

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Chayei Sara
October 30, 2021 *** 24 Cheshvan, 5782

**Please look at end of brochure for exciting events coming up at Kol Rina!!*

Chayei Sara in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3174/jewish/Chayei-Sarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Sarah dies at age 127 and is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron, which Abraham purchases from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver.

Abraham's servant Eliezer is sent, laden with gifts, to Charan, to find a wife for Isaac. At the village well, Eliezer asks G-d for a sign: when the maidens come to the well, he will ask for some water to drink; the woman who will offer to give his camels to drink as well shall be the one destined for his master's son.

Rebecca, the daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel, appears at the well and passes the "test." Eliezer is invited to their home, where he repeats the story of the day's events. Rebecca returns with Eliezer to the land of Canaan, where they encounter Isaac praying in the field. Isaac marries Rebecca, loves her, and is comforted over the loss of his mother.

Abraham takes a new wife, Keturah (Hagar), and fathers six additional sons, but Isaac is designated as his only heir. Abraham dies at age 175 and is buried beside Sarah by his two eldest sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: I Kings 1:1-31

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/585783/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah describes an aging King David, echoing this week's Torah reading, which mentions that "Abraham was old, advanced in days."

King David was aging, and he was perpetually cold. A young maiden, Abishag of Shunam, was recruited to serve and provide warmth for the elderly monarch.

Seeing his father advancing in age, Adoniah, one of King David's sons, seized the opportunity to prepare the ground for his ascension to his father's throne upon the latter's passing — despite King David's express wishes that his son Solomon succeed him. Adoniah recruited two influential individuals — the High Priest and the commander of David's

armies — both of whom had fallen out of David's good graces, to champion his cause. He arranged to be transported in a chariot with fifty people running before him, and invited a number of his sympathizers to a festive party where he publicizing his royal ambitions. The prophet Nathan encouraged Bat Sheva, mother of Solomon, to approach King David and plead with him to reaffirm his choice of Solomon as his successor. This she did, mentioning Adoniah's recent actions of which the king had been unaware. Nathan later joined the Bat Sheva and the king to express support for Bat Sheva's request. King David acceded to their request: "Indeed," he told Bat Sheva, "as I swore to you by the Lord God of Israel saying, 'Surely Solomon, your son, shall reign after me and he shall sit on my throne in my stead,' surely, so will I swear this day."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Kindness of Strangers (Chayei Sarah) by the Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust
<https://rabbisacks.org/chayei-sarah-covenantconversation/>

In 1966 an eleven-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighbourhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, "I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here . . ."

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realise, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were colour-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive

memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*.^[1] The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. "In the Jewish tradition," he notes, such civility is called *chessed* – "the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God." *Civility*, he adds, "itself may be seen as part of *chessed*: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard." To this day, he adds, "I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever."^[2]

I never knew Sara Kestenbaum, but years after I had read Carter's book I gave a lecture to the Jewish community in the part of Washington where she had lived. I told them Carter's story, which they had not heard before. But they nodded in recognition. "Yes," one said, "that's the kind of thing Sara would do."

Something like this thought was surely in the mind of Abraham's servant, unnamed in the text but traditionally identified as Eliezer, when he arrived at Nahor in Aram Naharaim, northwest Mesopotamia, to find a wife for his master's son. Abraham had not told him to look for any specific traits of character. He had simply told him to find someone from his own extended family. Eliezer, however, formulated a test:

Lord, God of my master Abraham, make me successful today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a young woman, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one You have chosen for Your servant Isaac. By this I will know that You have shown kindness [*chessed*] to my master." (Gen. 24:12-14)

His use of the word *chessed* here is no accident, for it is the very characteristic he is looking for in the future wife of the first Jewish child, Isaac, and he found it in Rebecca.

It is the theme, also, of the book of Ruth. It is Ruth's kindness to Naomi, and Boaz's to Ruth, that Tanach seeks to emphasise in sketching the

background to David, their great-grandson, who would become Israel's greatest King. Indeed the Sages said that the three characteristics most important to Jewish character are modesty, compassion, and kindness. [3] Chessed, what I have defined elsewhere as "love as deed," [4] is central to the Jewish value system.

The Sages based it on the acts of God himself. Rav Simlai taught:

"The Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness. It begins with God clothing the naked – "The Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin and clothed them," (Gen. 3:21) – and it ends with Him caring for the dead:

"And He [God] buried [Moses] in the Valley." (Deut. 34:6).

(Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a)

Chessed – providing shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry, assistance to the poor; visiting the sick, comforting mourners and providing a dignified burial for all – became constitutive of Jewish life. During the many centuries of exile and dispersion Jewish communities were built around these needs. There were chevrot, "friendly societies," for each of them.

In seventeenth-century Rome, for example, there were seven societies dedicated to the provision of clothes, shoes, linen, beds and warm winter bed coverings for children, the poor, widows and prisoners. There were two societies providing trousseaus, dowries, and the loan of jewellery to poor brides. There was one for visiting the sick, another bringing help to families who had suffered bereavement, and others to perform the last rites for those who had died – purification before burial, and the burial service itself. Eleven fellowships existed for educational and religious aims, study and prayer, another raised alms for Jews living in the Holy Land, and others were involved in the various activities associated with the circumcision of newborn boys. Yet others provided the poor with the means to fulfil commands such as mezuzot for their doors, oil for the Chanukah lights, and candles for the Sabbath.[5]

Chessed, said the Sages, is in some respects higher even than tzedakah:

Our masters taught: loving-kindness [chessed] is greater than charity [tzedakah] in three ways. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's person. Charity is done only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given both to the poor and to the rich.

Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to the living and the dead. (Talmud Bavli, Succah

49b)

Chessed in its many forms became synonymous with Jewish life and one of the pillars on which it stood. Jews performed kindnesses to one another because it was “the way of God” and also because they or their families had had intimate experience of suffering and knew they had nowhere else to turn. It provided an access of grace in dark times. It softened the blow of the loss of the Temple and its rites:

Once, as R. Yohanan was walking out of Jerusalem, R. Joshua followed him. Seeing the Temple in ruins, R. Joshua cried, “Woe to us that this place is in ruins, the place where atonement was made for Israel’s iniquities.” R. Yohanan said to him: “My son, do not grieve, for we have another means of atonement which is no less effective. What is it? It is deeds of loving-kindness, about which Scripture says, ‘I desire loving-kindness and not sacrifice’” (Hosea 6:6).[6]

Through chessed, Jews humanised fate as, they believed, God’s chessed humanises the world. As God acts towards us with love, so we are called on to act lovingly to one another. The world does not operate solely on the basis of impersonal principles like power or justice, but also on the deeply personal basis of vulnerability, attachment, care and concern, recognising us as individuals with unique needs and potentialities.

It also added a word to the English language. In 1535 Myles Coverdale published the first-ever translation of the Hebrew Bible into English (the work had been begun by William Tyndale who paid for it with his life, burnt at the stake in 1536). It was when he came to the word chessed that he realised that there was no English word which captured its meaning. It was then that, to translate it, he coined the word “loving-kindness.”

The late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say, “When I was young I admired cleverness. Now that I am old I find I admire kindness more.” There is deep wisdom in those words. It is what led Eliezer to choose Rebecca to become Isaac’s wife and thus the first Jewish bride. Kindness brings redemption to the world and, as in the case of Stephen Carter, it can change lives. Wordsworth was right when he wrote that the,

“Best portion of a good man’s [and woman’s] life” is their
“little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love.” [7]

[1] Stephen Carter, *Civility*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, pp. 61-75. [2] *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

[3] *Bamidbar Rabbah* 8:4. [4] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, pp. 44-56.

[5] Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, London, Edward Goldston, 1932, pp. 348-363. [6] *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, 4. [7] From Wordsworth’s poem, ‘Tintern

What was Isaac Doing in the Field? By Jason Rogoff

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/what-was-isaac-doing-in-the-field/>

The patriarch Isaac is one of the most passive biblical characters. He speaks infrequently and seems to stand still while other people feverishly act around him. His presence in Parashat Hayyei Sarah is no exception. After surviving the ordeal of the Akedah, and experiencing the death of his mother, Isaac is nowhere to be found. Abraham buys the burial plot and only Abraham is mentioned as present at Sarah’s burial. Abraham then sends his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac, but again we lack any information as to what Isaac is doing or how he is feeling after successive traumatic life events. Isaac only returns to the story when Eliezer returns with Rebekah and she first sees Isaac. The Torah describes how “Isaac went out [lasuah (לָשׁוּחַ)] in the field toward evening” ([Gen. 24:63](#)). Ironically, one of the few times we hear of Isaac performing an action, the Hebrew verb’s meaning is obscure. This allows for multiple interpretations from commentators and scholars, each of which provides us with an important model for how to cope with and respond to tragedy.

The commentator Abraham ibn Ezra interprets the word to mean “go for a walk.” Biblical scholar and former JTS professor Nahum Sarna explains that this interpretation is based on the Arabic cognate, saha, meaning “to take a stroll.” We can imagine Isaac using this moment at the end of each day to have some time to himself to process the significant life events he had recently experienced. At times, seclusion from others allows us to be in touch with our innermost feelings and reflect on our own needs.

In contrast to this interpretation, Nahmanides prefers a connection to the root for talking, siyah. He explains that Isaac was out in the field with his friends chatting. That is, Isaac found comfort and support in being surrounded by friends.

Rashbam connects Isaac’s action to the word for shrub or plant, siah. He references the creation story: “when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil” ([Gen. 2:5](#)). Rashbam explains that Isaac was out in the field engaging in the creative act of working the land. The proactive deed of generating life and sustenance perhaps served Isaac well as he worked to return his life to a routine.

Rashi, citing the classical rabbinic midrash, suggests that Isaac was out in the field praying. The rabbis base their understanding on [Psalm 102:1](#): “A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea [siho (שׁיח)] before the LORD.” The Babylonian [Talmud Berakhot 26b](#) connects Isaac’s prayer to the establishment of mincha, the afternoon prayer service. According to this view, Isaac turns to God in the aftermath of the Akedah and the death of his mother.

Seeking to understand Isaac’s actions, the medieval commentators offer us four models for coping with trauma and challenges in our lives. This idea takes on a modern idiom in [Shirat Ha-Asavim](#) (“Song of the Grasses”), a beautiful Israeli folk song composed by Naomi Shemer and based on the writings of R. Nahman of Bratzlav. The lyrics compare the individualized nature of prayer to the uniqueness of a single blade of grass: “Know that each and every blade of grass has its own song.” Solitude or companionship, action or prayer: there is no one way to respond to challenges. We all must choose our own path.

Returning to Isaac, the Torah tells us that he indeed ultimately finds the comfort for which he is searching. Rebekah, his new partner, becomes a source of support and love for him: “Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death” ([Gen. 24:67](#)).

(Jason Rogoff is the Academic Director of Israel Programs and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS.)

[Embracing an Overlooked “Patriarch” - Hayyei Sarah 5782 by Rabbi Aviva Richman](#)

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/embracing-overlooked-%E2%80%9Cpatriarch%E2%80%9D#source-11241>

When we reflect on our lineage, who comes to mind? Often, lineage focuses on biological family ties. This is certainly true when we think of the patriarchal triad, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya’akov. But family has always been more complex, as we know from the Torah itself. We are blessed to live in a contemporary moment when we are striving to be more aware of—and honor—broader definitions of family.¹ Some of the people who play the role of family, to ground us and shape us, may not be part of our immediate family at all. In this week’s parashah, we come to know the servant of Avraham (identified as Eliezer) who accepts the task of finding Yitzhak a wife. Rather than viewing him as a mere messenger who carries out Avraham’s bidding, a closer look reveals that this servant is a crucial part of our lineage, even as he is peripheral to the bloodline of the patriarchs.

Before having any biological children of his own, Avraham despaired of the possibility that his servant Eliezer may be his sole heir (Genesis 15:2). Yet, rabbinic traditions emphasize Eliezer as a true heir to Avraham's broader legacy. A midrash relates that Eliezer actively chose to serve Avraham, as opposed to anyone else.² He valued Avraham's path and came to embody his ways. Avraham trusted him to make any decision because Eliezer had cultivated the same virtue as Avraham, "to be in control over his passions (³שולט ביצרו). Eliezer's embodiment of Avraham's legacy is so powerful that according to one tradition his face looked exactly like Avraham's.⁴ The same is taught of Yitzhak, to counter any possible doubt about his biological paternity.⁵ Moulding Eliezer's face like Avraham's and like Avraham's biological son, this teaching concretely embraces Eliezer as part of the family, based not on blood but on deed.

As someone who chose to carry on Avraham's legacy, Eliezer may have actually done so more successfully than Yitzhak. Midrash turns to an unrelated verse about a servant, found in Proverbs, as a key to understanding the complex relationship between Eliezer and Yitzhak:

משלי יז:

עֶבֶד־מִשְׁכִּיל יִמְשֹׁל בְּבֶן מִבְּיַשׁ וּבְתוֹף אֲחִים יִחַלֵּק נַחֲלָה:

Proverbs 17:2

A capable servant will dominate an incompetent son, and share the inheritance with the brothers.

At first this seems to suggest that Eliezer was more competent than Yitzhak, but the midrash pushes back against this connotation.

Rereading the word for "incompetent" as "to put to shame" (mevayesh rather than meivish), it teaches that Yitzhak's willingness to sacrifice himself put everyone else to shame. Yet, a Hasidic interpretation of this midrash resurfaces Eliezer's superiority. R.

Yehudah Leib Alter (known by his commentary as the Sefat Emet) explains that Yitzhak veered from Avraham's path of hesed (overflowing loving kindness) and followed a different path of gevurah (restraint and discipline).⁶ Eliezer, on the other hand, remained steadfastly in Avraham's path of hesed. He singled out kindness as the formative attribute for Yitzhak's future wife (to give water to all the camels) to ensure the continuation of Avraham's legacy.

שפת אמת

וז"ש ימשול בבן מביש שבמעשיו המתיק מדת יצחק בעל כרחו.

Sefat Emet

That is why it says "he will dominate an incompetent son"—through his deeds, he tempered the attribute of Yitzhak against his will.

It is only thanks to Eliezer and how he influenced our ancestral line that Avraham's legacy continued. We see here the important role of a figure on the periphery of the patriarchal lineage. Our lineage depends on Eliezer, by ethos if not by blood.

The Sefat Emet goes further in honoring the important role of this servant's contribution to our own inheritance. He reads the last phrase in Proverbs as "he will distribute inheritance among the brothers" instead of "he will share the inheritance of the brothers,"⁷ focusing not on what he takes but what he gives:

ובתוך אחים יחלק כו' כי הי' במעשיו טובה לכלל ישראל כנ"ל

"And distribute inheritance among the brothers"—because in his deeds there was goodness for all of the people of Israel.

The embrace of Eliezer as part of the fabric of the family isn't just about inviting him in to benefit from chosen family—he also contributes to chosen family in a formative way. The Sefat Emet treats Eliezer as a kind of ancestor in his own right, who played an important role in bequeathing us our legacy.

Eliezer may be an even more accessible and relevant religious role model for us than Avraham. Avraham's relationship with God was sui generis, discovering God on his own, while Eliezer learns about God from a teacher, like we do. Avraham speaks with God in conversation directly, while Eliezer prays indirectly to "the God of Avraham," like we do (Genesis 24:12). Also, even as Eliezer has the instinct to pray to God, he is a skeptical realist. When Avraham reassures him that there will be a divine angel helping him on his mission to find a wife for Yitzhak, Eliezer assumes things might not go according to plan and asks what to do "if the maiden does not consent" to leave home (24:5). He doesn't assume he can rely on divine intervention alone. While we think of Avraham as the pioneer of our religion, we would do well to acknowledge the ways Eliezer carved out the contours of a more indirect and down-to-earth religious path, perhaps more like our own. These teachings about Avraham's servant invite us into a more expansive understanding of what lineage looks like. Remarkably, each time we recite the opening blessing of the Amidah, where mentioning the names of our biblical forebears might reinforce a narrow sense of lineage, we should be aware that we are actually following in the footsteps of Eliezer, the first one who taught us to pray to the God of Avraham.⁸ Invoking words first spoken by Eliezer, we remind ourselves each day to appreciate the fullness of our lineage and bring honor to those who have contributed to all that we each inherit. It is our duty as individuals, as communities, and as a broader society to notice and

honor those who might otherwise remain on the margins when we tell and retell the stories that shape us.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ Over the past several decades there has been an emergence of writing on chosen family and queer family. ² Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 60:2: " אמר כבר קללתו שלאותו האיש בידו, שמא יבוא כושי אחד או ברברי אחד וישתעבד בי, מוטב לי להשתעבד בבת אחר" —because his origins were in the line of Ham, he destined to slavery after the flood (see Genesis 9:25). This notion of "being destined to slavery" is difficult to encounter in our tradition and requires much fuller attention.

³ See Bereishit Rabbah (Theodor-Albeck) 59:2: " שהיה זיו איקונין שלו דומה לו, המושל "

⁴ " See Bereishit Rabbah 59:2. ⁵ Earlier in Bereishit Rabbah 53:2. ⁶ This is based on much earlier Kabbalistic texts that associate the Sefirot (aspects of God in Kabbalah) with biblical ancestors. ⁷ This involves reading it as yehalek in the pi'el, rather than the kal grammatical construction yahlok.

⁸ The phrase in the Amidah that includes the full triad of patriarchs first appears in the scene of Moshe at the burning bush. For a full discussion of this passage, see Elie Kaunfer's teaching, e.g.: <https://hadar.org/torah-resource/new-ways-understand-siddur>. Listen to "Mechalkel Chaim," a niggun for Hayyei Sarah: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLS00kMRA4A>.

Yahrtzeits

Larry Ozarow remembers his mother Mollie Ozarow (Malka bat Avraham Yitzhak va Rais'l) on Tuesday November 2nd (Cheshvan 27)

Coming Up At Kol Rina

Mark your calendars!

Exciting lecture series by Dr. Ruth Calderon

Israel's leading secular scholar of Talmudic narrative, Dr. Ruth Calderon, will speak via Zoom from Israel on three Sundays, November 21, December 12 and December 19, at 1:30 PM. The series, entitled *Holiness Seen and Unseen: Three Talmudic Tales*, is presented by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation Beth Shalom of Bloomington, Indiana and Temple Beth Shalom of Livingston, New Jersey. Further details and Eventbrite registration will follow. Please mark your calendar and plan to attend. This is an outstanding opportunity to hear a strikingly original thinker, provided free of charge and open to all.