

5780- Genesis 23-25 - Chayei Sarah (The life of Sarah)

Chayei Sara contain three narratives: the death of Sarah and Abraham's purchase of a burial plot for her, the first part of the Holy Land to be owned by the people of the covenant; the search for a wife for Isaac, the first Jewish child; and the last period of Abraham's life, and his death.

In the first of the following essays we explore the continuing significance of the first two of these stories to the Jewish present. In the second we look at Isaac's evening meditation, which the sages took as the model for *mincha*, the afternoon prayer. In the third we analyse the halakhic implications of the way a wife was chosen for Isaac, by Abraham and his servant. Surprisingly, this was taken by the rabbis to be an exception rather than a general rule. In the fourth we look at a remarkable series of midrashim about Abraham's second marriage, after the death of Sarah, and their implications for relations between Judasim and Islam.

*On Judaism and Islam*¹

The language of the Torah is, in Erich Auerbach's² famous phrase, "fraught with background." **Behind the events that are openly told are shadowy stories left for us to decipher.** Hidden beneath the surface of *Parashat Chayei Sara*, for example, is another story, alluded to only in a series of hints. There are three clues in the text.

The first occurs when Abraham's servant is returning with the woman who is to become Isaac's wife. **As Rebecca sees Isaac in the distance, we are told that he is "coming from the way of Be'er lachai-ro'i" (24:62) to meditate in the field.** The placement is surprising. Thus far we have situated the patriarchal family at Beersheva, to which Abraham returns after the binding of Isaac, and Hebron, where Sarah dies and is buried. **What is this third location, Be'er-lahai-ro'i, and what is its significance?**

The second is the extraordinary final stage of Abraham's life. For chapter after chapter we read of the love and faithfulness Abraham and Sarah had for one another. **Together they embarked on a long journey to an unknown destination.** Together, they stood against the idolatry of their time. Twice, Sarah saved Abraham's life by pretending to be his sister. They hoped and prayed for a child and endured the long years of childlessness until Isaac was born. Then Sarah's life draws to a close. She dies. Abraham mourns and weeps for her and buys a cave in which she is buried, and he is to be buried beside her. We then expect to read that Abra-

ham lived out the rest of his years alone before being placed beside "Sarah his wife" (25:10) in the "Cave of Makhpelah" (25:9).

Unexpectedly, however, once Isaac is married, Abraham marries a woman named Keturah and has six children by her. We are told nothing else about this woman, and the significance of the episode is unclear. **The Torah does not include mere incidental details.** We have no idea, for example, what Abraham looked like. We do not even know the name of the servant he sent to find a wife for Isaac. **Tradition tells us that it was Eliezer, but the Torah itself does not.** What then is the significance of Abraham's second marriage and how is it related to the rest of the narrative?

The third clue to the hidden story is revealed in the Torah's description of Abraham's death:

And Abraham expired, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Makhpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre, the field which Abraham purchased of the children of Het. There was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife. (25:8-10)

Ishmael's presence at the funeral is surprising. After all, he had been sent away into the desert years before, when Isaac was young. Until now, we have assumed that the two half-brothers have lived in total isolation from one another. Yet the Torah places them together at the funeral without a word of explanation.

The sages pieced together these three puzzling details to form an enthralling story.

First, **they point out that Be'er-lahai-ro'i, the place from which Isaac was coming when Rebecca saw him, is mentioned once before in Genesis (16:14): It is the spot where Hagar, pregnant and fleeing from Sarah, encountered an angel who told her to return. It is indeed she who gives the place its name, meaning "the well of the Living One who sees me" (16:14).** The midrash thus says that Isaac went to Be'er-lahai-ro'i in search of Hagar. **When Isaac heard that his father was seeking a wife for him, he said, "Shall I be married while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him."**⁽¹⁾

Hence the sages' answer to the second question: who was Keturah? She was, they said, none other than Hagar herself. It is not unusual for people in the Torah to have more than one name: Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, had seven. Hagar was called Keturah because "her acts gave forth fragrance like incense (ketoret)."⁽²⁾ This indeed integrates Abraham's second marriage as an essential component of the narrative. Hagar did not end her days as an outcast. She returned, at Isaac's prompting and with Abraham's consent, to become the wife of her former master.

1 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 141-144.

2 Erich Auerbach (1892 - 1957) was a German philologist and comparative scholar and critic of literature.

This also changes the painful story of the banishment of Ishmael. We know that Abraham did not want to send him away—Sarah's demand was “very grievous in Abraham's sight on account of his son” (21:11). Nonetheless, God told Abraham to listen to his wife. There is, however, an extraordinary midrash, in Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer,³ which tells of how **Abraham twice visited his son. On the first occasion, Ishmael was not at home. His wife, not knowing Abraham's identity, refused the stranger bread and water. Ishmael, continues the midrash, divorced her and married a woman named Fatimah. This time, when Abraham visited, again not disclosing his identity, the woman gave him food and drink. The midrash then says Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, and Ishmael's house became filled with all good things. When Ishmael returned, his wife told him about it, and Ishmael knew that his father still loved him.”**⁽³⁾ **Father and son were reconciled.**

The name of Ishmael's second wife, Fatimah, is highly significant. In the Koran, Fatimah is the daughter of Mohammad. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer is an eighth-century work, and it is here making an explicit, and positive, reference to Islam.

The hidden story of Chayei Sara has immense consequence for our time. Jews and Muslims both trace their descent from Abraham—Jews through Isaac, Muslims through Ishmael. The fact that both sons stood together at their father's funeral tells us that they too were reunited. Beneath the surface of the narrative in Chayei Sara, the sages read the clues and pieced together a moving story of reconciliation between Abraham and Hagar on the one hand, Isaac and Ishmael on the other. Yes, **there was conflict and separation; but that was the beginning, not the end.** Between Judaism and Islam there can be friendship and mutual respect. Abraham loved both his sons, and was laid to rest by both. **There is hope for the future in this story of the past.**

(1) Bereshit Rabba 60:14

(2) Bereshit Rabba 51:4

(3) Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 30

1. *Be'er-lachai-ro'i* (is) the place from which Isaac was coming when Rebecca saw him, is mentioned once before in Genesis (16:14) ...

a. Genesis 24:62-67

⁶²Now **Isaac had come from Beer Lahai Roi** ...

b. Genesis. 16:7-16

⁷**The angel of the LORD found Hagar** near a spring in the desert ...

¹³**She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the**

God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." ¹⁴That is why **the well was called Beer Lahai Roi**; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

2. *Together (Abraham and Sarah) embarked on a long journey to an unknown destination ...*

a. Hebrews 11:8-10

⁸By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, **even though he did not know where he was going ...**

3. *Then Sarah ... dies. Abraham mourns and weeps for her and buys a cave in which she is buried, and he is to be buried beside her.*

a. Genesis 23:17-20

²⁰So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

b. Genesis 17:8

The whole land of Canaan ... **I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you ...**

c. Genesis Rabbah LXXIX:7

7. AND HE BOUGHT THE PARCEL OF GROUND, etc. (XXXIII, 19). R. Judan b. R. Simon said: **This is one of the three places regarding which the nations of the world cannot taunt Israel and say, 'Ye have stolen them. These are they: The cave of Machpelah, the [site of the] Temple, and the sepulchre of Joseph.** The cave of Machpelah: And Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver (Gen. XXIII, 16). The Temple: So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold (I Chron. XXI, 25). And Joseph's sepulchre: AND HE BOUGHT THE PARCEL OF GROUND (Josh. XXIV, 32).

d. **This brings up an interesting tension, i.e.,**

1) **Between God's promise to Abraham, i.e., that the (Promised) Land would belong to him and his descendants forever (Gen 15:18; 17:8; 26:3; 28:13; 35:12; 48:4; Exo 33:1; Num 14:24; Deu 1:8,36; Neh 9:8; Ps 25:13; Jer 23:8; Acts 7:5).**

2) **And, Abraham's reality, i.e., the fact that the only portion of the Land that was formally "deeded" to him was Machpelah—the burial cave of Sarah—because he purchased it!**

e. *Machpelah* (23:17) means “double”—according to scripture, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob all rest in the cave at *Machpelah*.

1) A strong tradition has it that Rebekah, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah are buried there as well.

3 Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer [PdRE]) is an aggadic-midrashic work on the Torah containing exegesis and retellings of biblical stories. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia it was composed in Italy shortly after 830.

2) And, an early rabbinic legend has it that Adam and Chava are buried there too.

a) Eiruv (Ritual Enclosures) 43a

The cave of *Machpelah*. Rav and Shmuel have different opinions [explaining why it was called "double."] Rav believes that the cave consisted of two chambers, one inside the other. Shmuel believes that the cave consisted of a lower and upper chamber. The term *Machpelah* (double) makes sense according to the explanation that one chamber was above the other. But according to the one who believes that the cave consisted of two chambers, one inside of the other, why would it be called *Machpelah*? It is so called because it held several couples. Rabbi Yitzchak explained that the city of **Hebron is called Kiriath Arba (City of Four) because "It is the city of the four couples: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah."**

3) The notion that *Machpelah* is also the burial site of Adam and Chava is an important component of Jewish thought regarding the afterlife.

a) In Jewish literature, we have it that Abraham chose the cave of Adam and Chava as a burial place **because it marked the entrance to the Garden of Eden.**

b) The term "Garden of Eden," is the common Jewish term for paradise—and **why we refer to "paradise" as "Abraham's Bosom."**

a) Luke 16:19-31

²²"**The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side (lit., "Abraham's bosom"). The rich man also died and was buried ...**

4) Our "forefathers" (and "foremothers") are often referred to as "those who sleep in Hebron" or "those who sleep in *Machpelah*."

5) And, it is sometimes said that the resurrection of the dead will begin in *Machpelah*.

a) Pirke Mashiach, BbM 3:73-74

In that hour, [Messiah] goes up and brings glad tidings to those who sleep in Machpelah, and says to them: "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, rise! Enough have you slept!" And they reply and say: "Who is this who removes the dust from over us?" And he says to them: "I am the Messiah of the LORD. Salvation is near, the hour is near." And they answer: "If it is really so, go and bring the tidings to Adam the first man, so that he should rise first." In that hour they say to Adam the first man: "Enough have you slept!"

6) 1Thessalonians 4:13-16

¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command ... with the trumpet call of God, and **the dead in Messiah will rise first.**

4. *The name of Ishmael's second wife, Fatimah, is highly significant. In the Koran, Fatimah is the daughter of Mohammad. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer is an eighth-century work, and it is here making an explicit, and positive, reference to Islam. The hidden story of Chayei Sara has immense consequence for our time ...*

a. Fatima (605-633 CE), the daughter of Mohammad lived in the 7th-century CE—Isaac lived in the 18th-century BCE.

b. Genesis 25:1-6

¹Abraham had taken another wife, whose name was Keturah. ²She bore him **Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah.**

³Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan; the descendants of Dedan were **the Ashurites, the Letushites and the Leummites** ...

⁵Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. ⁶But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east ... ⁹His sons **Isaac and Ishmael** buried him in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre ...

1) Genesis 17:1-5

⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: **You will be the father of many nations** ...

c. Bava Batra 16b

What we have to say is that the fact of the text placing Isaac first shows that Ishmael made way⁽³⁵⁾ for him, and from the fact that he made way for him we infer that he repented in Abraham's lifetime.

(35) Lit., 'made him lead.'

5. *Abraham loved both his sons, and was laid to rest by both. **There is hope for the future in this story of the past.***

a. As the Midrash comments: Ishmael, the son of the maidservant [Hagar] showed honor to the son of the lady [Sarah], for were this not the case they would have been listed according to their age with Ishmael first. In Bava Basra 16b it is deduced from this that Ishmael had repented. The Talmud asks: Perhaps the verse merely listed them in the order of their wisdom [and thus Isaac is properly mentioned first, with no suggestion of repentance on the part of Ishmael] The Talmud answers that in this case, the Torah did not use relative wisdom as the criterion. The proof of this is in 35:29, which tells how Isaac was buried by his children: there Esau [the elder] is mentioned before Jacob [the wiser]. The prior mention of Isaac in

our verse, therefore, must lead to the deduction that he repented in Abraham's lifetime (*Mizrachi*).⁴

Gur Aryeh⁵ asks: Perhaps the Torah mentioned Isaac first simply because he was the son of the lady and as such clearly merited precedence over Ishmael the son of the maidservant? —But the traditional hatred of the wicked for the righteous is so intense, and so defies the norm of dignified conduct ... that if Ishmael were still wicked he would never — under any circumstances — have allowed the righteous Isaac, to precede him. Hence, the Sages derive from this verse that Ishmael repented.

Ha'amek Davar⁶ adds that implicit here is that **Abraham had informed Ishmael of God's decree that he was a son in every respect, except in situations where Isaac was involved [in line with 21:12: *through Isaac will offspring be considered yours.*] Ishmael obediently refrained from contesting the inheritance, and accordingly now gave precedence to Isaac. Once Isaac is given this precedence, Ishmael is referred to as son which he was in every other sense.**

4 Rabbis Nosson Scherman/Meir Zlotowitz, Gen. Eds., *Bereshis*, Vol. 3, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), p. 977.

5 *Gur Aryeh* (*Young Lion*), a rabbinic commentary by Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (d. 1609) also known as the Maharal of Prague.

6 *Ha'amek Davar* (Delve into the Matter) is a Torah commentary written by Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816 -1893), also known as Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin, and commonly known by the acronym Netziv.