



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Chayei Sarah*

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

27 Heshvan, 5770

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Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba which is Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. Genesis 23:1-2

These lines are spare and yet so very powerful. Sarah, our great foremother, lived an amazing and dynamic life and then, in two words, she died. Immediately she is praised and grieved and remembered and finally, buried. And then life goes on. Perhaps the Torah's compact description of her death, (especially as contrasted to the many stories of her life and even her burial) is a way of reminding us what is important. The Torah is showing us to live fully for as long as we can, grieve what we will inevitably lose, and finally let go.

Sarah, the Torah tells us, lived 100 years, 20 years, and 7 years. This is such a different and more descriptive read than the more economical phrasing, 127 years. Each part of this phrase conveys a full phase of life. 100 years; I imagine her as an old woman, tired, world weary, wise, still cracking wry jokes, but steeped in wisdom that she paid dearly for. Time starts flying backwards; watch her wrinkles unfold and disappear, her back straightening up, her eyes coming clear. Each receding decade takes with it some weight and wear. And suddenly she is a young woman of 20 years; I see her with thick hair; dark and blowing in the wind, chiseled features, piercing eyes, gorgeous, full of sass and dare. The years keep shedding away until she is just a girl, 7 years old; I see a dreaming child, bones still growing, limbs slightly out of proportion. Every layer of her life distinct and different, and somehow, there is no contradiction between these *Chayei Sarah* -- these lives of Sarah. She has lived many lives, but they are all, each, true; every tear and cackle a part of her wholeness. These epochs of her life, nest perfectly, one inside the next, like each layer of a Matryoshka doll. Any one of them complete in and of itself, but alone each chapter is limited. Yet here, at the moment of her death, her lives are pieced together into a full, rich mosaic of quite a life.

Our mother Sarah, teaches us a great deal about how to live. In her chockablock 127 years, she faced challenge, pain, insecurity, instability, anxiety and loss. She also knew hilarity, beauty, passion, adventure and miracle. She is a shining example of how to ride through the storms that define, shape and shatter, this earthly life. The Torah gives us a precious glimpse into how she coped, reacted, and pulled through the rough spots. And at the core of this wild and wily woman we find that Sarah enjoyed a profound and intensely personal relationship with God. It is informal, spontaneous and honest.

In one of the most stunning and irreverent moments of the Torah, Sarah laughs at God. God says that despite her advanced age Sarah, who has been barren all her life, will bear a child. After years of trying and failing to conceive, Sarah laughs incredulously.

This moment of bitter, ragged laughter is a gift to every one of us who has ever found ourselves pushed beyond our limits from months of ceaseless effort, any one who has ever snapped after years of struggle.

In my reading of this portion, Sarah shows us how to be real. Sarah laughs incredulously and her pain seeps out onto the very pages of the Torah. And God reacts with love. God says: "Why are you laughing? You think I'm joking? I'm not. There is nothing I can't do, and I'm telling you, by next year at this time, you will have a son." (Genesis 18:13-14) It is a beautiful interaction. How healing to have our rawness and bitterness met with confidence and compassion. What a balm to be heard, seen, listened to, even in a moment of deep bitterness, anger, pain.

Sarah knew how to live an authentically spiritual life long before there were synagogues or prayer books. She prayed with her feet and her fingers and her eyes and her laughter. Things were often difficult and the good times didn't last too long, but she made every moment of her life count. She had a lifelong spiritual practice of being ruthlessly herself.

As my own mother, of blessed memory, was dying, she was surrounded by a battalion of supporters. She was very weak and in a fair amount of pain. Her well meaning friends would encourage her to limit her activity or avoid situations where she might hurt herself. But she would have none of it. She continued to putter around her house, she went outside to tend her garden; she took care of her cat. "Listen," she said, "I intend to live until I die." Something tells me she was cut out of the same cloth as our ancestress Sarah. In this week of *Chayei Sarah* – the lives of Sarah -- may we find a way to follow her example to live fearlessly, fully and truthfully. And may our courageous honesty be met with care, love and good humor.

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