

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

towards becoming a great nation. Avraham, painfully aware by his loss of the significance of a spouse who is a partner, looks for a suitable wife in the land he came from. He is perhaps hoping to find a young woman with a hint of Sarah's flavor, something that Yitzhak could recognize and connect to.

Why does Avraham not carry out this task by himself? His advanced age might well have been a consideration in avoiding the travel. However, recently I came to understand this parashah in a new, cultural light thanks to Muatasem, a local young Arab man who teaches my daughter Arabic.

Muatasem explained how marriage works in his society: When the young man seems ready for marriage, his mother starts to inquire among her friends if any of them have a daughter who might be eligible. After the mother finds a girl whom she believes would be suitable for her son, the two young people meet. If they are interested in each other, then the fathers get involved and settle the business end of things.

Now let us look at the marriage of Avraham's sons. When Ishmael, Avraham's son from Hagar, gets married, he marries a woman from Egypt, the land his mother hails from. We are told (21:21) that it is his mother who finds him a wife.

In our parashah (24:28) Rebecca runs to tell her mother about the arrival of the messenger from Avraham. The mother seems to have a significant role in arranging the marriage in 24:53-58.

What will happen to Yitzhak now that Sarah is gone? Avraham no longer has at his side the woman who knows Yitzhak well enough to find a woman suitable for him. (It is interesting that none of the matriarchs seem to have met their daughters-in-law.) Instead, Avraham entrusts the task to someone else who knows Yitzhak well - in this case, his most trusted servant. The rabbis note that the name of this important character is not mentioned, stressing that he is acting entirely as a messenger, with only Avraham's family needs in mind.

While debating if this reading is assigning too much significance to the role of the mother in her son's future in biblical times, I looked again at this week's haftarah. While it opens with the old age of David (that might parallel that of Avraham), the main story is that of Bat Sheva arranging for Solomon to be placed on the throne. That story offers an alternative situation, one where the mother is present and active. It suggests to us the significant role a mother can play when she is not absent.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Hayyei Sarah *Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh*

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Annual | Genesis 23:1-25:18 (Etz Hayim p. 127-141; Hertz p. 80-89)
Triennial Genesis 24:53-25:18 (Etz Hayim p. 137-141; Hertz p. 86-89)
Haftarah | 1 Kings 1:1-31 (Etz Hayim p. 142-145; Hertz p. 90-92)

D'var Torah: Sarah's Absence

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This parashah is all about Sarah; Avraham's wife and Yitzhak's mother. Spoiler: despite its title, the story opens with her death. But it is her death that forces her husband Avraham to finally buy land, and her absence stands behind the marriage story of Yitzhak.

Sarah is Avraham's steadfast partner. She is the one about whom God said to Avraham "in all that Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice" (21:12). In an unusual move, the Torah gives Sarah's death and burial great coverage. Her death becomes the catalyst that arouses Avraham from his routine. He now takes the two actions that represent steps in fulfilling his destiny of becoming a great nation in the land of Canaan - acquiring land and ensuring his continuity.

While Avraham manages the purchase of land and the burial on his own, he turns to his senior servant to find a wife for Yitzhak. At first glance, the death of Sarah has no connection to Avraham's move to find a wife for Yitzhak. However, both human nature and local culture tie her, or, rather, her absence, to this story. On the human level, the correlation is not difficult to understand. The loss of his life-partner, the end of an era for Avraham, becomes a wakeup call for him. The chapter of his generation is coming to an end. If he wants the story that he and Sarah began to continue, he has to make sure that Yitzhak marries as a first step

D'var Haftarah: The Strength to Lead

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

When David reached old age, his household was a hotbed of political and familial intrigue. Following the death of David's oldest sons, Amnon and Absalom, the next oldest, Adonijah, saw himself as the rightful heir to the throne. It is unclear whether he knew what will be revealed later: that David had already promised the kingship to a much younger son, Solomon. Before nature can take its course, Adonijah attempts to assume the kingship, expecting that David will accede to his fait accompli. But Solomon's supporters get David to announce Solomon as king, and Adonijah is eventually executed.

What made this chaotic situation possible? Why did Adonijah think he could make such a brazen move while his father was still alive?

The strange beginning to the Book of Kings might offer us an answer to these questions. A prematurely aged David is in failing health and is unable to maintain his own bodily warmth. His desperate servants find a beautiful young woman to "keep him warm" - seemingly with the hope that she will reawaken his potency and vigor. But the text tells us that David never had sexual relations with her, perhaps signaling to those around him, and to the reader, his irreversible decline and imminent death. This is the context for Adonijah's move to seize the throne.

But Adonijah's over-confidence was also a product of David's inattentive parenting. The text tells us: "And Adonijah son of Hagith was giving himself airs, saying, 'I shall be king!' And he made himself a chariot and horsemen with fifty men running before him. **And his father never caused him pain, saying, 'Why have you done thus?'**" (verses 5-6) Like many children who eventually go astray, Adonijah sought to test his father's boundaries but met no resistance. And he took his father's silence as tacit approval.

These two stories, one of literal impotence and the other figurative, demonstrated that David had long ceased being the king his people needed him to be. Dissension in his government threatened to tear the nation apart. Thankfully, David was able - at the urging of the Prophet Nathan - to summon up enough strength to ensure the right leader took his place. As Rabbi Yosef Kara, a contemporary of Rashi, noted, "For every situation and everything there is a proper time - a time to be quiet and to wait; and a time to respond; and [for David], if not now, when?

David brought his nation to the brink, but he did what was necessary to avert the crisis. He responded to the challenge. May our leaders find the strength to do the same.

Parashat Hayyei Sarah Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The parashah opens with the death of Sarah which then leads to two main stories: Avraham's purchase of land in Canaan (the Cave of Machpelah), and the search for a wife for Yitzhak (Rivka).

1) Following Sarah's death, Avraham wishes to buy the field and cave belonging to Ephron the Hittite. Ephron declares in front of all his landmen that he will give Avraham the field. When Avraham insists on paying, Ephron responds to Avraham: "A land worth 400 Shekel of silver, what is that between you and me?!" (23:10-16.) Avraham pays and receives title to the land. How does the first and second encounter differ? Who is present at each encounter? Why?

2) Before sending the elder of his household to find a wife for Yitzhak, Avraham asks him to put his hand under Avraham's thigh and swear to not take a wife from the women of the Canaanites, but rather go to the land Avraham came from (24:2-3). Why do you think that an oath is taken in such a manner?

3) The Torah tells us that the servant "took 10 camels of his master's camels and went" (24:10). Rashi comments "*They were distinguishable from other camels by the fact that they would go out muzzled to prevent robbery, that they should not graze in strangers' fields.*" What seemed superfluous in the verse that pointed Rashi in this direction? What message did Rashi wish to impart to us about Avraham and his household?

4) When the servant reaches the house of Rivka's family he unloads and feeds the animals, then washes up himself (24:32). Most of us travel by motor vehicles, not live animals. What is the Torah teaching us about using animals in our service?

5) When Rivka arrives with the servant, Yitzhak brings her to the tent of his mother, Sarah (24:67). What does his action symbolize? How do you think that Yitzhak felt at that point?

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