

Overview for Parshah Chayei Sarah

From the Lubavitcher Rebbe

As we have noted, the previous two *parashiot*, *Lech Lecha* and *Vayeira*, are entirely devoted to the life and times of Abraham. Although the chronicle of Abraham continues through this *parashah*, *Chayei Sarah*, as well, it seems to be mainly devoted to "closing the curtain" on his life, as we see him burying his wife, preparing the way for his son's succession, and finally dying.

On the other hand, neither does it really focus on Abraham's successor, Isaac. Even though the bulk of the *parashah* is concerned with the arrangements for Rebecca's betrothal to Isaac, hardly any of Isaac's own actions and not even one word of his are recorded. What then, is the focus of this *parashah*?


As we have seen, the key to understanding the content and central point of a *parashah* is its name. Inasmuch as *Chayei Sarah* means "the life of Sarah," it follows that it is Sarah who is the subject, the protagonist, the heroine of this *parashah*.

At first glance, this seems baffling, to say the least. Sarah's life came to an end in the previous *parashah*, and *parashat Chayei Sarah* in its entirety seems to emphasize the finality of her death: Abraham must arrange for her burial, he must find a wife for his son to succeed Sarah as the matriarch of his household, and he marries Hagar in order to have a wife in Sarah's stead. Finally, the *parashah* closes by recording the genealogy of Ishmael, whom Sarah had expelled from her home.

But in truth, all these constituent episodes of this *parashah* serve to demonstrate how Sarah's life indeed did not end with her death. Rather, the influence of the values and ideals that she stood for and worked toward throughout her lifetime continued on after her death. This is the most substantial evidence that her life played a pivotal role both in the development of the Jewish people as well as in the progressive dissemination of Divine consciousness to the world.

Abraham was undoubtedly the trailblazer in disseminating the awareness of God in the world, as we have seen. But in order to spread the message of monotheism, morality, and justice to an idolatrous, immoral, and unjust world, he had to focus persistently on humanity's great potential, deliberately turning a blind eye to its imperfections. Abraham personified *chesed*, the primary attribute defining God's relationship with the world: giving endlessly and indiscriminately, accepting everyone with unqualified love, seeing them as the best they can be regardless of who they are now.

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Sarah participated in Abraham's great enterprise, helping him spread his message among the world's women with the same indiscriminating eye he used toward the world's men. When Isaac was born, however, and they were entrusted with raising a child who would have the moral strength and vision to carry on their Divine mission, she realized that this universalism would have to be tempered by a discerning particularism if Abraham's lifework was to continue to succeed. Abraham could afford to be unconditionally accepting only as long as it was just he and his wife interacting with their audience. But once the mission of disseminating Divine consciousness was to be passed on to a family, and eventually to a whole people, steps had to be taken to ensure that this message be passed on with uncompromising purity, direction, and force.

Thus, Sarah, the mother entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing Abraham's successor, undertook to insulate the family from deleterious influences. As soon as Ishmael became just such an influence, and Hagar proved unwilling or unable to check his untoward behavior, Sarah insisted that they both be sent away. Abraham was troubled by this, but God settled the matter, instructing Abraham to follow Sarah's advice. Abraham's universalism is appropriate in its place, but out of place, it becomes counterproductive. A family or a people, like any living organism, must have well-defined borders. An organism's membranes can be porous, but it must possess a vigilant and finely honed immune system that determines what is allowed to pass through its membranes; if not, the health and integrity of the entire organism is compromised.

Furthermore, Sarah realized that Abraham's family, because they were to be perennially involved with the world, would have to constantly recall their role and never shy away from their destiny. As bearers of the Divine message charged with executing God's mission, they would have to abandon any well-meaning notions of equivalence vis-à-vis the rest of humanity. Teachers can—and should—always learn from their students, but in order to educate successfully, they must clearly uphold their authority as mentors. Sarah's very name means "sovereignty,"¹ and she endeavored to inculcate her family with the sense of moral nobility crucial to the success of their Divine career.

The events chronicled in *parashat Chayei Sarah* illustrate just how well Sarah's influence was perpetuated after her death:

The Machpelah Cave is the burial site of Adam and Eve, the progenitors of the human race; as such, it originally belonged to all humanity. In purchasing it, Abraham articulated God's intention that the mission originally given to humanity as a whole now be passed on to the nascent Jewish people, and that by accepting this task, the Jewish people were fundamentally separating themselves from the rest of humanity and assuming the role of its mentors. The Hittite owners of the cave responded to Abraham's desire to purchase the cave by acknowledging his preeminence over them, understanding that they, in essence, had no claim on the land God had given him.

Rebecca's betrothal to Isaac, as we shall see, followed a detailed discussion between Abraham and his trustworthy disciple Eliezer, in which Abraham made it clear that he knew that Sarah's discriminating standards had to be applied not only to humanity-at-large but even to those close to Abraham, whether genetically or ideologically. Abraham rules out sending Isaac to live with his close relatives out of fear of negative influences, and rejects Eliezer's offer of his own daughter as a bride for Isaac on the grounds that, notwithstanding his

great loyalty and achievements, his crippling psychological heritage rendered his daughter unworthy. And in the course of negotiating the match, Rebecca's family realizes that it was preordained by God and that they therefore have no right to oppose it or even stipulate conditions.

Later, after Abraham marries Hagar, he banishes all the children she bears him—again, to prevent them from abusing their status as his progeny to corrupt Isaac in any way.

Finally, when Abraham dies, we witness how Ishmael himself has fully absorbed Sarah's message. Now understanding that he is not part of the new national entity being forged out of Abraham's line, he bows to his brother Isaac's preeminence, allowing him to lead the burial procession. And the *parashah* closes by telling us that Ishmael's future success is dependent on his continued acknowledgement of Isaac's preeminence.²

Sarah's particularism was thus the next stage in the process of the creation of the Jewish people. Abraham initiated the process by reviving the world's awareness of God; Sarah ensured the continuation of this process by defining the parameters of the relationship between Abraham's heirs and the world they were charged to mentor.

The lesson of *parashat Chayei Sarah*, then, is that universalism must operate hand-in-hand with particularism. We are all Abrahams, charged with the mission of spreading Divine consciousness to the whole world; as such, we must always strive to view humanity in the best possible light, and each individual as a precious child of God who deserves our unconditional love and the best we can give, both materially and spiritually. But concomitantly, we must also all be Sarahs, cherishing the integrity of the bearers of the Divine message and acutely aware of the fact that God has entrusted His mission to us—that we bear the message and that the world is our audience.

Sarah's legacy also applies on the national level. We must remember that our Divine goals will be not achieved by obsequiously seeking the world's approval, thereby confusing both them and ourselves as to our intended role in God's plan. Rather, we are assured success in our Divine mission only if we respectfully but unabashedly assert our Divine rights, including the right to our God-given land. Only in this way can we faithfully help steer the whole world on its course toward fulfilling its objective in becoming God's true home.³

FOOTNOTES

1. Above, 17:15.
2. See on 25:18.
3. *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 15, pp. 145-154; vol. 5, pp. 338-344; *Sefer HaSichot 5748*, vol. 1, pp. 85-89.

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