

PARASHAH: Hayyei-Sarah (Sarah's Life)
ADDRESS: B'resheet (Genesis) 23:1-25:18
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O'lam,
asher bachar banu m'kol ha-amim,
v'natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This week's parashah (portion) is called **Hayyei-Sarah**. Sarah is the main focus of the introduction for this week. Last week our two main characters had received a change in names, symbolizing a change in their God-ordained callings. Before we dive into this week's commentary I want to feature the thoughts of Rav Kook on this special change in monikers. His focus, like my own, will be on our matriarch.

God changed both Abraham and Sarah's names: Abram to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah. The Talmud [Brachot 13] explains both changes in a similar vein:

'Abram' means the Father of the nation of Aram. In the beginning he was a leader just of Aram, but in end he became a leader for the entire world ("Av hamon goyim," the father of many nations).

'Sarai' means 'My Princess'. In the beginning, she was a princess of her people. In the end she became 'Sarah' - 'The Princess' - a princess for the entire world.

These name changes indicate that the message of Abraham and Sarah was no longer a national but a universal one. Yet while both of their names were changed, the Talmud tells us that there was a difference. One who calls Abraham by his old name (Abram) has transgressed a positive commandment. No such prohibition, however, exists with using Sarah's old name. Why?

Rav Kook makes an interesting distinction between Abraham and Sarah. The teachings of Abraham, he writes, represent the philosophical heritage of Judaism. The Torah of Sarah, on the other hand, represents the practical mitzvot.

The philosophical content of Judaism is universal in nature. The ideals of monotheism and righteousness apply to all peoples. Abraham, the source for these beliefs, must be recognized as a world figure, so that the universal character of his teachings will not be lost.

The practical mitzvot, on the other hand, serve to strengthen the national character of the Jewish people. From Sarah we inherited the sanctity of deed. These actions serve to develop the unique holiness of the Jewish people, which is required for the future correction of all peoples. Sarah's practical Torah, therefore, contains both national and universal relevance. [Adapted from Ein Aya vol. I, p. 69]

Passing the Torch

The portion contains some rather somber notes, as it records the deaths of Sarah, Avraham, and Yishma'el. Sarah lived to be 127 years old, the Torah tells us. In all of this time, we hear of only one semi-direct revelation to her from HaShem, and that is when she overheard the conversation between her husband and God, about Yitz'chak, and laughed. Other than that, we don't have any recorded Scriptures indicating her direct contact with the Almighty, in the same manner as her husband. Why is this significant? Because it shows that even though she did not have the exact same revelations from HaShem that Avraham did, surely she had a genuine, living relationship with her God! This is proven by the quality of faith and support that she displayed towards her husband, amidst his unbelievable callings. Packing up and leaving the only home she had known for 65 years (she being 10 years his junior when they left; see 12:4; 17:17b), following him to lands unknown, and allowing him to take their son of promise to a distant mountain to slay him. All of these real-life circumstances required a considerable amount of patience and faith from someone such as Sarah.

Also it should be noted that the Torah omits the details surrounding the parting of Sarah and Yitz'chak, just prior to his journey to Mount Moriah. It is possible that they never got to experience an intimate farewell exchange between each other. It seems as if Avraham and Yitz'chak left for the 3-day trip, and Sarah died while they were away. This further adds to the credibility of her faith and servitude to the calling of her husband. Surely this was a trying moment for her. A woman of Sarah's caliber would not be easy to match, yet as we study further into the pages of the Torah, we will find another "Sarah" unfold before our eyes.

At this juncture in the Torah, the focus shifts from that of Avraham, to the life and calling of his son Yitz'chak. You could say that Avraham, becoming aware of the nearing conclusion of his incredible trials from HaShem, began preparing for his own "semi-retirement." After the "Akedah" (binding), the spotlight's noticeable shift begins detailing the life and times of Yitz'chak and his bride-to-be, Rivkah (Rebecca). Yet, our father Avraham feels led to oversee just one final important task in the life of his son.

Mystery of the Gospel

Chapter 24 is the account of the finding of a wife for Yitz'chak. Avraham calls his senior and most trusted servant to go and fetch a wife for his son from among Avraham's ancestors rather than from the Kena'ani (Canaanite women) around them. In the unfortunate event that the servant is unable to procure a suitable wife from family, one who will follow him to where Avraham is, then Avraham's instructions included details explicitly forbidding his servant from ever returning Yitz'chak to the land from which HaShem had brought them. What is the significance of this explicit order? I believe it is this: the stock from which a wife for his son, a wife that would bear the "multitudes" promised to him by HaShem, was not to be Kena'ani stock.

Avraham understood that HaShem had removed him and his family from Ur-Kasdim and that physically or symbolically he was never to return. Moreover, **his son's future bride would likewise "cross over" into the land of promise to join her future husband.**

The Gentile peoples, at this time (the strangers dwelling in the land, those with no "covenant-of-faith" connection to Avraham or HaShem), were not to be mixed into the physical lineage of the children of the promise. Even HaShem's "rejection" of Yishma'el (chapters 16, 17:17-21; 21:9-20) reflect this fact. The time was not yet, when just anyone could physically join the household of the lineage of Avraham. Even later on, in the time period of the TaNaKH (Old Testament), when, from an Isra'elite perspective, non-Jews were required to become circumcised in order to join the commonwealth of Isra'el, the full actualization of being a child of Avraham was not yet. There was still a hidden aspect of it all. I'm not counting the inclusion of slaves and other males belonging to the household (17:23-27) of Avraham. The full actualization that I'm referring to is the "bringing near" that the B'rit Chadashah (New Covenant) talks about in Ephesians 2:11-22.

Tim Hegg of TorahResouce.com has written a most valuable contribution in helping to sort out the details of Jewish and Gentile covenant relationship in his book "Fellow Heirs." Allow me to pull an important quote from that work:

A common expression in the Torah is "the alien (ger) who has drawn near (karav)" or who is "in your midst" (b'kerev). The fact that the LXX regularly

uses the verb prosekeimai (“to be closely attached to”) with proselutos to translate ger in the context of “in your gates” (or other locative descriptor) highlights this concept of “attachment” or “drawing near.” This language of “drawing near” most likely underlies the words of Paul in Ephesians 2, in which the Gentile is said to have been “far off” but who has been “brought near” through faith in Yeshua (cf. Ephesians 2:11-13)

Paul makes it clear that the Gentiles do not form a separate entity, nor do they participate in a covenant different than the Jews, but “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel...” (Ephesians 3:6). Moreover, this is not some ethereal, theoretical “body” which fulfills some kind of theological requirement of the Gospel. The “body of Messiah” envisioned by Yeshua and His Apostles were actual communities that lived out the context of their faith in everyday events. Indeed, the Gospel, as far as Paul was concerned, is grounded in the Abrahamic promise that all of the nations would be blessed through his seed (Galatians 3:8). This blessing accords with the eschatological promise that the nations would be instructed in the Torah, not in their separate locations, but as they came up to Zion, and fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy that the Temple would be called the “house of prayer for all the nations.”¹

With the coming of Yeshua, the ultimate “son of promise,” non-Jews could finally share completely in the spiritual as well as physical blessings promised to “our father Avraham.” Only after this time came, could this “mystery” (Ephesians 3:4-10), allowing the uncircumcised to be called righteous (Romans 4:11-12), be revealed. But at this current time in our parashah of historical making, according to HaShem, while Gentiles were allowed into the covenant, God saw fit not to explicitly reveal how this mystery would unfold. As far as Isra’el knew, Gentiles were not to be chosen as suitable fellow-inheritors of the promises to become a nation of people (the Jews) without undergoing the ritual of conversion first. This apparent blindness on the part of Isra’el even seems at times to serve HaShem’s purposes, until he chose to fully unveil his plans to a charismatic man from Tarsus.

This is the reason why I believe our study has focused primarily on the “natural offspring” of Avraham. I am not purposely neglecting the Gentiles of today, the ones who are offspring according to faith. The Torah does indeed have Gentiles in mind when it speaks of covenants. To be sure, Hegg asserts that the reason that Jewish lineage is important is that God has promised to manifest His omnipotent sovereignty through the people descended from Jacob. But in maintaining this promise to Jacob, one need not exclude the non-descendent, for God has also promised to bring the nations within the scope of that same covenant. God has adopted them both! It is only when the Jew and non-Jew live

¹ Tim Hegg, *Fellow Heirs* (FFOZ 2002), 40, 41

and worship together as equally adopted brothers in the congregation of Yeshua that God's faithfulness and power are manifested as they should be.² I am, however, laying the groundwork necessary for the Gentile believers to understand the foundations of the Christian faith. By addressing first the natural we will be better equipped to understand the spiritual. For a thorough treatment of the practicalities and impracticalities of Gentile to Jewish conversions read my commentary on **'Who is a Jew?,'** available by request.

Yitz'chak Finds a Bride

Continuing into chapter 24, we find that Rivkah indeed turns out to be the woman that Avraham's servant is looking for, the wife that Avraham believes by faith that his son will need—a woman of the caliber and stature of his beloved Sarah. To be sure, Rivkah receives a prophetic blessing in verse 60, reading,

“They blessed Rivkah with these words: “Our sister, may you be the mother of millions, and may your descendants possess the cities of those who hate them.”

This is strikingly similar to the prior blessing attributed to Yitz'chak, by the mouth of HaShem himself, at his "binding" (B'resheet 22:16-18)! I believe it is a confirmation from the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) that this was to be the woman through whom HaShem would bring about the birth of the promised nation of called-out ones!

At Avraham's servant's request, and at Rivkah's approval (24:56-58), they set out to return to Yitz'chak. Yitz'chak was in deep mourning over the loss of this visible and necessary part of his life. I'm sure the absence of Sarah affected everyone in the camp, but no one besides Avraham felt it like Yitz'chak. This strengthens the fact that only someone with the faith of his mother Sarah could fill the void in his life. And if indeed he did not get to formally say goodbye before she died, we can imagine how much more he was grieving the loss. The Torah says,

“Meanwhile, Yitz'chak, one evening after coming along the road from Be'er-Lachai-Roi—he was living in the Negev—went out walking in the field, and as he looked up, he saw camels approaching.” (vv. 62, 63)

The word translated “walking” stems from the Hebrew root word soo-akh שוּאָח. It is the same root word used in Psalm 102 in the opening few words, to describe the prayer of one who pours out his “complaint” (KJV) before the LORD. It is also found in a prior Psalm (44:24), to describe “affliction” (KJV). One more use is found in the book named for its “distresses,” Lamentations. Chapter 3, verse 20 reads,

² Ibid., 48

“My soul hath [them] still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.”

Here it is translated “humbled.” We understand, from other passages using this Hebrew word, that it is possible to catch a glimpse of Yitz'chak's grief over the loss of Sarah, as he “walked” in the field. When Rivkah notices him she inquires of the servant of Avraham as to his identity. Upon learning that it is her future husband, she veils herself in typical Middle Eastern respect. Notice that after the report is given to Yitz'chak, he accepts her without hesitation, and brings her into his mother's tent to receive her as his wife. Only after she comes into his life, does the Torah record,

“Thus was Yitz'chak comforted for the loss of his mother.” (24:67b)

What is my point in bringing out these details of the story of chapter 24? What we have here is a beautiful “Torah picture,” one that is painted for us again in the New Covenant, when referring to the “Son of promise” and his “bride.” The bride this time is someone who has symbolically crossed over, in faith, to join her husband where he lives. She is forever removed from the land of her forefathers, united to dwell with her husband, in the land that has been promised to them. The Father lovingly oversaw the choosing of the perfect mate for his Son. The wife is to be chaste and of the utmost character, possessing beauty and faith, in order to fulfill the role chosen by the father. Avraham made sure that someone such as Rivkah was the only one suitable for his son Yitz'chak; HaShem made sure that the **Kehilah**, (Greek: Ekklesia ἐκκλησία, the Church, i.e., the called-out ones) was the perfect bride for his Son. The son of Avraham could only be satisfied with one woman—the bride chosen by his father (Genesis 24:67b). Likewise, our “Husband,” the Messiah Yeshua, is only satisfied with one “woman,” the bride chosen by his Father (John 17:11).

Conclusions

The final chapter of our parashah gives us the account of the death of this father of ours named Avraham. Verses 12-17 sadly record the death of Yishma'el as well. But shortly before Yishma'el's death, verse nine shows both of Avraham's sons Yitz'chak, and Yishma'el working side by side to pay (final) respect to their great father. O' that we might see Jew and Arab working side by side today, for the same common goal! Great division and strife exists between these two peoples today. I believe that part of the solution to this conflict is lying directly at the feet of the ones known as the “bride.”

Hegg provides a most fitting concluding remark as well:

Covenant membership was never purely a physical reality, nor even primarily related to one's lineage. Those who were native-born could be “cut off from their people,” and in such a case, would no longer be constituted as covenant members. On the other hand, those of foreign

extraction, if drawn by the God of Isra'el, could through their faith “draw near” to God as their Father, and become bona fide covenant members with Isra'el, and recipients of all of the privileges as well as responsibilities of that covenant. Faith is therefore the issue, and God will show Himself both faithful and sovereign by bringing the physical seed of Jacob to faith and thus to covenant obedience before Him.³

If, as purported above, the bride today consists of both physical heirs and of those grafted into Isra'el, then both the Jews and the Church have a mission of love, to help in “**Tikkun ha-‘Olam**” (repairing the world). In this way, we will both help heal the split between Synagogue and Church, as well as between Jew and Arab. To be sure, as we study further into the pages of the Torah, we shall learn exactly what type of healing needs to take place between these two “brothers” according to the flesh. But for now, I want to conclude by reemphasizing the main thrust of my commentaries on Avraham, as they apply to the Church.

A most famous Talmudic rabbi by the name of Hillel (fl. 10-20 C.E.) was quoted as saying, “**If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?**” Moreover, this was to be remembered as his most famous saying. I don’t want to ponder the meaning of this entire quote; rather, I just want to comment on the final statement. Contemporary author Marvin Wilson, in his book **Our Father Abraham**, has these final words to say about our father Avraham, and our relationship to him as the Church:

Every Christian should desire a greater knowledge and strengthening of the Jewish roots of his faith. In this lifelong search and endeavor, loving concern for the Jewish people is not optional. Indeed, Christians are commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Gal. 5:14). Passive love is not enough, however. A person cannot claim to love his neighbor if he has not yet made a sincere effort to reach out to get to know and understand his neighbor. And so, Hillel again compels us to reply by asking, “If not now...when?”⁴

³ Ibid., 49

⁴ Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Eerdmans, 1989), 335

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-O’lam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O’ LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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