

the son of the inebriated woman! Were it not for the angel you would have been slaughtered?' Isaac replied, 'Yes.' At that, she screamed six times . . . she had not finished doing this when she died." And so, one may argue that these Torah readings are placed perfectly together: Sarah dies as a consequence of hearing the news of her son's near sacrifice. Yet, how else may we understand the placement of these narratives?

Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen writes,

This *parashah* [Hayyei Sarah] comes, as it were, to complete the previous *parashah* [of Vayera]. For one may allege that Abraham is a brutal person; he took his only son to be bound on the altar. Perhaps, they will claim, that Abraham is a hard, uncaring soul; he is a man that lives in splendid isolation with his God and knows nothing of familial love and warmth. Along comes this *parashah* describing the death of Sarah and the "matching" of Isaac with his mate and all of this completes the portrait of the "binding." The deed of the "binding of Isaac" receives greater texture and appreciation as the depth of Abraham's humanity and sensitivity is revealed. In the story of the *Akedah*, we know nothing of Abraham's heart, nothing of the pangs and suffering of his soul—under which Abraham was tested as he escorted his only child "to one of the mountains [that God would show him]." Only now, when Abraham the husband and father are truly revealed to us, can we understand to what extent Abraham was a lover full of mercy and emotional depth. It is this person that journeyed to do the bidding and command of his God and Creator. (*Likrat Shabbat* [trans. from the Hebrew], 26)

Reading through the "binding of Isaac," it is all too easy to come away with the impression of Abraham as an uncaring father wholly disconnected from family. As Rav Shmuel Avidor HaCohen sensitively explains, Parashat Hayyei Sarah rounds out the picture of Abraham. Far from being one blinded by faith and insensitivity, he is one who cares deeply. While it is regrettable that this gentle, loving portrait comes in the context of Sarah's death, we cannot discount this caring image of the patriarch. He is a tortured and loving soul—caught between his ties to family and his commitment to God and the future of a nation. May Avidor HaCohen's wisdom lead us to judge our ancestor in a gentler, fuller light.

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Hayyei Sarah 5780

חיי שרה תש"ף



A Family Reconciles

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Parashat Hayyei Sarah is bookended with the accounts of the deaths of the two first Jews, Sarah and Abraham. The early part of the text spends much time describing the process by which Abraham secured land for Sarah's burial and then buried her. At the end of the *parashah*, we learn that Isaac and Ishmael buried their father Abraham together. Though the Torah describes these brothers' unity in concise and matter-of-fact language, they and their extended family must have worked hard to achieve reconciliation.

The last time the Torah describes Isaac and Ishmael together was the day of the celebration of Isaac's weaning. Sarah had taken note of Ishmael, became protective of her son, and ordered Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their home. (Gen. 21:9) Early the next morning Abraham sent them on their way, and the text does not tell of the brothers having contact afterwards until Abraham's death when they bury him together. The text is vague about how Isaac and Ishmael reunited and reconciled.

The Torah does not provide us with information about the relationship between the brothers during the intervening years. Had Isaac and Ishmael not seen each other in the years since their separation? Do they know of the traumas each had experienced? Did Isaac know about Ishmael's expulsion by their father from his home and abandonment in the wilderness? Did Ishmael know about Isaac's near-death at the hand of their father during the *Akedah* (the Binding of Isaac)? Perhaps each of them greeted their reunion with anticipatory dread, as did the next generation of brothers, Jacob and Esau, who had an even more explicitly fraught relationship that originated in the womb. Leading up to their crucial encounter after years of estrangement, Jacob was even afraid that their reunion would result in someone's death, yet

they interacted with unexpected grace. Offering gifts to Esau, Jacob tells his estranged brother that “to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” (33:10) Later, the twins would meet again as they came together to bury their father, Isaac (33:29).

According to Monica McGoldrick, a Family Systems Theory therapist and educator, “death and other major loss pose the most painful adaptational challenge for it [i.e. the family]—as a system—and for each surviving member. Its impact reverberates through all the relationships in a family.” When a change takes place in a family through an addition (marriage, birth, adoption) or subtraction (divorce, death), it opens up the possibility for both positive and negative change. McGoldrick writes, “loss can strengthen survivors, bring them closer together, inspire their creativity, and bring out their strengths.” Conversely, “It can also leave behind a destructive legacy of dysfunctional coping patterns.” Reading for multiple members of the extended family provides us insight into how together they experienced their grief.

The Midrash takes notes of a curiosity in the text: when Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham (and when Jacob and Esau reconcile), the younger brother is mentioned first. The Midrash interprets this to mean that Ishmael engaged in a process of *teshuvah*, repentance. (Gen. Rabbah 30:4, 38:12, BT *Bava Batra* 16b) One may read the word *teshuvah* as “repentance” or simply as “return.” Ishmael returned—to his estranged brother. For reasons we do not know, he gestured for his brother to lead the way.

Other midrashim assume an earlier reunion—and not only of Isaac and Ishmael but of numerous family members. After Sarah’s death, Abraham lives 35 more years, and the Torah does not tell us explicitly what he did during this period. Late in our parashah, we read that “Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah (25:1). Rashi explains that Keturah is identical to Hagar: *Keturah* was her name, and *Hagar* (creatively revocalized to “*ha-ger*,” “the stranger”) was a description of her status within the context of Sarah and Abraham’s household. Genesis Rabbah explains that she was named Keturah “because her deeds were as beautiful as spices [*ketoret*].” (61:4). The descendants of Abraham and Keturah include merchants of spices (See Gen. 37:25).

The home that Hagar established is a central location at this time of change in the family. After joining Ishmael in burying Abraham, Isaac “settled near Beer-lahai-roi,” the location central to Hagar’s story, where

Ishmael’s birth was foretold (Gen. 16). It was in this location that Hagar became the first woman with whom God speaks directly. Unlike her later expulsion in the wilderness, during which she cries out, in this experience she speaks out and gives voice and story to her experience (16:8). She bestows a name upon God: “You Are El-roi,” which the Torah explains as reflecting her own transformation from her encounter with God: “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!” (v.13)

Hagar is a supporting character. Not clearly identified, she hovers throughout this parashah. She is the one who was seen and felt seen. Transformed, she has the ability to see, hear, and know others. Through their relationships with her, Isaac and Ishmael experience healing from their traumas and reconciliation with each other. Jonathan Shay, MD, a psychiatrist who works with veterans, writes that “healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community.” (*Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, 4). Claiming her name as Keturah, Hagar did just this. She creates a place of refuge, where one can be seen genuinely, where strangers become known, loss can be mourned, and a family can turn toward its future.

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A Taste of Torah



From Suspense to Sensitivity

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

Immediately after the drama of the binding of Isaac, we read Parashat Hayyei Sarah. Why the juxtaposition of these two parshiyot? Notably, at the end of the trial of Genesis 22, Isaac is absent. We read that “Abraham returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beersheba” (Gen. 22:19). What may account for Isaac’s absence at the close of the story?

Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 20:2 suggests that Isaac returned to his mother: “She asked him, ‘Where have you been my son?’ Isaac answered, ‘My father took me and led me on a terrible journey . . .’ At this, she said, ‘Woe upon