

A Brief Note on a Human Tragedy, Part One

Parsha Chaye Sarah, the life of Sarah, may not be the fairest name for this week's Torah portion. Sarah is only mentioned at the beginning of the parsha, and then only as the subject of a terse death notice; that she had passed away at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. It is the fact of her death, its causes and its consequences, which drive the narratives of the parsha.

The parsha contains none of the dramatic moments of its predecessors, nor is God an active participant in the stories which it recounts. The narratives are neither triumphant nor heroic; rather, they expose a raw edge of human emotions generally absent from scriptural literatures. For example, Sarah's sudden death is linked with the Akedah; she died alone, apparently estranged from her husband and apart from her son.

While some commentators have attempted to link her death to Satan informing her that indeed her husband had slaughtered her only child, it is fair to accept that there was at least some indication of discord between them, as evidenced by Abraham's journey to Beersheba, and not back to Kiryat Arba, where Sarah remained.

The Torah related that when Abraham heard that Sarah had died, he returned to Kiryat Arba where he arranged for the purchase of an appropriate tomb for Sarah, and then eulogized and lamented his late wife. The Torah does not describe Isaac's reaction to the news that his mother had died. Rather curiously, it also does not reveal whether he returned with his father to inter and mourn Sarah. To add slightly to that mystery, the text suggests that Isaac was living apart from Abraham at the time; a possible indicator of some strife between son and father.

After Sarah was laid to rest his grieving having abated, Abraham now painfully aware of his own mortality, set about to secure the future for Isaac. Sarah's only child was almost forty years old and did not have a spouse. He determined to find a wife for his son. In another of the magical narratives of *Bereshit*, Abraham takes the oath of his most trusted aide, Eliezer. Eliezer travels back to Haran, the land of Abraham's kin, to find a wife for Isaac. The Torah details Eliezer's search for a bride and importantly the criteria he established to best fit the scion of the founder of a nation. Then we are introduced to Rebecca, a woman who meets Eliezer's concerns. In a colourful scene Eliezer's bargains for Rebecca's hand and then escorts Rebecca back to the lands of Canaan. The Torah recorded that Isaac was pleased with the choice made by Eliezer: "*she became his wife; and he loved her*". Equally important, Rebecca filled a void in Isaac's life that existed because of the death of his mother: "*Isaac was comforted for his mother*".

These tales, like many of the narratives of *Bereshit*, are rich – both in their detail and their ambiguities. Of course, there are perfectly reasonable explanations for the entire turn of events; the move to Beersheba by Abraham indicated the onset of their winter preparations, and father and son would necessarily stake separate camps, to better pasture their livestock. Isaac's age may be misleading. Biblical men seem to enjoy late starts: Abraham was seventy-five years old when he heard the call of God, and Moses was over eighty when he travelled back to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh. In contrast, Isaac at forty years old was positively youthful and presumably lacked the wisdom of age. Even the unusual choice of words "*Isaac was comforted for his mother*" may only suggest that a

worthy successor as Matriarch of a nation had been found. Sarah's death too, could have been from natural causes.

Whatever frame of reference one would adopt, there is an air of tragedy to the entire narrative: that of a son who suffered the loss of his mother and that mother and wife who died alone her family far from her side.

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