

death. Although we do not know from the text if Abraham was inconsolable, we are told that he actively mourns his wife. We also know that Abraham goes on a quest, not to have Sarah restored to life but to find a suitable place to bury her. (Gen. 23:3–16)

Recent developments in psychiatry and neurobiology show that a quest, or what is called the “searching mechanism,” is normal and perhaps crucial to the grieving process. Searching usually occurs unconsciously or symbolically, and may even appear logistical in nature. For instance, many people find themselves picking up the telephone to call a loved one to tell them good news only to realize that the person is no longer alive. Some people embark on a trip to uncover family roots, either by physically visiting the birthplace of deceased ancestors or searching online through genealogy websites. Some people search for answers about the cause and details of death.

Through this searching, our minds and bodies try to fill the void that results from the loss of a loved one. I have heard many anecdotes of perfectly logical bereaved people embarking on some kind of search in the hopes that they would actually find and be reunited with their spouse or child. Yet, we know that this is not possible. However, it seems that the strong drive to be reunited allows us to take the first difficult steps forward, when we lift ourselves off of the ground, as Abraham did, literally or figuratively. Much like the woman in the Buddhist parable and Abraham, we come to terms with the reality of the loss as we search and experience disappointment. Hopefully, we eventually find ourselves walking down a path toward peace and prosperity.

Parashat Hayyei Sarah 5775

פרשת חיי שרה תשע"ה



Who Inherits Abraham?

By Rachel Rosenthal, PhD candidate in Rabbinic Literature and faculty in the Nishma Summer of Torah Study program, JTS

It is a well-known, if vaguely uncomfortable, psychological phenomenon that when looking for a partner, people are often attracted to those who are similar to their parents in appearance and personality. It is easy to see the logic behind this; when planning our futures, we seek that which is familiar to us from our pasts. This notion is often thought of as a modern phenomenon, reflecting a time when people choose their own mates. However, closer examination dates this concept back to the Torah, starting with the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca.

At first glance, it would seem that Rebecca appears on the scene as a replacement for Sarah. It is not until Sarah's death at 127, recorded at the beginning of this week's parashah, that Abraham begins to occupy himself with finding a wife for Isaac. He tells his servant—identified in the midrash as Eliezer—to go back to Nahor, his homeland, to find Isaac a wife from the same community from which he found Sarah. And toward the end of the parashah, after Isaac and Rebecca have finally met, the Torah tells us, “And Isaac took her to the tent of Sarah his mother, and he took Rebecca and she became his wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was comforted about his mother” (Gen. 24:67). It is the arrival of Rebecca that allows Isaac to come to terms with the loss of Sarah.

Certainly, logic would suggest that Rebecca is to accept the role that Sarah played as a complement to the role that Isaac is to inherit from Abraham. A patriarch requires a matriarch, someone who can carry his family's legacy through to the next generation. However, a closer reading of Genesis 24 suggests the possibility of another, less-conventional possibility. Perhaps Rebecca does not come to replace Sarah. Perhaps her true role is to replace Abraham.

As much as Hayyei Sarah marks the beginning of the Isaac narrative, it is really Rebecca's story. When Eliezer sets out to find Isaac's wife, he beseeches God, “And let it be that the young woman to whom I say, Put

down your vessel so that I may drink, and she says, Drink, and I will also give to your camels to drink, let her be the one you have appointed for your servant Isaac” (Gen. 24:14). Although the classical commentators are bothered by Eliezer’s establishment of conditions for finding the correct wife, especially without affirmation from God, Eliezer is not establishing a set of arbitrary parameters.

Indeed, it is clear that this is not a haphazard test. As the medieval Italian commentator Seforno points out, although Eliezer gives Rebecca gifts before he knows her identity, he does not do so until she has finished watering the camels. It is not until he knows that this mystery woman will not ask for anything in return that he can be sure that she is the one he has been seeking. To quote Seforno, Eliezer needs to know that *hayu kol maaseha al tzad hahesed hagamor*—all of her actions were in the realm of complete *hesed* (loving-kindness). It is the first step in finding the woman who will be able to inherit the tradition of his master.

The parallels between Abraham and Rebecca are clear. Just as Abraham is known primarily for his commitment to *hesed*, so too Eliezer’s first interaction with Rebecca is one of *hesed gamor*, complete *hesed*. Just as Abraham rushes out to welcome the strangers who come to visit him in Genesis 18, Rebecca offers Eliezer lodging in her father’s home. Just as Abraham was asked to leave his homeland right away, without knowing where he was going, Eliezer asks Rebecca to accompany him right away. And just as Abraham goes forth without comment or complaint when he hears God’s command, Rebecca says only one word—“*eilekh*” (“I will go”)—before setting off on her journey (Gen. 24:58).

In many ways, it makes sense that Rebecca would be so similar to Abraham. First, it is Abraham and not Isaac who instructs Eliezer about the qualities in a possible mate for Isaac. Second, as much as Isaac is the inheritor of his father, it is clear from the Torah that the two are not especially alike. Where Abraham sets out on epic journeys, Isaac never leaves Canaan. While God speaks to Abraham to explain the divergent fates of his two sons, it is Rebecca, not Isaac, who is told about the future of Jacob and Esau. While Abraham is deeply involved in the world, engaging in wars and making pacts with kings, Isaac often seems more involved with otherworldly matters, meditating in the field and literally losing his ability to see what is around him. And where the Rabbis traditionally associate Abraham with the value of *hesed*, Isaac is linked to *gevurah*, the attribute of strength and judgment. Therefore, to allow Isaac to fully become himself, his wife must be able to emulate his father’s character.

In Bereishit Rabbah on Hayyei Sarah, Parashah 59, the Midrash tells us

that at the time that Abraham sent Eliezer to find Rebecca, God sent two angels to help: one to guide Eliezer in the right direction and one to ensure that Rebecca would go out to meet him. This midrash serves to emphasize the importance of the match between Rebecca and Isaac, but also to affirm the centrality of Rebecca as a character unto herself. Far from being a simple tool in her husband’s pursuit of his fate, Rebecca too has a crucial role in the unfolding of the history of the Jewish people. It is not any woman who could have been Isaac’s wife. Both Abraham and Eliezer understand that beyond simply coming from Abraham’s family, the right woman must have distinctive traits and a strong personality of her own. Ultimately, Eliezer identifies Rebecca not because of her relatives, but because of the traits she embodies. So perhaps Rebecca—fearless but kind; a daughter, sister, wife and mother, but also an individual; inheritor of Abraham and institutor of her own vision—can teach us to look beyond our set roles and expectations and instead see the people we really are and can become, beneath the surface.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z”l) Hassenfeld.

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Abraham’s Search: A Hallmark of Human Grief

By Allison Kestenbaum, clinical pastoral education supervisor, JTS

In an oft-told Buddhist story, a woman loses her son and is inconsolable. She approaches the Buddha and begs him to bring her son back. He instructs her to go around the village from house to house, seeking a single mustard seed from any home where no one has died. If she can find such a mustard seed, he will restore her son to life. So the woman knocks on each door and finds that there is no household that has not experienced loss. She returns without the mustard seed but with an enlarged awareness of the universality of loss that leads her to a path of compassion and peace. —**Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair***

When I encounter this parable (often) in my work as a chaplain and pastoral educator, I am struck with the parallels to Abraham’s path after Sarah’s