

Chayei Sarah

This week's Torah portion, Parashat Chayei Sarah, "Sarah's Life", is named for one verse of the portion: the first one. The verse reads as follows: This was the life of Sarah: 100 years and 20 years and seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah". Following this, there are 18 verses dealing with Abrahams mourning for Sarah and his purchase of a cave in which to bury her, and then 85 verses about Abraham finding their son a suitable wife, their subsequent love at first sight-affair, Abraham re-marriage to Sarah's old maidservant Hagar who is now Ketura- with whom Abraham fathers 5 more children and ending finally with the death of Abraham. So why name a 104 verse Torah portion in honor of someone who is dead before the first verse even begins? And why call it 'The life of Sarah' and not, 'Sarah: Her legend lives on!', or something else more reflective of what the Torah portion speaks about?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in answer to this question says, "Not always, but often- death and how we face it is a commentary on life and how we live it."

Rabbi Allie Cogan poses the theory that Chayei Sarah may begin with the death of Sarah, but because she taught Isaac how to find his relationship with God, how to be a good husband, and how to be a good partner, the portion reflects her life in all she instilled in Isaac which will ultimately carry on through the Jewish people.

Rabbi Yitzhak Karo (in Toldos Yitzhak) postulates that, "Placing the account of Sarah's death between Rivkah's birth and Yitzhak's marriage reminds us that even on such joyous occasions as a birth or a wedding, one must still remember the day of death. It is the day of death which puts life in its proper perspective."

Oddly enough, I have also found inspiration in one of the most unlikely of places: an old episode of the Twilight zone. Here's the gist as I remember it:

A gentleman woke up early one morning to find his room filled with a little blue people who were removing every single item in his house, one by one. Everything went; furniture, clothing, tchotchkes...even his appliances were not spared the purge. Convinced he was being robbed, the gentleman jumped out of bed yelling at everyone he could find to stop taking his things. He could neither get their attention, nor grab his possessions from their hands. As he ran from room to room helplessly watching as his once comfortably decorated home turned bare at the hands of these strange little blue kleptomaniacs, his anxiety and confusion led to despair. He could neither call the police nor run for help because the phones had been pulled out of the wall and having just woken up, he was in his pajamas and bare feet and all his clothes and shoes had gone the way of the rest of his belongings. Doing the only thing he could do, he bolted outside, and suddenly caught sight of a rotund official looking blue fellow with a clipboard and a bushy mustache, ticking off the gentleman's belongings one by one on a long list. He ran to interrogate this official, but the moment the official

caught sight of the gentleman, he started yelling and waving his arms! "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! YOU CAN'T BE HERE!! HOW DID YOU GET HERE?!" While simultaneously the gentleman was yelling, "WHAT ARE YOU PEOPLE DOING IN MY HOUSE? WHERE ARE YOU TAKING MY THINGS? YOU CAN'T BE HERE!". Through all the waving of arms and yelling over each other the following was revealed: Somehow, the gentleman had slipped between the minutes. Humans- like us- explained the official, live minute to minute, hour by hour, day by day, not giving it much thought. But the little blue people live BETWEEN the minutes. Their job is crucial to our existence. As we go through our days, doing our thing, living our lives, and collecting our things, the blue folk make sure that the stuff of our existence is collected, categorized, checked off, and then put back in its place before each and every minute. They ensure that every item will be at the ready should we need it.

I honestly don't remember how the episode ended, but the IDEA of it made a profound impression on me and has stuck with me all these years. There is an intentionality in what goes on 'between the minutes' in this story. The idea that every item we possess- no matter how often we use it, how old, new, valuable, worthless, sentimental...even those items we don't even remember we have- MUST be put in their places to be carried forward into the next minute, and the next, day after day, year after year. Each has a place in our lives whether we know it or not.

And is it not so, that long after we have moved on from our childhood playthings, they are still a part of us? We remember the décor of our first apartments. We carry with us our first bunkbed, the 70s bellbottoms we wore, and the books we read. Our first car, the songs our grandparents sang to us and our first baseball game.... All long gone, but still with us. Minute after minute.... growing with us....

Does it not follow then, that every thought we have- relevant or not, - every word we speak- consequential or not- and every action we take for better or for worse- carries forward with us in our lives as well? Once we use them, think them, speak and do them; they are ours forever; shaping us, molding us and guiding us as we live our lives.

So maybe Rabbi Sacks is right. That the title 'Sarah's Life' is fitting because we learn who Sarah was as a human being by looking at the way those left behind mourn her. How hard Abraham works to ensure Sarah has a proper resting place, and the lengths he goes to ensure that their son will be given a good match- one, perhaps, that Sarah would be proud of. And perhaps, as Rabbi Cogan says, by the type of woman Isaac falls in love with, and how he and his future wife treat each other once married.

There is power in that first verse of Chayei Sarah. It says that Sarah lived 100 years and 20 years and seven years. She LIVED those years. We see in one single sentence what shapes our entire people. The strength of a woman who wasn't perfect, but who owned her every minute, every day, every year. She carried the burden and the joy of them with her until the end. And by the shadow of her death, as Rabbi Karo teaches, we see the full light of her life in those who survive her.

May each of us live each moment with intention, minute by minute.

Shabbat shalom.

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