

Parashah Chayei Sarah, one of six Parashiot named after a person and the only one named after a woman, is all about transitions – transitions that take the story of our people to its next level. The brilliant and wise Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z”l, who unfortunately died of cancer this past Shabbat, pointed out that the Torah, by the very nature of its name (*torah* means teaching) is not a history book, but rather, a book of teachings. Teachings are seldom found on the surface; they are revealed through asking questions. This week’s parashah hands us a question right at the outset: Why is it called *Chayei Sarah* – the life of Sarah, when it begins with her death and never discusses her life? Because Sarah’s death is a transition that sparks other transitions that are integral to the perpetuation of our eternal covenant with HaShem. We all know some form of the adage “HaShem helps those who help themselves.” A covenantal relationship requires engagement from both parties, and two of Abraham’s actions in this parashah prove beyond a doubt his willingness to uphold the human side of our covenant.

The first is the acquisition of land in an agonizingly painstaking real estate transaction with the Hittites. In Parashah Lech Lecha Ha Shem promises Abraham two fundamental things – land and progeny. When Sarah dies, Abraham sets out to purchase a burial place for her. As a *ger v’toshav* – an alien and an inhabitant, as he reminds the Hittites, he needs their permission to buy property. He could simply bury Sarah along the road, as Jacob does with Rachel, or he could place her in one of the burial sites the Hittites offer him for free. But he insists on purchasing a specific piece of property, and after much cajoling, ends up paying an exorbitant price for it. Why? Because this tiny parcel of land is the first step toward fulfilling one of those two promises. This small field with its burial cave is a toehold in the Promised Land, and more importantly, it also sets a milestone. One of the first tasks a newly forming Jewish community undertakes is to consecrate a cemetery and establish measures for the proper burial of its dead. Throughout most of our history, we, like Abraham, have been resident aliens, subject to the whims of the prevailing society. Our small graveyards, often far outside the confines of settlement and not always safe from marauders, came to represent ownership, which in turn stands for stability and permanence. How blessed we are today, to be full citizens of the many counties in which we live, but we must never forget upon whose shoulders we are standing.

Abraham’s second act is to procure a suitable wife for Isaac, and here again, he goes to great pains to uphold his part of the covenant. He knows that the mother of his grandchildren must come from his own family, and unable to undertake the arduous journey himself, he sends his trusted servant to his ancestral home laden with costly presents and bound by specific instructions. Once again, negotiations are long and complicated. The Hittite Efron and Rebecca’s brother Laban are kindred spirits, forthcoming on the surface but wily and avaricious by nature. In addition, the prospective future wife is free to accept or decline. Rebecca, whose spontaneous generosity at the well has already proven her suitability, chooses to accept and depart immediately to begin her new life. In this story we definitely see the hand of HaShem. Abraham’s servant, whom later commentators called Eliezer, is so unsure of his own ability to fulfill Abraham’s request that he devises a test and prays to HaShem for assistance. It goes as he had hoped, and his mission is successful.

One little parcel of land, and a wife for his son – small beginnings indeed, but on the cusp of momentous transitions. Sarah’s death propels Abraham into actions that set HaShem’s seemingly improbable promises into motion. What can we learn from these two stories? First, we learn that as covenantal partners we are expected to do our part to bring those promises forward to the next generation. We cannot rely on trust alone; we must act, and we must persevere, even when it seems hopeless. We can pray for strength and we can pray for the ability to effect good outcomes for our endeavors, but our goals must be in accordance with our mitzvot – in other words, like Abraham and Sarah for the greater good, and not like Efron and Laban solely for personal gain. The second lesson is another old adage: all beginnings are difficult. Success does not happen overnight; it takes work, commitment, patience, and the courage to try, to fail, and to try again. Abraham and Sarah do not have an easy life, but they move toward their goal with great determination. They make some tragic mistakes along the way, just as we all do, but they remain steadfast and thus able to pass the mantle to the next generation and touch off the transition from one small family to *am yisrael* – our people. As Rabbi Tarfon said, “It is not up to you to complete the work, but you are not free to be idle.” (Pirke Avot, 2:16) The work goes on. Let us try to imitate the good qualities of our ancestors and carry it forward to the next generation.

Shabbat shalom!