

Suffering and Blessing — A Balance

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Chayei Sarah* (Gen. 23:1 – 25:18)

By Ilene Schneider

“Vayih'yu chayei Sarah mei'ah shanah v'esrim shanah v'sheva shanim sh'nei chayei Sarah.”
“Sarah's lifetime — the years of Sarah's life — was 127 years.”

While the words “Chayei Sarah” mean “the life of Sarah,” *Parashat Chayei Sarah* discusses the stories of the deaths of both Sarah and Abraham. After the death of Sarah, Abraham makes preparations for her burial and his own demise. First, Abraham negotiates with Ephron the Hittite to purchase the Cave of Machpelah as a burial place for Sarah. Although Ephron is willing to give the property to Abraham free of charge, Abraham wants to make it his uncontested property.

Then, Abraham sends Eliezer, his trusted servant, to Aram Naharayim, to find Isaac a bride from Abraham's own people. Leading a caravan of supplies and riches, Eliezer arrives in Nachor. While resting by the well, he devises a test to ascertain the worthiness of a potential mate for Isaac. Rebecca meets all of the criteria by offering Eliezer water for him and his camels, and Eliezer gives her gifts from Abraham.

Eliezer is invited into the home of Bethuel, Rebecca's father, and he relates the entire story of his mission and his encounter with Rebecca. Eliezer asks for Rebecca's hand in marriage to Isaac. Bethuel and Laban, Rebecca's brother, agree to the marriage. Eliezer brings Rebecca to Canaan, where she marries Isaac.

Abraham marries Keturah and has six more sons. When Abraham dies at the age of 175, his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, bury him in the Cave of Machpelah, next to Sarah. God blesses Isaac. Ishmael, who has 12 sons, dies at the age of 137.

Several topics are prominent in *Chayei Sarah*. A key element is the concept of suffering, as interposed with blessing. For example, Abraham is blessed as the leader of his people, with great wealth and power. However, he has left his father's house under duress, smuggled his wife and nearly lost her and his own life to two different lustful kings, participated in the animosity between his wife Sarah and her servant Hagar, expelled Hagar and his son Ishmael, suffered the feuds between his own servants and the servants of his nephew Lot, waged war with a victorious coalition of kings to save his nephew, argued with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, is ordered to kill his beloved son Isaac and, finally, lost his beloved wife.

Suffering and blessing apply also to Sarah. Sarah is blessed with a child late in life, after the anguish of being childless and being ridiculed for it by her handmaiden Hagar, who she has given to Abraham for the purpose of

bearing a child. Sarah's suffering over the near loss of Isaac is considered by many scholars to be the cause of her death, but there is no mention of her willingness or unwillingness to allow Abraham to sacrifice her son.

Dr. Barry Leff of the Rabbi Midrash Archive shares the thoughts of the Piasatzner Rebbe, Kalman Kalanimous Shapira, also known as the Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe, on *Chayei Sarah*. The rebbe says that while some suffering is acceptable, too much of it will destroy us. The Piasatzner says that Sarah accepted this great suffering on herself, even at the cost of her life, for the benefit of Israel, to show God that it would be impossible for Israel to bear excessive suffering — that too much suffering saps one's strength, spirit and wisdom.

Based on the merit of Sarah's sacrifice, the rebbe prays that God will take mercy on us and on all Israel, and save us quickly, spiritually and physically with revealed loving-kindness. His teaching is especially remarkable when put in the context that he witnessed the killing of his own son a week before he gave the D'var Torah, as if he were saying to God, you're putting the binding of Isaac on us every day.

Rambam says that the majority of the suffering we experience is simply a result of being human, according to Dr. Leff. Suffering is part of the way God created the world. When people get sick, they are not being punished. Dr. Leff adds that much of our suffering is self-induced by wanting things we cannot have and ignoring our essential selves.

Rabbi Lee Diamond of the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong links Sarah's death with the *Akeda*, in the previous Torah portion, *Parashat Vayeira*. There Abraham is commanded to take his only son and offer him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah to prove his loyalty to God. Whereas *Chayei Sarah* opens with a report of the death of Sarah — Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother — there is no mention of Sarah throughout the episode of the *Akeda*. Rabbi Diamond questions where Sarah was when the command to sacrifice Isaac was given and during the three-day journey that Abraham and Isaac took to Mt. Moriah. He wonders whether Sarah's apparent silence means that she approved of what was about to happen.

According to Rabbi Diamond, we can begin to answer the question of Sarah's silence by noting the fact that all that we are told is that, after the ordeal of the "almost" sacrifice, Sarah's life ends. According to Midrash, Sarah's death is directly influenced by the ordeal that her son and her husband were experiencing. Her pain was so great that her soul expired.

Rabbi Diamond proposes a Midrash in which Sarah argues with Abraham. She tells him that God is testing him and that he ought to argue with God, rather than responding with blind faith. She then pleads with God to spare Isaac, and God tells Abraham not to slay Isaac. However, Sarah's soul expires from the shock. Her very being is devastated by the ordeal. The real

lesson of this imaginary conversation, according to Rabbi Diamond, is that there can never be an immoral commandment from God. God demands life — not the death of his creations. God demands that we struggle against evil and that we challenge those who speak in His name and call for destruction.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies discusses Abraham's last major act, finding a wife for Isaac. The parashah says, "Abraham was old, well along in days, and Adonai had blessed Abraham 'with everything' (*ba-kol*)."¹ Rabbi Artson wonders how Abraham can be subjected to such personal struggling, loss and suffering, and still feel blessed.

According to Rabbi Artson, Rashi notes that the numerical value of the word *ba-kol* is the same as the numerical value of the word *ben* ("son"), reminding us of the immense blessing a child brings into one's life. Rabbi David Kimchi says that at the end of one's life, "the years when a person thinks about his departure from this earth, [Abraham] lacked nothing, and did not need anything in this life except to see his son well married." Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explains that the blessings that constitute human richness are: riches, possessions, honor, longevity and children. Abraham was blessed in all of these areas.

Ramban says that the reference to *ba-kol* means that God has an attribute called *kol* ("all"), which is the foundation of everything. Instead of seeing Abraham's blessings only in the abundance in his life, in the good things he owned, we should see blessing in the fullness of his life, the sheer "all-ness" of it. Similarly, according to Rabbi Artson, only by embracing the totality of life's experiences can we truly live. By allowing ourselves to dwell in the suffering and in the ecstasy, to embrace the disappointment and hurt along with the delight, we can experience the fullness of being alive, the holiness of life being itself.

Rabbi Artson adds that Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, the Seer of Lublin, reminds us that God blessed Abraham with the qualities of "with all," as the Torah states, "...all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."² Blessed to be able to see blessings in "all," able to release his inner energy to embrace everything that life brought him, that is indeed the blessing that Abraham was able to reveal. To see blessing *ba-kol*, in everything, is the task of a lifetime, and the opportunity of every moment.

Rabbi Uri Regev, Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, relates that, at the end of *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, we find the account of Abraham's death "at a good ripe age, old and contented."³ The Torah tells us that Abraham's sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him in the Cave of Machpelah." This coming together in a spirit of cooperation was a milestone

¹ Genesis 24:1

² Deuteronomy 6:3

³ Genesis 25:8

in the troubled relationship between the sons. According to tradition, Ishmael became identified as the ancestor of the Arab people, casting a dark shadow over the relationship between their offspring that exists even today. Let us hope that a way can be found for the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael to once again live in peace as they did when they came together to bury their father.