

# פרשת חי שרה Parshat Chayei Sara

## Ashreinu | אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion



### Expand Your Horizons

Mrs. Amy Horowitz

Two fascinating midrashim offer conflicting accounts of Sarah's death in this week's parsha. The

Mrs. Amy Horowitz

Riley Spitz ('25)

Naftali Keiffer ('23)

Sarah Posner ('24)

Ariel Elazar ('25)

first midrash famously attributes Sarah's death to her receiving the "fake news" that Avraham had gone through with Akeidat Yitzchak and sacrificed her only

child, Yitzchak. In this scenario, the midrash suggests that Sarah died from grief. The second midrash also connects Sarah's death to Akeidat Yitzchak, but for the opposite reason – Sarah is devastated to hear that Avraham *didn't* go through with Akeidat Yitzchak! In this scenario, Sarah grieves the possibility that either Avraham or Yitzchak refused to obey Hashem's word.

What are we supposed to make of these two midrashim? How do we reconcile these contradictory narratives? Which one is right?

I've been teaching Chumash for 19 years, and this must be the most frequently asked question by my

students over the years. Rashi offers a compelling answer to a question, and Ramban says the exact opposite: who is correct? How can we move forward without determining a concrete truth?

My students are often frustrated with my answer – they're both right! – but I think it's essential to become a thinking adult. As children, we are satisfied with answers that are absolute. If someone is good, they are not evil. If someone is wrong, they are not right. But as adults, we begin to seek nuance. Life experience teaches that nothing is really ever as simple or as absolute as we thought. Good and evil are complicated. So are right and wrong.

Learning Torah through the lens of multiple perspectives challenges us to broaden our thinking and abandon our need for absolutes, leaving room for multiple truths. Studying the lives and experiences of our Avot and Imahot is a richer experience when we stop limiting ourselves to accept only one point of view.

So what really happened to cause Sarah's death? Was she distraught over the death of her son or over her concern that perhaps her husband and son weren't righteous enough? The answer is....that's not really

the right question to be asking! Instead, let's ask: what can we learn from Sarah by embracing *both* midrashim? Sarah was a real human being, with real and complicated feelings. She was a mother who deeply loved her son, and couldn't imagine living in this world without him. At the same time, she was a pious woman who loved and feared God, and couldn't imagine living in this world without serving Him.

Far from being frustrated by these two ideas, I feel completely satisfied. This Sarah – this woman with complicated feelings that left her feeling conflicted, the mother who desperately loved her son and just as desperately loved Hashem – this is a woman I can look up to!

# Aliyah Summary

1- Sarah died at the age of 127, and Avraham wanted to bury her in Chevron. The cave that he wanted to bury her in was owned by Efron Ha'Chiti, so Avraham requested to buy it. Efron offered to give it away to him for free, but after Avraham insisted on paying, Efron sold the land for 400 silver coins.

2- Avraham buried Sarah in Me'arat Hamachpela. He then called on his servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for Yitzchak. Avraham did not want Yitzchak to marry a girl from Canaan, so he asked Eliezer to travel to Aram, where Avraham was from, to find someone.

3- Eliezer traveled to Aram, and prayed to be successful and for a sign from Hashem that he would choose the perfect girl for Yitzchak. He decided he would test the girl by asking her for water, and if she offers to give water to his camels also she would be the best choice for Yitzchak. Immediately the test is passed by Rivka, who was Avraham's great niece.

4- Rivka ran back to her house to tell her family about what happened at the well. Her brother, Lavan, went out and invited Eliezer to sleep over that night. Eliezer told them about the test he developed to find Yitzchak's wife, and her family agreed to the marriage.

5- Rivka's family and Eliezer celebrated the engagement. The next morning Rivka and Eliezer went back to Avraham's house in Canaan. Yitzchak married her.

6- Avraham got remarried and had several more children. Before he died he gave gifts to all of his children, but gave most of his possessions to Yitzchak. Avraham died at the age of 175, and was buried next to Sarah in Me'arat Hamachpela by Yitzchak and Yishmael.

7- Yishmael's descendants are listed. He died at the age of 137.

# Always There

Riley Spitz ('25)

In this week's parsha, Chayei Sarah, we read about Eliezer's journey to find a wife for Yitzchak. Avraham, Yitzchak's father, instructs Eliezer, his servant, to find a wife for his son from outside of Canaan. Eliezer obeys and heads to Charan to find a wife. Eliezer begins to daven to Hashem to be successful in his mission. He asks Hashem for a sign: if a woman approaches him and offers him and his camels water from the well, she will be the wife he chooses. Strangely the pasuk says:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים כֹּלֶבֶת תְּבִרְכָה וְהַנְּהָרָה רְבָקָה יְצַאת... וְכֹה  
עַל-שְׁכָמָה

“He scarcely finished speaking when Rivka came out... with her jar on her shoulder” (Bereishit 24:15).

How strange is it that before he even finished speaking, Rivka came to do exactly what Eliezer had asked Hashem for?

The Malbim explains that Hashem arranged for this to happen exactly this way, so that the girl Yitzchak was supposed to marry would arrive at just the right time. This is a perfect demonstration of *hashgacha pratit*. Not only does the Malbim explain Hashem's involvement, but he also adds that Rivka had never even been to the well before because her father's servants would normally go instead. Hashem not only planned for this important encounter between Eliezer and Rivka, but He made sure that Rivka would be there at the exact time, unlike any other day.

The Sforno corroborates the Malbim's commentary in his own explanation of Eliezer's retelling of meeting Rivka, on the words **אני טרם אכלה לדבר**, suggesting that this also proves that all of it was planned by Hashem.

Through both the Malbim and Sforno, we can understand Hashem's role in Eliezer's journey to find a wife for Yitzchak and, to take it a step further, help us acknowledge Hashem's role in our daily lives. Although we may not recognize it, Hashem's presence is always here, helping us reach our goals and guiding us on the right path, just like he did with Eliezer!

# Holy Vessel

Naftali Keiffer ('23)

גַּר וַתֹּשֶׁב אָנֹכִי עַמְּכֶם תָּנוּ לִי אֲחִזֶּת קָבֵר עַמְּכֶם  
וְאַקְבָּרָה מֵתִי מִלְּפָנֵי

"I am a resident alien among you. Give me a burial plot among you so that I may bury my dead before me" (Bereishit 23:4).

When Sarah died, Avraham refused to bury her in the general cemetery. Instead, he wanted to make sure that she received a special plot of land designated as *kever Yisrael*. Nowadays, all Jewish people get buried in a separate cemetery. What is the reason for this?

According to halacha, all religious items used to fulfill mitzvot are placed into two categories. Tefillin, mezuzah and sifrei Torah are labeled as *tashmishei kedusha*, while lulavim, etrogim, and s'chach are labeled *tashmishei mitzvah*. The difference between the two categories is based on the proper way to discard the items. An old lulav can be discarded, but a pair of tefillin must be placed in *sheimost*. Since *tashmishei kedusha* all contain Torah within them, they cannot simply be discarded. Once an item has any Torah inside of it, the Torah is considered to be everlasting. Even the *bayit* of the *tefillin shel rosh*, which only has the letter shin on it, also qualifies as *tashmishei kedushah*. One word, even one letter, of Torah has the significance of Torah.

While Jews are alive and performing mitzvot we have a *tzelem Elokim*. We all have a part of Hashem within us while performing mitzvot. But after one dies and the *tzelem Elokim* is no longer there and the body is no longer performing mitzvot, there should no longer be any requirement to respect the dead body. So why do we?

This is because of the halacha of *tashmishei kedusha*. Because all Jews have been involved in Torah in some regard throughout their lifetime, they receive the special status. Even Jews who never learned a word during their lifetime had already been involved in Torah study before they were born (Niddah 30b). This is why all Jews must be buried in a special cemetery: because we've all been involved in Torah study during our lifetime and receive a special status.

This halacha teaches the significance of being a Jew.

Sometimes we compare ourselves to others. We look at our friends and think that we aren't as smart or observant of mitzvot. This halacha teaches that we are all extremely significant just by being Jewish.

## Physicality vs. Real Substance

Sarah Posner ('24)

Avraham Avinu set the precedent for us to look past superficial beauty and value internal qualities. In this week's parsha, Avraham sends Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. The only requirement Avraham gave Eliezer was that she should not be from the Canaanites:

וְאַשְׁבֵּעַ בָּהּ אֱלֹקֵי הַשָּׁמְמִים וְאֱלֹקֵי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא  
תִּקְחֶחֶת אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי מִבְנֹת הַכָּנְעָנִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב  
בְּקָרְבָּוֹן

"And I will make you swear by Hashem the God of the heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell" (Bereishit 24:3).

Later when Eliezer is praying to Hashem for a sign to see who will be most fitting for a wife, he does not ask for any physical qualities. He exclusively asks for a woman who exemplifies excellent character traits, a woman who will help feed him and his camels water:

וְהִיא הַנְּגָעָר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים הַטִּי וְאַכְזֵב וְאַשְׁתָּה וְאַמְרָה  
שְׂתָה וְגַם גַּמְלִיק אֲשֶׁר קָחָתָה לְעַבְדָּה לִצְחָק וְבָהּ  
אַדְעַ כִּי עֲשִׂית חָסֵד עַמְּדָנִי

And it will be, [that] the girl to whom I will say, 'Lower your pitcher and I will drink,' and she will say, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels,' her have You designated for Your servant, for Yitzchak, and through her may I know that You have performed loving kindness with my master (24:14).

When Rivka comes and does exactly what Eliezer asked for, he knows that she was the one intended for Yitzchak. There is one category of adjectives which is entirely absent from this story but is usually pervasive in the broader world: there is no mention of Rivka's external appearance.

Avraham never states this as a value which Eliezer should look for, and Eliezer never factors it into his decision. If beauty was not a critical factor Eliezer was told to look for, then it should not be something we ourselves hold in such high esteem.

This event takes place shortly after the passing of

Sarah Imeinu. Rav Soleveitchik says that there must be both a man and a woman to lead a nation and build the Jewish people. Avraham recognizes this and that is why he decides that it is time for Yitzchak to marry. We are told that Sarah was “*יפת-מראה*”, beautiful looking, however her physical beauty was not an integral part of her role as our matriarch. If it were, then her successor would have also needed to fit this standard, and Avraham would have told Eliezer to seek out a beautiful woman.

Instead, he was instructed to find a woman whose traits were virtuous as Sarah's. The testament of Rivka being a fitting replacement for Sarah is that the miracles of Sarah lived on through her. Her candles stayed lit from week to week, her dough remained fresh, and the cloud (of Hashem's presence) stayed over her tent. If it were really important that the matriarch of the Jewish people be externally beautiful, then beauty would have been one of Eliezer's priorities and one of Rivka's primary descriptors.

We learn from this what *our* principles and priorities should be. “Don't judge a book by its cover” is a cliche for a reason. It is an ideology that is timeless and should always guide our decisions. Real beauty is not external.

## Words into Action

Ariel Elazar ('25)

In this week's parsha, Efron offers to give Ma'arat HaMachpelah to Avraham for free. Avraham declines and instead offers to buy it for 400 silver pieces, which Efron immediately accepts. Rashi questions how Efron could have such a change of heart and immediately accept such a large sum of money after he offered to give it away for free. He answers that Efron's name is written incompletely here (missing a “i”) to show Efron's greed and dishonesty. Efron didn't even offer to split the high amount of money Avraham offered; rather, he wanted all of it (a relevant example of this situation can be when you offer to pay for dinner for someone, but really hope they don't accept).

This is in contrast to last week's parsha, where Avraham goes above and beyond to give hospitality and a lot of food to strangers that he invited into his home. In this week's parsha, Efron is extremely boastful, and his actions do not support his boasts. His kindness is easier said than done, and therefore he did not fulfill his word of being generous to Avraham. However, we saw the opposite occur in last week's parsha, where Avraham's kindness to the *malachim* spoke louder than any words he might have said.

From this comparison we should learn to be like Avraham and always be inviting and let our actions speak louder than our words. Additionally, we should learn from Efron's mistake to never boast about something that we cannot back up with our actions. Have a great Shabbos!

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