

The overarching theme of the three stories in our parashah is securing HaShem's promise to Abraham, whose purpose is to establish the radical idea of monotheism centered around an invisible, inscrutable, fully unique deity Who communicates with select individuals to carry the idea forward. What does this have to do with Sarah, and why is our parashah called *Chayei Sarah* – Sarah's life – when it begins with the story of her death? First of all, her life as well as that of her husband and partner Abraham is a fully human life, marked not only by adherence to high ideals, but also by human fallibility. Sarah could be dishonest (helping Abraham deceive Pharaoh and Avimelech, and denying that she had laughed at the prospect of bearing children); she was impatient (urging Abraham to have a child with Hagar, which she later regretted); and she transgressed an important tenet of Judaism. Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah 16b teaches, "Three matters evoke a person's sins, and they are: Endangering oneself by sitting next to an inclined wall that is about to collapse; expecting prayer to be accepted ... ; and passing a case against another to Heaven, ... . Praying for God to pass judgment on another, causes one's own deeds to be examined and compared with the deeds of the other, as is stated, 'And Sarai said to Abram: My anger be upon you; I have given my maid into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes; let the Lord judge between me and you.' [16:5], ... Sarah called upon Heaven to pass judgment between her and her husband, and therefore she was punished and died first." All three sins are based on a mixture of laziness and feelings of entitlement. Because a covenantal relationship requires participation from both parties, expecting action from HaShem without personal initiative is a violation of its terms. Variations on this include mistreating our bodies and then expecting to stay healthy, expecting a good grade on a test without studying adequately, and expecting HaShem to judge in our favor without considering all the facts. The human foibles of Sarah and her progeny, to which we can all relate, illustrate a vital pillar of monotheism: Because life in our earthly realm is finite, we do not deify human beings; only HaShem is infinite. This brings us to the second point. In Parashah Lech Lecha, which we read last week, HaShem promises Abraham two essential things: land and progeny. By acquiring land and finding a suitable wife for Isaac, Abraham proves his willingness to do his part to make it happen, and Sarah's death is the catalyst. Abraham sets out to purchase a burial place for her, engaging in a painstaking exchange with the Hittites for a parcel of land containing a double cave suitable for use as a family mausoleum. (*Machpelah*, the name of the cave, derives from the root כפל – double, echoes of which we find in the word *couple*). He reminds them that as a *ger v'toshav*, an alien and also a resident, he needs their permission to buy property on their land. He could simply bury Sarah along the road, as Jacob does with Rachel, or place her in one of the choice burial sites the Hittites offer him for free. But aware that these would revert to Hittite ownership after his death, he insists on a monetary transaction in order to secure the land for his progeny. It is noteworthy that Midrash Genesis Rabbah 58 points out that Abraham, unmoved by the Hittites' calling him "a prince of God in our midst" (23:6), which they embellish with "... you are a king for us, you are a prince for us, you are a god for us," admonishes them: "Do not detract His kingship from this world, do not detract His Divinity from the world." All cultural niceties aside, we do not deify humans! The property Abraham has selected belongs to one Ephron ben Tzokhar, who likewise effusively offers it to Abraham free of charge. But Abraham remains steadfast in his desire to purchase the land, ending 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, and it also creates a precedent. One of the first tasks of a newly forming Jewish community 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 city walls and not always safe from intruders, represent ownership, which signifies permanence. Today, we are blessed to be full citizens of the many counties in which we live, but we must never forget upon whose shoulders we are standing, and we must continually strive to uphold their high ideals. Abraham's second act is to procure a suitable wife for Isaac, and here again, he goes to great pains to fulfill his part of the covenant. He knows that she must come from his own family and not from the local inhabitants. Too old for such an arduous journey, he sends his trusted servant to his ancestral home with costly presents and specific instructions. Once again, negotiations are long and complicated. The Hittite Ephron and Rebecca's brother Laban are kindred spirits, outwardly forthcoming but inherently wily and avaricious. Rebecca, whose spontaneous generosity at the well amply proves her suitability, is free to accept or decline. Like Abraham, she readily accepts the call, and chooses to depart immediately for a new life in an unknown land. We are now on our way, secure in HaShem's promises, and obligated to do our part to uphold our unique, eternal covenant to the best of our human abilities.

Shabbat shalom!