

Chaye Sarah  
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November 22, 2008

One of my fondest memories of growing up was listening to a story on one of my mother's old 78 records. It was called, "The Little House." The house, which was out in the country, was very happy when a young couple who were recently married, moved in. They raised a family and there was much joy. As time went on, the city gradually encroached upon the house. There was noise from cars honking, dust blowing, and many more people around. Eventually, with their children grown, the couple moved out. The city kept getting larger and larger and pretty soon the buildings next to the house were so tall that the house never saw the sun. The pollution was awful. The paint was peeling and it was badly in need of repair. It was so unhappy. One day a big flat moving truck pulled up in front, the house was loaded on it and moved out of the city and back to the country. Now the house could breathe fresh air again and feel the warmth of the sun. Another young couple moved in, fixed it up and started a family. The little house had come home.

I loved this story, not just because the ending was happy, but because it took me through a whole gamut of emotions – joy, worry, sadness, hope and finally happiness once more. I don't think it would have been the same if the story had remained joyful throughout. There was something about going through the dark times that made the ending so much sweeter. Interestingly, it wasn't important to me to have the original family move back. I understood that that wasn't possible; that they had gone on into a new phase of their lives. Just the fact of having fresh air, sunshine and laughter, even though it was a new family, was enough for me to appreciate the ending. The story taught me that even though things change and that there is loss, there can also be renewal. Life really is a cycle. This teaching is beautifully exemplified in this week's Torah portion.

The name of the portion is *Chaye Sarah*. When most people hear those words, the meaning they attribute to it is, "the death of Sarah." While it is true that we do indeed learn of Sarah's death in this *parashah*, the words, *chaye Sarah*, literally translate, "the lifetime of Sarah." *Chaye* is a derivative of *chai*, which we all know means "life." It is interesting that this mix-up occurs so often. It is almost like life and death are separate from each other, disconnected, Sarah's life having been discussed in the previous two portions, and her death in this one. In fact, however, this is not true. Judaism teaches us that death is a part of life, and no where is this principle better illustrated than in this portion.

The opening line tells us that Sarah lived 127 years. This is the combination of 120, which was considered the ideal life span, and 7, which is a sacred number. The number 127 is actually expressed as 100 years and 20 years and 7 years. Rashi tells us that this means all her years were equally good. We know from our own experience that life has its ups and downs; some times are special, others are quite painful. Since it is not natural to have equally good years, there is something to be learned from the peculiar way the text is expressed. Sarah's life was a gift from God. She was truly a righteous person. According to an explanation on Proverbs, of the twenty-two biblical women worthy of the term, "women of valor," only Sarah's age is given. From this we learn that Sarah was the greatest of them; a person to be emulated. This is why we hear about her death in connection with her lifetime. The principles her life teach us are timeless: loyalty, hospitality, concern for others. Sarah's spirit lives on despite her

death. When we say *kaddish* and attend *yizkor* services, it is a way of thanking God for the gift of life and the continuing influence in our lives of the person who has died.

After Sarah's death, Abraham mourns her. This is to be expected. They spent a lifetime together full of joys and sorrows. But the text doesn't stop with his grief. It goes on to tell us in great detail how Abraham rose up, negotiated a burial site among strangers and buried Sarah. Later we learn that he takes a new wife, Keturah, and has six more sons. Once again, the details of the text reveal the teaching that is there for us. There is value in the rituals and customs of Jewish mourning practices. They are there to help us face the reality of our loss and find comfort with friends. Abraham's grief was not endless. He didn't stop functioning or ignore his responsibilities. In spite of his sadness, he accepted the loss of Sarah, attended to the task of her burial and continued with his life. Abraham serves as a model for us to understand that death is not the end for the mourner. As a matter of fact, Judaism also teaches us that dwelling too long on our loss embitters our hearts and is harmful to ourselves and others around us. Going through the grieving process is what gives us the strength to go on and to incorporate the loss into our lives. To quote Ecclesiastes:

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven:

A time for being born and a time for dying...

A time for weeping and a time for laughing,

A time for wailing and a time for dancing...

Death and life go hand in hand.

The second half of the *parshah* tells the story of how Abraham sent his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son, Isaac. The servant has the difficult task of discerning the right woman for his master. He encounters Rebecca who is not only beautiful, but willing to provide enough water for him and his camels. Rebecca is willing to leave her family and so the servant brings her back with him. She and Isaac are married. Isaac loves her and finds comfort in his marriage from the death of his mother.

At first glance this appears to be a whole new story. Certainly it introduces new characters as well as teaching us about beauty and the meaning of love. But this section is also connected to the beginning. Rebecca replaces Sarah as the next matriarch and Isaac becomes the next patriarch after the death of Abraham. There is continuity. Life goes on. People are able to find happiness despite enormous change and upheaval in their lives. Just like in the story of the little house, good things follow even what appears to be the direst of situations. And no matter what happens, God is with us.

Sometimes words of Torah seem so obscure. How can events that took place in an entirely different context from our own, shed meaning on our lives today? Yet, after delving into the text and examining it below the surface, there is always something relevant; something we can take from it that enriches us. Studying Torah can truly illuminate our lives. In conclusion, let me quote from Rabbi Harold Kushner. "Hillel's last words – 'go and study' – are not the last words on the question of what Judaism asks of us. We should study; Judaism has always insisted that knowledge has the power not only to make people smart but to make them good. Having studied, we should commit ourselves to live differently as a result of what we have learned. And having resolved to live differently, we should then go forth to bless God's world and sanctify it."