

## **Parshat Chayei Sarra, TE Minyan, 11/26/05**

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Today's parsha, Chayei Sarra, gives us the opportunity to stop for a moment, and consider the impact of Avraham's unique destiny on the people that surround him. The drama of the patriarch's life ended in last week's parsha, Vayera, with the successful passage through God's final test: the Akedah, the binding of his son Yitskhak on the altar. Now we have a kind of wrap-up, like at the end of a novel or a movie, when the storyteller ties up the fate of the characters in a few brief sentences. Sarra died at a ripe old age and was buried in Maarat haMachpela. Yitskhak was given a wife and wandered on into the future. Avraham went on to father a squad of children, died full of years, and was buried by his sons.

But it isn't exactly a happy ending. One common interpretation teaches that Sarra's death at the start of the parsha is a result of the shock of learning her husband has taken their son to the slaughter. We read here as well that her death plunges Yitskhak into a state of melancholy, which only begins to lift when he is given Rivka as a wife. And, of course, this wife is acquired for him, given to him by his father as a means of assuring the continuity of his father's vision.

We see the full force of Avraham's sense of mission brought to bear on Yitskhak. A verse in next week's parsha, Toldot, encapsulates the way that Yitskhak's life is bounded by the life's work of his father: (26:18) "And Yitskhak digged again the wells of his father, which they had digged in the days of Avraham his father...and he called their names by which his father had called them."

Yitskhak never really escapes the boundaries laid around him by his father's legacy. His story lacks the boldness of his father's, or the adventurousness of his son Ya'akov's. He never even leaves the land of ca'naan. Some commentators suggest that he is unable to overcome the trauma of the Akedah, unable to recover from the vision of betrayal and mortality that he sees in the gleam of his father's knife, and so his life is stunted, and deformed. Avraham's triumph is Yitskhak's inhibition.

But the Torah tells us that even though Yitskhak only uncovers what his father has already dug, he finds new water in the old wells, both literally and figuratively. Again, in parshat Toldot, as Yitskhak and his servants restore the wells the Philistines have stopped up, we are told: (26:19) "And Yitskhak's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of living waters. [mayim khayim]" We know this is new water, because the Philistines instantly contest it,

not willing to cede it to Yitskhak as an ancestral right. Yitskhak finds access, somehow, to a source of vitality, of nourishment that eluded his father.

In the same chapter of Toldot (I promise I'll get back to Chayei Sarra eventually) we read an episode that speaks more metaphorically to the idea of finding new water in old wells. Yitskhak and Rivka, fleeing a famine, come to live in Gerar, the Philistine land ruled by Avimelech. In an almost exact reenactment of a scheme his father pulled twice, Yitskhak passes Rivka off as his sister, in order to spare his own life. But whereas Avraham and Sarra were delivered from their straits through the direct intervention of God, Yitskhak and Rivka's salvation is more mundane, if not less miraculous: (26:8) "Avimelech king of the Philistines looked out a window, and behold, Yitskhak was sporting with his wife Rivka." The Hebrew word translated as "sporting", *mi-tsa-khek*, has the same root as Yitskhak: *tso-khak*, meaning laughter. Its meaning here clearly has erotic connotations. It is something Yitskhak shares with his wife, and which serves as evidence of their marriage. We could call it a kind of mirthful aspect of the life force, a playful desire, an irresistible component of Yitskhak's character that he manifests even here in a life and death situation, and which earns him and his wife the full protection of the king. It has the sustaining power in his life that the plagues of God had in the life of his father. And it is the gift of his mother.

Earlier in Bereshit, three angels appear to Avraham, to announce that he and his wife, both "well stricken with age" will have a son. We read: (18:12) "va-teets-khak Sarra bi-kirbah." "And Sarra laughed within herself," or, "Sarra laughed in her innards." I don't even think it's too far-fetched to translate this as "And Sarra laughed in her womb." Sarra's response to her situation, to being told that after so many withering years with a so-called godly man she is to have a son when they are both passed their time, is not pure bitterness. Her laughter in the face of pain, her spontaneous laughter in the face of the absurdity of God's plan, is a sign of emotional fertility. And if it is God who places life in her barren womb, it is her own fertile soul that sustains that life, and names it Yitskhak.

Close to the end of today's parsha, after one of the more romantic passages in the entire Torah, when Yitskhak and Rivka's eyes meet across the width of a field just before the evening, we read: (24:67): "And Yitskhak brought her into his mother Sarra's tent, and took Rivka, and she became his wife; and he loved her. And Yitskhak was comforted for his mother." Rivka is the wife his father has acquired for him. She is, on one level, the ultimate symbol of the role he plays in his father's plan. But at the same time, there is a discomfort in his soul that she eases, a longing that she fulfills. We can read this like Freud, and say that she was just a surrogate mother to an immature man, or we can be more generous.

Yitskhak suffers the loss of his mother inordinately hard, because she is the force that carries him through the fate imposed upon him by his father. Without her, at first, he is lost. But in meeting Rivka, in choosing to love her, in bringing her into his mother's tent, he realizes, not that she is a replacement for Sarra, but that the power he felt emanating from his mother has entered into him, as well. He gains the ability to find laughter in his fate.

Avraham strode through the Torah like a master of his own fate. His iron faith in God gave him the strength to leave his homeland and the house of his father, to claim a new land and to dig new wells. But without Yitskhak, and the tradition of Sarra that survived in him, these wells would have run dry. Though we may find Avraham's stridency easier to comprehend than the relative silence of the son he left in his wake, in "Chayei Sarra" we are invited to reflect on the power of Yitskhak's response to life, and to appreciate his grace. Because we are all, at one time or another, circumscribed. Because we all know moments when our only choices are to love, to laugh, or to wither.