

## ***Parashat Chayei Sarah, Genesis 23:1-25:18***

### **How Strange the Way of Providence The Righteous Are Called Living Simeon J. Maslin**

Our ancient sages raised two interesting questions about the very first verse of this week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*. First, why was this portion, which mentions the matriarch Sarah only to tell us that she had died, entitled Chayei Sarah, which means "the life of Sarah"? The portion tells us nothing about her life but only about her burial and then the story of her son's marriage.

The obvious answer, of course, is that Torah portions take their names from the first important words in the opening verse, in this case: "The life of Sarah was 127 years." But that was much too prosaic an answer for the sages, who were always looking for moral teachings in the verses of Scripture.

What moral did the rabbis find in the title "The life of Sarah"? They taught that "the righteous are called living even after death, while the wicked are called dead even in life." And so Sarah, the righteous mother of Israel, still lives because her example continues to inspire acts of goodness among her descendants.

The second lesson that the rabbis took from that same verse can only be perceived in the original Hebrew. The English translation tells us that Sarah lived to the age of 127. (Don't be put off by the fantastic ages given for many characters in Genesis. That might be a subject for another commentary.) But the Hebrew informs us that "the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty and seven years." Why this strange choice of language?

According to Rashi, it was to teach us that at any age of the one hundred Sarah was as beautiful as she was at twenty, and at the age of twenty she was as sinless as at seven. Fanciful, yes, but a lovely tribute to our matriarch.

The chapter goes on to relate how Abraham, the grieving widower, mourned and wept for Sarah and how he provided a burial place not only for her but for himself and for their descendants as well. He bought land from the Hittites, a large burial cave named Machpelah. Muslims and Jewish tradition locate that cave in today's volatile town of Hebron, where it is enclosed in a mosque, the site of a bloody massacre on Purim 1994. We pray for the day when the descendants of Abraham, Muslim and Jewish,

will make Hebron into a place of life and peace, a worthy resting place for our patriarchs and matriarchs.

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### **This is the Life of Sarah Kyla Epstein Schneider**

This week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*, contains two major narratives: Abraham's acquisition of a burial site for Sarah, his wife, and the story of how Abraham arranges for the marriage of his son, Isaac. As Rabbi Maslin points out, though this parasha is called the "Life of Sarah," we learn little about her life.

Or do we? "Sarah had lived to be one hundred years and twenty years and seven years old. These were the years of Sarah's life. Sarah died in Kiryat-arba, also known as Hebron, in the land of Canaan. Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." (Gen. 23:1-2) If we read this literally, we would assume that Abraham was somewhere else and came to Hebron to bury Sarah. Almost every commentator has asked from where was Abraham coming from when he came to mourn his wife. The great medieval commentator Nachmanides gives us an unexpected answer. Nachmanides posits that if Abraham had been coming from somewhere else, the text would have stated that directly. Rather, Abraham, already in Hebron, came to where Sarah died (in her own tent) in order to mourn and weep for her there. Nachmanides points to what Abraham needed to do: mourn, cry, spend time in her space, rage, rest. What Abraham did by coming to her tent - mourning, weeping, and then making complex arrangements to bury her - tells a great deal about the life of Sarah. By mourning and weeping, Abraham manifests universal and particular response to the death of a loved one. When he mourned her, Abraham mourned her departure from the world. When he wept, he wept as a result of the personal loss he sustained (or *hachayim*). Abraham cried because he lost his partner. I picture him crying as he reviewed Sarah's life's narrative to himself: "She wandered from land to land with me. She went hungry with me. She spent most of her life childless and struggled with my need for an heir. And in her last days, she had to confront the fact that I would bring her son up to Moriah as a sacrifice to God. " Maybe more than that, Abraham weeps because of the courage and audacity with which Sarah met life. She had the tremendous capacity to meet the challenges and tests in her life with confidence, bravery and not a small amount

of chutzpah. (Remember, God tells her that she will bear a child at the age of ninety, and she laughs - outloud.)

Sarah, our first matriarch, is a woman of substance. Rashi tells us that all her years were good because no matter what occurred, she looked upon them as good. Abraham recognizes that, as he mourns for her in her tent. As he tells and retells her story, maybe he begins: "Chaye Sarah, this is the life of Sarah...."

Sarah's story suggests the following questions:

1. How do we actively sustain and carry on our loved ones' lives after they die?
2. How do I want those around me to tell my story when I am gone?
3. What is the substance of my life's story?

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## **THE LIFE OF SARAH AND THE IMMORTALITY OF INFLUENCE**

**Donald B. Rossoff**

Why is the *parashah* that speaks of Sarah's death known as *Chaye Sarah* - "The Life of Sarah"?

One answer offered by our tradition is derived from a comment in the Talmud (Berachot 18a): "The righteous in their death are called living."

Because of the way she lived her life, Sarah is referred to as if she were still alive. But wait! Does this mean that there really is life after death? Is this something in which Jews have believed? Is this something in which we Jews can or should still believe?

Growing up in an observant Reform household, I was taught that Jews did not believe in life after death. Yes, our beloved dead do "live on in the hearts of those who cherish their memories," but we are more concerned with "life after birth." The early CCAR platforms affirmed the "immortality of the soul," while the Centenary Perspective offered us the open-ended idea that we "share in God's eternity." Later I learned that traditional Judaism includes a plethora of positions on what happens after we die, from belief in bodily resurrection and final judgment at the end of time to the mystic concept of reincarnation.<sup>1</sup> So much from which to choose! And who really knows?

But there is one clear afterlife concept that we all share because we have seen it working in our lives. We call it

"the immortality of influence."<sup>2</sup> We live on in the lives we have created and/or shaped, in the students we have taught, in the institutions we have helped build, and in the people we have touched, even if that touch was momentary or indirect. What we do forms the ethical wills we write with each moment of our lives.

Creating one's "immortality of influence" requires work. How can we insure this kind of eternal life for ourselves and those who have died but are still in our hearts? Certainly by leading the most moral and most giving lives we can. But there are also other avenues to immortality to which we Jews should pay special attention.

**Giving *tzedakah*.** As Scripture says, "*Tzedakah* [righteous giving] redeems from death." (Proverbs 10:2) Each act of *tzedakah* not only benefits the recipient but also enriches the life of the giver and sends out autographed ripples across the pond of being that last longer than we ourselves will. And when one who has died is the catalyst for *tzedakah*, then his or her life continues to be a blessing.

**Saying *Kaddish*.** We say *Kaddish* not for but after our loved ones. "*Kaddish* is the unique Jewish link that binds the generations of Israel. The grave doesn't hear the *Kaddish*, but the speaker does, and the words will echo in your heart."<sup>3</sup>

**Donating an organ.** Whether the recipient is Mickey Mantle or an unknown person, a Jew or a Gentile, we can save a life and thereby save a world, gaining immortality through the one in whose body we live on, as well as through the lives that person touches.

**Living Jewish lives and strengthening the Jewish people.** We are immortal because we are part of an eternal people.

As Z. Hillel writes, "With Sarah's death was initiated her eternal life.... When some people die, they leave nothing behind. But after Sarah and Abraham died, the Jewish people remained. For the first time in human history, there was continuity. Within the Jewish people live all of Abraham and Sarah's characteristics and values...."<sup>4</sup> Sarah and her righteousness are living still-in us and through us. We are her immortality. As we strive for righteousness, our life becomes the "Life of Sarah."

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<sup>1</sup> *What Happens After I Die* by Rabbis Rifat Sonsino and Daniel B. Syme (UAHC Press).

2 I learned this phrase from our teacher Rabbi Harold Schulweiss.

3 From an ethical will by Dr. William Abromowitz, as quoted in *So that Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them* by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Professor Nathaniel Stampfer (Jewish Lights).

4 Iturei Torah, Chaye Sarah.

## REAL BEAUTY

**Marsha Katz Rothpan**

Actions speak louder than words. It's what's on the inside that counts. Don't judge a book by its cover. Physical beauty is only skin deep; it's inner beauty that matters. "Good deeds are better than wise sayings." (*Pirkei Avot*). In *Parashat Chayei Sarah* (Genesis. 23:1-25:18) we find that all these sayings ring true when it comes to the matter of choosing a bride for Isaac.

Let's set the scene. Sarah, our first matriarch, has passed away at the age of 127. Abraham and Isaac are in mourning. Because Isaac is not married and has no children, there is no guaranteed future for the Israelite people. Eliezer, Abraham's senior servant, is sent by Abraham to the latter's native land of Haran to find a bride for Isaac. Faced with this challenging task, Eliezer devises a "test" to use in order to find a bride who is appropriate for Isaac and who will be the next matriarch of the Israelites. Eliezer said: "Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; 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." (Genesis 24:13-14)

Rebecca arrives at the well with her jar visible, making no attempt to hide it to insure that no one bothers her for a drink of water. Eliezer sees Rebecca and asks for a sip of water. Without hesitation, she invites him to drink. After he has quenched his thirst, she offers to draw water for his camels. Rebecca makes this offer after Eliezer has already drunk so that it does not appear that she is equating him with the camels, while at the same time she does not withhold water from his animals.

Eliezer is interested in inner beauty, not physical appearance. Rebecca's clothes, jewelry, figure, and face are not described in the parashah. Rather, she is described

by her actions and her deeds. Her behavior demonstrates her kindness and character, her *chesed*. She does not turn away from a stranger nor judge him.

The importance of *chesed* is found in many of our texts. In *Pirkei Avot* it is written that the world is founded on three things: Torah, *avodah* (prayer), and *gemilut chasadim* (acts of loving-kindness). The rabbis also taught, "In three respects are *gemilut chasadim* superior to charity: Charity can be done only with one's money, whereas *gemilut chasadim* can be done with one's person and one's money; charity can be given only to the poor, whereas *gemilut chasadim* can be done for both the rich and the poor; charity can be given to the living only, whereas *gemilut chasadim* can be done both for the living and the dead [by attending to funeral needs]." (Tractate Sukkah 49b)

Rebecca doesn't know that Eliezer is testing her. As individuals, we are being tested every day—for example, by the beggar on the street corner and by the family we see living in a car. Our communal institutions are also tested each day by the diverse and numerous needs that exist in our community and by the limited resources, both monetary and human. These are not tests for which we can prepare: The answers to them must come from within.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What virtues do you look for in others?
2. Who do you know that possesses Rebecca's character traits?
3. What have you done recently for which you would like to be remembered?
4. How are the values of our matriarchs (and patriarchs) represented in your life?
5. Rebecca is a wonderful role model. Who are some of today's role models? Do they possess "real beauty"?
6. How can we show *chesed* without feeling overwhelmed by the many ways we might be of help?
7. Can you think of examples of "institutionalized *chesed*"?
8. How can you help take care of the needs of others and of the community without neglecting your own needs?
9. What are some examples of kindness that can be done for anyone, rich or poor, child or adult?
10. Is it hard for you to accept kindness from another person? If so, why? How does being the recipient of kindness from another make you feel? What do the following statements mean to you?

"Happy is the person who clings to it [*chesed*] wholeheartedly, since she/he acquires merit for the coming generations." (*Ahavath Chesed*, the Chafetz Chaim)

"Kindness is a lot of things: It is a way of thinking and a way of doing. It is a way of being ... the way God wants you to be." (*Kindness Is a Lot of Things*, C. R. Gibson)

For Further Reading:  
*Ahavath Chesed*, the Chafetz Chaim, Feldheim Publishers, 1976.

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## **GIVING ALL THAT WE OWN** **Wendy Drucker Pein**

United States presidents are usually concerned about their historic legacy. Most of us, however, do not put nearly the same thought into what we will leave behind. But our tradition teaches us that this is not how it is supposed to be. *Parashat Chayei Sarah* describes two different types of inheritances that one generation can leave for the next. The first type is material/financial, as manifested in Abraham's servant's explanation to Rebekah's family about her future husband's (Isaac's) security: "He [Abraham] has given him [Isaac] all that he owns." (Genesis 24:36) The biblical commentator Rashi interprets this verse to mean that the servant literally shows Rebekah's family a "document of the gift," thereby providing visible proof that Isaac is a wealthy man. The second type of inheritance is spiritual, as reflected in Abraham's approach to death: "Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac." (Genesis 25:5) Regarding this passage, Rashi quotes R. Nehemiah, who interprets that Abraham is here bestowing his spiritual blessing on Isaac. (Rashi on Genesis 25:5) These descriptions of how Abraham imparts his legacy to Isaac teach us that we should be concerned about our own role in providing for future generations.

*Parashat Chayei Sarah* prompts us to ask ourselves: What are we willing to give to the next generation? In an increasingly materialistic society, our thoughts about the future often turn to financial matters. Just as our parents, grandparents, and ancestors provided for us, we strive to provide similar, if not greater, financial security for our children and the succeeding generations. However, our *parashah* reminds us that material acquisition should not be our only goal. Abraham transmitted both a material and

spiritual legacy to Isaac, and we, as the inheritors of Abraham's gifts, bear the responsibility of providing both of these inheritances for the next generation.

Many of us act on our responsibility by donating and/or raising funds for Jewish causes and institutions. Others pass down Abraham's spiritual blessing through Jewish education, outreach, and forging strong connections to *Am* and *Eretz Yisrael*. Some of us try to establish both kinds of legacies for our children. Whatever path we choose, our roles have been clearly paved by Abraham. He willed all that he owned to Isaac and gifts to his other sons "while he was still living." (Genesis 25:6) As modern progenitors of the Jewish legacy, we are taught to "give all that we have" of our material and spiritual gifts generously and selflessly and to do so today.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Compare the "giving" patterns (both financial and emotional) of the present generation to those of our parents or grandparents.
2. Can you see yourself "giving all that you own" to another individual or to an organization? Why or why not?
3. What do you expect to leave behind for future generations?

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## **MANY FORMS OF BEAUTY** **MANY REASONS FOR MARRIAGE** **Peter Kessler**

The marriage of Rebekah and Isaac is the first love story we encounter in the Torah. We have read about many married couples previously, but never before have we witnessed their first meeting or encountered the word "love," as we do in Genesis 24:67 in reference to Isaac's feelings for Rebekah.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah teaches us that there are many different reasons why a couple may get married. Some people marry for love, others because of financial concerns, and still others for political reasons or a desire to raise their social status.

In this instance, Abraham's only concern is that his daughter-in-law comes from the land of his birth. Once a bride has been found for Isaac, Abraham seems to feel

that his job is finished and he is free to take on a new wife, Keturah, after Sarah's death. The text never tells us if Abraham even met Rebekah: His only desire was to ensure the status of his progeny as Hebrews.

Abraham's unnamed servant (assumed to be Eliezer, who is mentioned in Genesis 15:2) is more concerned with finding a suitable mate for Isaac. Eliezer is wise enough to pray to God for guidance and hopes to find a woman who is beautiful both inside and out. Rebekah's outward beauty is immediately evident, and her inward beauty manifests itself in her kindness and generosity at the well.

What was Rebekah's motivation for agreeing to marry Isaac and leave her ancestral home? Some of our Sages suggest that she was living in a "house of scoundrels" and saw an opportunity to escape to a life that involved contact with more righteous people. But it is clear that when she sees Isaac for the first time, he sparks her interest: "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" she asks the servant (Genesis 24:65). Obviously there was something about Isaac that was worth noticing.

The motivation for Isaac's falling in love was the desire to alleviate the loneliness and sense of loss he experienced as a result of the death of his mother. The text tells us that "Isaac loved her [Rebekah] and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67).

What lay ahead in the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah? Some may argue that they lived a happy life, while others would conclude that theirs was a marriage fraught with deception and misunderstanding. If Rebekah married Isaac in order to escape a difficult family life and Isaac married Rebekah in order to have someone to comfort him after the loss of his mother, what were the chances of their marriage being successful?

Sometimes when two people enter into a marriage with very different objectives, each of them can still derive satisfaction from their union. May God grant us the wisdom to choose spouses whose beauty delights us in many ways and whose motivations for marriage are in harmony with our own.

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## **REMOVING THE VEIL**

**Elizabeth Dunsker**

The *bedeken* can be a very powerful and emotional moment at a wedding. At my own wedding it was a

moment when my husband and I saw each other, but then were immediately separated by that gauzy piece of fabric. This veiling of the bride can be intensely intimate, as it is the moment when both bride and groom signify their preparedness to marry each other. The veil itself is truly a remarkable device; it is able to simultaneously conceal and reveal. A bride wears a veil for this very reason: it conveys a sense of secrecy without obscuring her completely. We can see her face through the veil, but not all the details. We may miss the mischievous sparkle in her eye, or a tear, or even the full force of her smile. And the bride's perspective from under the veil has a soft, muted look. She can feel hidden while still having the ability to see out.

Veils are mentioned so rarely in the Torah that their appearance is worth examining. In each instance, something is hidden from one of the characters but revealed to the reader. *Chayei Sarah* contains the Torah's first mention of a veil, which occurs when Rebekah arrives in the Negev and has her first look at Isaac. She asks, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" (Genesis 24:65). When the servant answers, "That is my master," she covers herself with her veil. Interestingly, this need for modesty does not arise at any other time during the journey to her new home. Nor was she wearing a veil when she first met the servant at the well. It is only upon first seeing her fiancé Isaac that she feels the necessity to veil herself. She hides her face from the only person who has a vested interest in seeing it! What is hidden from Isaac is revealed to all the other characters, as well as to the reader. We have already been told of Rebekah's beauty; only Isaac has yet to behold it.

The next mention of a veil in the Torah occurs to explain why Judah is unable to recognize his daughter-in-law, Tamar, who exchanges her widow's garb for a veil and waits for Judah at the roadside. The text says, "When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face" (Genesis 38:15). Throughout this episode, the reader knows and understands that Tamar tricks Judah so that she can conceive an heir for his deceased son. The technical term for this situation is *chalitzah*, or levirate marriage. Only when Tamar's pregnancy becomes public does she reveal her identity as the veiled woman to Judah and expose his role in the pregnancy.

In the first instance, the veil signifies Rebekah's modesty and preparation for marriage. In the second, the veil signifies that Tamar is available for hire. So, the veil serves as a symbol of duality in multiple ways. It hides a

face while still making it visible; it hides a situation from a participant while still allowing the reader to see the whole story; and it signifies both the modesty of a bride and the immodesty of a prostitute. This point of duality is noted further by the midrash “Two covered themselves with a veil and gave birth to twins” (*B’reishit Rabbah* 60:14). Rebekah and Tamar both become the mothers of twins soon after their “veil” episodes.

We find a veil mentioned in only one other place in the Torah. We are told in Exodus 34:29–35 that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai his skin was glowing so radiantly that the Israelites were unable to look at him. From then on he wore a veil unless he was speaking to God, or of God, to the Israelites. While it’s true the word for veil in this instance, *masveh*, is different from the word for veil that appears earlier, *tza-if*, the veil concept still signifies duality—the difference between Moses’s time with God and his everyday life with the Israelites.

Throughout our lives we experience moments of holiness. What makes them so is that they are separate and unique from what is regular and everyday. The Torah uses the veil as a device to note such separations in the lives of biblical characters. Moses’s closeness to God would certainly be classified as *kadosh*, “holy.” It can also be argued that Tamar’s fulfillment of the obligation to provide an heir for her deceased husband is an example of holiness. And Rebekah veils herself before entering into *kiddushin*, “marriage” that is holy under God, with Isaac. In fact, this text is used as the basis for the ceremony of *bedeken*.

While the veil symbolizes duality—hiding and revealing—it is also a symbol of the separateness of that which is *kadosh*. The act of separating something makes it holy. We separate Shabbat from the other days of the week, making it holy. When we pinch off a piece of the bread we are baking, it becomes *challah*, which is holy. And when we join with another person making ourselves separate from all others, that is undoubtedly an act of *kiddushin*—a holy union.

We are complicated beings made up of contradictions and dualities. In our world, holy and profane will always exist side by side. Sometimes we clearly see the holiness of the separate, and sometimes we mistake it for the everyday. Rebekah knew that when she would meet Isaac her life would change; she marks that moment by covering her face with a veil, revealing her consent to marry. So too in our lives, it may be only the sheerest of fabrics that separates what is holy from what is profane. May we

always see those moments with the same clarity possessed by our ancestors.

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## **"WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF LOVE" Paul F. Cohen**

Abraham, feeling old and tired, bereft after losing his beloved Sarah, decides that it is time for Isaac to marry. He sends his servant Eliezer out to find Isaac a wife. Abraham does not provide any of the expected prerequisites for a suitable mate. He does not tell Eliezer that the woman should come from a family of wealth or fame. And Abraham says nothing about the appearance he desires for Isaac’s bride: tall or short, dark or fair.

Without any clear direction other than that he should not find her among the Canaanites. Eliezer prays to God, describing a drama that may take place at the well. He tells God that if the drama comes to life, he will recognize this as a sign that his prayer has been answered. The right woman will be the one who, upon Eliezer’s request, offers water not only to him, but also to his camels. Rebekah fulfills the conditions of the prayer and the story unfolds. Is this, then, a marriage made in heaven?

What does God see in Rebekah and in Isaac that assures them a successful—and indeed a loving—relationship? Perhaps the answer lies in each of their family stories. Rebekah longs to be free of a home where we know trickery and deceit thrive. Rebekah is the water drawer. She is the life giver and the one who embraces all of God’s creatures. Isaac is the damaged one, almost physically destroyed by his father; certainly emotionally destroyed by him. Isaac’s mother is gone, and he is alone. With Isaac, Rebekah will find the freedom to establish herself as a strong, independent woman. With Rebekah, Isaac will find the healing he so desperately needs, which will allow him to grow and become the man he is meant to become—a transmitter of the covenant.

The clues to this story are imbedded in the text. It is remarkable that the Torah describes the actions of Rebekah and Isaac using a form of the Hebrew root *nun-sin-alef*, which means, “to lift up.” On the verge of their very first meeting, both Rebekah and Isaac “lift up their eyes” and see each other.

Rebekah looks up and sees Isaac. Isaac looks up and sees Rebekah. They look up at each other and there find love.

What does it mean to “lift up” your eyes? For Rebekah and Isaac there are at least three possibilities. First, by lifting up their eyes, they are able to see heaven. They can see the Divine in each other. Next, in looking up, Rebekah and Isaac can see the potential beyond the surface. They can each look beyond their beginnings and see the light within. And finally, in lifting up their eyes, they can see the future. Rebekah and Isaac can imagine the blessings that will be a part of their life together. Each can see beyond the present to the promise of what lies ahead.

Romantic love, according to the Torah, is a gift from God. It comes in the blessing of being able to see beyond the surface. We find love when we are able to “lift up our eyes.” Recently, I listened to a local talk radio program on this very subject. Time and again I heard stories about how people found their life partner when they were not really looking for one. In “lifting up their eyes” they were able to see something that had eluded them before and find love. We find love when we see the future in another. When we are able to see beyond the moment, beyond the initial spark of attraction, we see what lies ahead and the blessing that is possible.

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