

פרשת חיי שרה

OVERVIEW

Sarah dies at the age of 127. She is the first person to be buried in the family plot, the cave of Machpelah, which Abraham had acquired from the sons of Heth. Alone with his son, he sends his faithful servant Eliezer to Bethuel – his nephew and father of Laban and Rivkah – to find a wife for Yitzchak.

The servant carries out his assignment and brings Rivkah back with him. She becomes Yitzchak's wife. His mind at rest, Abraham dies at the age of 175, "rich in years and satiated". Yitzchak and Yishmael bury him in the tomb next to Sarah.

COMMENTARY

The text uses strangely cumbersome language to inform us of Sarah's age: "The life of Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years - these are the years of the life of Sarah". Her life was rich and fulfilled from beginning to end. It was in the real sense a succession of years strung together like pearls on a chain to form a brilliant jewel. Comment the sages: "her years at one hundred were like twenty, and those were like seven". Sarah took the beauty of childhood into mature womanhood and she retained the innocence of a woman of twenty for the rest of her life. Her entire life was devoted to building the future the formation of mankind whose foremother she was destined to become. Girl, young woman, aged mother - each of these periods in her life represented a stage on a road that led to a pre-ordained goal. As a mature woman she would not have to regret the errors of her youth. Old and enfeebled, she will not have to weep for a past lived in vain. It is the great challenge of life - discreetly hinted by our text - to transform every phase of one's existence into the most productive possible, with the

emphasis on the positive human qualities that ennoble and enrich our lives.

Abraham mourns for Sarah but he quickly takes control of himself. Jewish grief always yields to the imperative necessities of life such as the material demands often caused by the death of a close relative. Thus it is Abraham's first task to find a fitting burial site. This is followed by the urgent task of finding a suitable wife for Yitzchak. Both demonstrate the overriding importance of getting on in life at the time of grief and pain. It is significant that the prescribed period of intensive mourning is limited to seven days, no more no less. Death claims its rights but there are limits. We give honor to the dead but we also must learn to turn back courageously to the living.

Eliezer's Assignment

In his search for a wife for his son, Abraham does not turn to a professional "marriage broker". He chooses his longtime servant who is intimately familiar with life in the patriarch's house and who is Yitzchak's confidant from his early youth. Surely Abraham received positive information about the girl in question and he is thus able to instruct Eliezer in detail how to carry out his delicate mission. Among the guidelines is the strict instruction not to agree to a probable request by the parents for Yitzchak to present himself in person to the family. Under no circumstances may Yitzchak leave his parental home.

One could question the motive for Abraham's refusal to allow his son to visit the girl's parents as a polite way of introduction. It appears that the reason is his constant concern to protect his son from any influence that could threaten the purity of his religious ideals. The luxurious and sensual oriental way of life was in stark contrast with the Canaanite living

conditions. Abraham expects Yitzchak's future wife to follow his example of severing her family contacts and turning her back on a dim past and a heathen environment. Her positive response will confirm Abraham's justification of his choice.

### Rivkah

The meeting at the well reveals much about the girl's character. As a simple friendly gesture, she presents a drink to the stranger, a servant of foreign origin whom she addresses as "my lord". She makes no show of her kindness, no conceited prattle "and I will also draw water for your camels". Only after serving the stranger, she tells him that she will take care of his camels, aware of the considerable effort this offer would entail. Then she hurries home to tell her mother of the stranger's arrival. She considers it a matter of self-understood courtesy to receive him as a guest although hospitality was not one of the virtues practiced in her parental home. This is evident from the text: Rivkah's brother rushes towards the stranger only after he had seen the generous presents that Rivkah had received. Guests were welcome in this house if they could be expected to pay handsomely for their stay.

### Negotiations

The text makes it clear that the authority in Behtuel's house lies with the son, Laban. A striking contrast to the atmosphere in Abraham's house where the patriarch's word was law even to a forty-year old son. Eliezer is convinced of his assignment's success. He gives his hosts a detailed account of his encounter with their daughter and the amazing manifestation of the sign he had requested from G-d. For at his arrival he had prayed for a divine sign to

help him determine whether this girl was indeed the one designated by G-d to become Yitzchak's wife. Actually, our sages do not approve of this approach, as it resembles the heathen custom of relying on certain omens prior to action. However, in this case, Eliezer's words may be interpreted as an attempt to ascertain the girl's character traits, especially her spontaneous readiness to perform acts of loving kindness that is to be the mark of the Jewish woman.

It is surprising how quickly Rivkah decides to accept Eliezer's proposal. It seems clear that the family's initial positive response - leaving it to Rivkah to decide - (an unusual deviation from the ancient oriental custom of male prerogative in family matters) was merely a diplomatic move to veil the family's true feeling. Instead of openly stating "we do not wish to give our daughter to a stranger", the family prefers to have her make the decision assuming that she would reject such an unexpected proposal. Almost brusquely she announces without explanation "I will go". Presumably she had waited for an opportunity to leave her unfriendly surroundings and join a family circle where she could freely unfold her natural goodness and love of her fellow men.

- Stunned, the family manages a few words of blessing and then lets her go without further ado. "Let her go on her way, with the stranger - we will have nothing further to do with this affair".

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