham in that same verse, "Go." Rebekah thus becomes a kind of Abraham figure in her own right. Abraham's dispatch of his senior servant back to his native land and his kinfolk brings his story full circle and ensures his legacy will continue in the next generation... Rebekah's running to serve the visitor (who has not introduced himself) recalls Abraham's response to the visit of the unidentified men... the near-identity of the last two lines with the latter words of the angel after

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the 'Akedah reinforces the appropriateness of Rebekah for Abraham's son and the providential nature of the match.