

Rachel Cohn - Senior Sermon - Parashat Hayyei Sarah

When I first moved to Rhode Island, I learned that directions often come with a side of nostalgia.

“The JCC is right past where Marvel Gymnasium used to be,” someone might say.

“Turn left into the plaza where Benny’s used to be.”

Even at my shul, our Jr. Congregation meets in the room known as “the former Gift Shop” (it hasn’t been a gift shop in many years!). This quirky, perplexing custom is more than just nostalgia, though; it means we can give directions not just across space, but also across time. It is our way of saying to the people and institutions that once were: you were here. You mattered. You still do matter. Each “used to be” breathes a bit of new life back into a place and the people who once called it home.

Parshat Hayyei Sarah also tells a story of new life. Despite beginning with the death of our matriarch, Sarah, it is actually about new beginnings. In *Hayyei Sarah*, Yitzhak reappears in the text after a long silence following the Akeidah. While much of his healing process is hidden, here we witness a piece of his recovery. Unpacking the process of Yitzhak’s re-emergence in *Chayyei Sarah* offers us profound teachings about facing loss and the possibility of embracing life.

According to ***Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer***, Yitzhak’s return is not just symbolic but literal: he had actually died and was revived. The midrash tells us:

Rabbi Yehudah said: Yitzhak’s soul left his body and then returned [while he and his father were on Mt. Moriah]. And at that moment, Yitzhak stood up, opened his mouth, and said: Baruch Atah Hashem, M’hayyei HaMeitim – Blessed are You, Holy One, who revives the dead.¹

Yet, I see Yitzhak’s post-Akedah reality as a more metaphorical *m’hayyei ha-meitim*—a messier version, in which he cannot simply go back to life as it was. He must learn to live again in a reality so altered that it feels like a second life. Just as we say *m’hayyei ha-meitim* when greeting a friend we haven’t seen in over a year, mindful of how much may have changed, Yitzhak, too, begins the slow, uncertain work of returning to life.

What is his first step in this daunting endeavor? The first glimpse we get of Yitzhak’s return finds him in a field, praying. We read:

¹ Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 31:10

וַיִּצְחָק בְּאֶרְבָּא מִבּוֹא בְּאֵר לְהֵהָרִי - Yitzhak had come from the well of Be'er lehai ro'i.

According to Sforno, Yitzhak had gone to this site because of the famous well where Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, prayed and encountered God. Its name, meaning "well of the living one seeing me," points to a place of divine encounter and spiritual sustenance. Before he could fully regroup, Yitzhak had to access that same renewal. Perhaps going to this well specifically, where others before him had called out to God in a time of crisis and recommitted to life, allowed him to re-commit to his own life.

We next see Yitzhak,

לְשָׁוֹם בַּשְׂדָה, conversing with God in the field.

Sforno notes that Yitzhak had already prayed at the well, but *he still pauses to pray again in the field*. It's as if he's on a spiritual road trip — catching every landmark and prayerful memento along the way. At each stop, he re-grounds himself and slowly re-engages with the world. While he may never fully recognize the Yitzhak that "used to be," he opens himself to becoming Yitzhak 2.0, the version of himself that *could be*. At this moment, Yitzhak looks up and sees Rivkah. He is able to begin a new relationship and a new chapter in life. This connection - strong enough for her to fall right off her camel at first sight of Yitzhak! - doesn't erase past trauma; rather, it provides an opening for him to continue moving forward, to build a life and -- eventually -- a legacy.

What allows for Yitzhak's return, this process of *m'hayyei ha-meitim*, to unfold at this moment? Whether by coincidence or inspiration, his reemergence comes just after the marking of Chayyei Sarah — the death of his mother. In that alignment, we also glimpse a second life for her.

The parashah opens:

מֵאַה שָׁנָה וָעֶשֶׂרִים שָׁנָה וָשָׁבַע שָׁנִים; שְׁנִי חֵי שָׂרָה וַיָּקַיֵּן חֵי שָׂרָה:

Sarah's life was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; these were the years of Sarah's life.²

² Everett Fox translation

Note that the phrase “*hayyei Sarah*” is repeated at the beginning and end of the verse. What is the significance of the repetition? A midrash in Bereishit Rabbah³ teaches that the doubling comes to tell us: the lives of the righteous are beloved by God—both in this world and in the World to Come. In other words, Sarah lived two lives: one in this world, and one beyond. We also come to see her “second life” reflected on earth, in the legacy she leaves behind: through the family she nurtured, the home she built, and the story she continues to shape even after her death.

Rashi teaches:

“As long as Sarah was alive, a lamp burned in her tent from one Shabbat eve to the next, her dough was blessed, and a cloud of divine presence rested above the tent. When she died, these miracles ceased. But when Rivkah arrived, they returned.”⁴

The place where Sarah's tent used to be becomes the home that Yitzhak and Rivkah now share. In his willingness to step into new life, Yitzhak not only brings himself back, but he brings his mother's memory back to life as well. So, in Rhode Island Terms, if someone asked, “what is the address for Yitzhak and Rivka's housewarming party?” you could say: “The tent where Sarah used to live.” Her tent went from standing still in time, a silent monument, to a living testament to her legacy. As Yitzhak begins to build a family and continue the promise of the Jewish people, he brings life to the memory of his mother as well.

Imagine, for a moment, how powerful this transformation might have been! The first time the Shabbat lamp was rekindled, it probably felt like Sarah was right there with them. The smell of fresh baked bread and sound of laughter and chatter over shared meals helped transform the stillness of her absence to the living memory of the festive moments when she made that same recipe. Together, Rivka and Yitzhak welcomed Sarah's memory to continue living with and through them. Sarah's “second life,” unlocked by Rivka's presence and Yitzhak's openness to healing, has such a significant impact on Yitzhak that it helps him embrace his life anew.

Today, and every day, I remember my own mother, Sarah Hurwitz Cohn, zikhrona livrakha. There are countless ways I see the echoes of her life still so present amidst the people

³ Bereshit Rabbah 58:1

⁴ Rashi quoting Genesis Rabbah 60:16

and places where she once was. When I hug my children, and at each holiday and milestone that she cannot be here for, I feel the tug of “this is where Grandma Sarah used to be.” When I can hear her response to a funny moment in my head, or when I make her honey cake recipe, I invite her into my life in new ways. I hope that my leadership continues to serve as a testament to who she taught me to be - kind, and fierce, and never willing to give up for the people in my care.

The poet Mary Oliver implores of us, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” At the risk of being slightly chutzpadik and editing Mary Oliver...she is almost right. If we are lucky, we can have more than one wild and precious life: The one we are living now, and the one others will create in our memory, woven together by the pieces of our legacy that we leave to them.

What would it look like for you to start living your legacy today? For every place you live and work, ask yourself: what could I do today, so that someone, someday will say: “This is the place where Rachel used to serve as Rabbi. This is the home where Rachel was a loving Imma” This is the classroom where Rabbi Cohen and Rabbi Ruskay and Cantor Levin Goldberg taught us to be rabbis and cantors. What can we start doing *now* so that someday our loved ones will navigate the world using the landmarks we leave behind? We should unabashedly shine our light in the world so there is no question where we have left our mark, creating a blueprint of our legacy as we walk through life.

In the end, Yitzhak and Sarah have the same message for us: live for this life and our next life. Baruch Atah Hashem, m’hayyei ha-meitim / Blessed are you, Holy One, who brings us back to life, even in the face of loss, and allows us to begin again.