TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Hayyei Sarah 5787 חיי שרה תשפ"ז

The People Who Love Us Will Miss Us

Rabbi/Cantor Israel M. Gordan, Coordinator of JTS Rabbinical and Cantorial Programs in Israel, JTS Alum (RS, CS, WDS)



In 2019, actor Keanu Reeves appeared on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. During a conversation that had taken an unexpectedly philosophical turn, Colbert asked Reeves a rather extraordinary question for a late-night talk show: "What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?"

Reeves paused, considered the question, and answered simply: "I know that the ones who love us will miss us."

Colbert, who is rarely at a loss for words, sat silently for a moment before reaching across his desk to shake Reeves's hand. I recommend looking it up on YouTube to see the exchange.

It was a remarkable answer, not least because Reeves managed to sidestep one of humanity's oldest theological questions without dismissing it. Rather than speculate about what happens to the dead, he turned our attention to the living. Whatever happens after death, we know something about what happens here: the people left behind grieve. They remember. They miss those they have lost.

I found myself thinking about that exchange while reading this week's parashah, Hayyei Sarah. The title itself presents a familiar paradox. Although it means "the life of Sarah," the portion opens with her death. But perhaps the title is more appropriate than it initially appears. Sarah's death is announced in the opening verses, yet her presence continues to be felt throughout the narrative.

Abraham must negotiate for a place to bury her. A servant must travel hundreds of miles to find a wife for her son. And Isaac, who has been largely absent from the narrative since the Akedah, must find a way to continue living in a world without his mother.

Sarah is gone. But her story, and the lives shaped by her presence, are far from over.

One of the most poignant verses in the parashah comes at the very end of Genesis 24, when Isaac meets Rebecca. After the lengthy account of Abraham's servant finding Rebecca and bringing her back to Canaan, the Torah tells us:

"וַיְבִאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֹהֱלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־רִבְקָה וַתְּהִי־לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַיֶּאֱהָבֶהָ וַיִּנָּחֵם יִצְחָק אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ"

> *"Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (Genesis 24:67).*

There is so much packed into this single verse. Isaac brings Rebecca into his mother's tent. He marries her. He loves her. And only then does the Torah tell us that he is comforted after Sarah's death.

Why does the Torah connect Isaac's marriage to his grief over his mother? Why is this the moment when we finally hear something about how Isaac has been coping with her absence?

Rashi, drawing on Bereishit Rabbah 60:16, offers a beautiful interpretation. During Sarah's lifetime, three blessings characterized her tent: a lamp remained lit from one Shabbat to the next, blessing was found in the dough, and a cloud of divine presence hovered above. When Sarah died, these blessings disappeared. When Rebecca entered the tent, they returned.

But the original midrash includes a fourth detail that Rashi leaves out:

"כל ימים שהיתה שרה קיימת, היו דלתות פתוחות לרווחה"

> *"As long as Sarah lived, the doors were wide open."*

When Sarah died, that openness ceased. When Rebecca arrived, it returned (Bereishit Rabbah 60:16).

This additional detail is particularly striking because we have already witnessed Rebecca's extraordinary hospitality. When Abraham's servant arrives at the well, she not only offers him water but volunteers to draw water for his camels as well. Long before she enters Sarah's tent, Rebecca has demonstrated that she shares something essential with the woman who once lived there.

At first glance, the midrash might suggest that Rebecca has simply taken Sarah's place. One matriarch dies, another arrives, and everything returns to normal. But Rebecca is not Sarah, nor should she be.

Throughout Genesis 24, Rebecca demonstrates remarkable independence, generosity, and courage. When her family asks whether she is willing to leave home and journey to an unfamiliar land, she responds with a single, decisive word: "אֵלֵךְ"—"I will go" (Genesis 24:58).

Rebecca arrives with her own character, her own choices, and her own capacity to shape the future. Perhaps, then, the return of the blessings to Sarah's tent does not mean that everything has gone back to the way it was. Rather, it suggests that the things Sarah brought into the world: light, nourishment, hospitality, and a sense of divine presence, can continue even after she is gone.

The lamp burns again, but it is Rebecca who lights it. The doors open again, but it is Rebecca who welcomes the guests. The tent becomes a place of warmth and possibility once more, not because Sarah has returned, but because someone new has entered and brought her own gifts.

Yet there is another detail in the verse worth noticing. The Torah does not simply say that Rebecca entered Sarah's tent. It tells us that Isaac brought her there.

Isaac is not merely a passive recipient of comfort. He takes an active step toward a future that will necessarily look different from his past. He brings Rebecca into the space most closely associated with his mother, allowing it to become the beginning of a new chapter rather than only a reminder of what he has lost.

The Torah's choice of language is especially significant. It does not say that Isaac forgot his mother. It says "וַיִּנָּחֵם"—he was comforted.

This is something Jewish mourning practices understand remarkably well. During shivah, we do not ask mourners to be strong or encourage them to move on. We sit with them. We listen. We acknowledge the absence that has entered their lives.

And when we leave a house of mourning, we offer the traditional words, "הַמָּקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם"—"May God comfort you."

We do not wish that the mourners will forget. We wish that they will find comfort.

But the seven days of shivah eventually end. The mourner returns to work, to community, to the rhythms of ordinary life. There is no expectation that grief will disappear. Rather, there is an invitation to discover that sorrow and joy, memory and possibility, can exist alongside one another.

Isaac's story suggests that comfort is not always something that simply arrives with the passage of time. Sometimes it becomes possible through our willingness to reengage with the world, to form new relationships, and to make room for experiences we could not have imagined in the midst of our grief. This is not a prescription for mourning, nor does it suggest that everyone must find comfort in the same way or on the same timetable. It is simply one possibility the Torah offers.

Perhaps this is also why the Torah portion is called Hayyei Sarah. Sarah's life cannot be measured solely by the years she lived. It must also be understood through the lives she shaped and the blessings that continue after her death.

Keanu Reeves was right. When we die, the people who love us will miss us.

But Hayyei Sarah offers something more.

Our task, as those who remain, is not to keep the world exactly as our loved ones left it. It is to find the courage, when we are ready, to bring new people, new possibilities, and new blessings into the spaces they once occupied.

Not because we have stopped missing them, but because remembering someone and continuing to live are not opposing acts. Sometimes, they are one and the same.

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