

Chayei Sarah

Torah: Genesis 23:1 - 25:18

Haftarah: I Kings 1:1-31

New Testament/Brit Chadassah: Matthew 1:1-17

After Abraham passed his last and greatest test of faith and obedience, he was granted the final form of the covenant between him and YHVH in the previous week's parashah. Sarah lived to see her husband obtain all that he and she had looked for and desired. After a life of service next to her husband, she was granted a peaceful rest in death.

How appropriate it was for Abraham to mourn the woman that had been a faithful companion ever since he took her for his wife!! She had done him good all her life and not evil. But mourning cannot last forever and a time must come when the deceased are laid to rest.

Abraham rose up and went to the sons of Heth who lived in and around Hebron. He asked them for a place to bury his wife. Extended bargaining is a custom enjoyed in the Middle East from ancient times, but it seems that on this sad occasion, it was cut short out of respect for Abraham's loss. Again, as with the king of Sodom after the War of the Nine Kings, Abraham did not want to be indebted to anyone, and refused to take the cave of Machpelah as a gift. Ephron, the owner of the cave respected Abraham's desire to pay the full price of the cave and seemingly quoted him a fair price. Abraham willingly paid the price of 400 shekels of silver. The purchase was witnessed by the city elders at the gate and the "deed" to the cave became Abraham's in perpetuity. Abraham then buried his wife in the cave.

Before we continue, there are several points to be made for Hebrew Israelite men who lead their families. When a man takes a woman as his wife and she walks with him faithfully and passes on before he does, then it is entirely appropriate to mourn and honor her. Burial in the earth is the preferred way to put the dead away, but that is not always possible. As YHVH said,

Until you return to the ground,

*Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)*

Also, we have here the first concrete example of land ownership by Abraham. Up until now he has led something of a nomadic existence. By buying land outside of Hebron and burying Sarah, Abraham is beginning to assert his right to land ownership via the covenant (Genesis 17:8). Certainly, Abraham possessed great wealth in his herds, gold and silver, etc., but he was, as he said, a stranger and sojourner among the sons of Heth and the Amorites (Genesis 23:4). One question comes to mind that I can’t answer yet is why did Abraham wait until Sarah’s death before buying any land. I think there’s a deeper meaning to this sequence of events.

In any event, Abraham is demonstrating through his actions that land ownership is of great importance. Abraham didn’t value gold and silver, sheep and goats as much as he valued a posterity that would impact future generations and land for them.

The last thing that I want to mention before moving on is respect. Abraham was regarded by the sons of Heth as a “mighty prince”. They honored him.

*A good name is better than good oil,
And the day of one’s death is better than the day of one’s birth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)*

In return, Abraham honored them and treated them with respect. Yes, he was going to inherit their land through his descendants, but that was no reason to behave arrogantly towards them.

Moving on, at the time of Sarah’s death, Abraham was 137 years old, as he was 10 years older than Sarah (127 years old at time of death).

Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in every way. (Genesis 24:1)

Think about this. Abraham had a covenant that would impact the very world in generations to come, a faithful wife, a concubine, two sons, both of whom were receiving great blessings, enormous wealth in gold and silver, and herds. Can

anyone deny that Abraham, through a life of faithful obedience had been blessed in every way?

But now it was time for him to think of his son Isaac and think of his posterity. We are not told if Abram's father Terah had any input into his sons' selections of the daughters of their brother, if indeed Sarai is the same woman as Iscah. Marrying within the family was later extended to marrying within the tribes of Israel. Abraham took this responsibility to choose a wife for Isaac and made his faithful servant his agent, as he (Abraham) was too old to do this personally.

As Isaac accepted being the sacrifice for his father, so too, he accepted his father's choosing a wife for him. Looking ahead briefly, Esau did not allow his father to choose a wife for him, but Jacob did.

Not every male is a wealthy man who is self-employed. Many, especially in modern times, work for others for wages. That is a form of servanthood. Serving others is not bad. Indeed, Moses himself was called God's servant (see Numbers 12:7-8). Joshua served Moses from his youth (Numbers 11:28). For this reason, I want to look at how a faithful servant conducts himself. We'll use the unnamed servant, who is presumably Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:2). Eliezer can be understood as "my god's servant".

First, the unnamed servant had earned a great deal of trust in managing Abraham's affairs. This is a foreshadowing of Abraham's yet future great-grandson, Joseph. Who will deny that Joseph's faithful service elevated him to the second most powerful position in the world, and enabled him to save his family?

Second, before swearing an oath to his master Abraham, the servant questioned him closely to get the full picture of what he was authorized to do or not to do. In this case, the questioning was intended to elicit exactly what his master wanted done, and what to do, should it prove impossible. In fact, one of the questions concerned the possible scenario if the chosen woman refused to come west and south from Haran. This shows that both men were aware that the unbetrothed woman would have some input. There would be no coercion. Once the servant was clear about his mission, he swore his oath to Abraham and got right to it.

Once the servant arrived in Haran, his camels were undoubtedly thirsty and ready to drink water after the long journey. The servant may have looked at them and thought about how much work it would be to water ten camels. Perhaps it was on the long journey that he considered how he would go about fulfilling his mission or it was an inspired thought of the moment. Either way, he chose not to ask around for the way to Abraham's family first. It seems that he wanted to find out if one of Abraham's female relatives was naturally generous and hospitable to strangers. In other words, this test foreshadows Gideon's fleece.

12 And he said, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. 13 Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; 14 now may it be that the young woman to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels also'—may she be the one whom You have appointed for Your servant Isaac; and by this I will know that You have shown kindness to my master." (Genesis 24:12-14)

In this prayer, we see that the servant recognized there was a hierarchy, and he also considered Isaac to be YHVH's servant as well. The servant did not presume any direct relationship. Yes, he prayed in faith, knowing the importance of both Abraham and Isaac to YHVH. He prayed to fulfill his mission to Abraham, not asking any blessing for himself, but asking for kindness from YHVH to Abraham. Just as the servant prayed on behalf of his master Abraham, so did the Roman centurion appeal to the Son of man on behalf of his sick servant. Same prayer, same faith, same understanding of one's place in the hierarchy.

The servant's faith was rewarded even before he finished speaking in his heart. He chose a girl who was both beautiful and still a virgin, and not betrothed. As an aside, there had to be visual cues to indicate her marital status. Apparently something about her, perhaps her beauty, caused the servant to run to her. If it was her beauty, maybe the servant was thinking about how beautiful Sarah had been, even as an older woman. Briefly jumping ahead into the future, Isaac was also concerned about being killed because of his beautiful wife.

After the camels were watered, the servant rewarded the girl with gold jewelry and asked her identity and if there was room for him and his caravan at her home. She told him her family lineage back to Nahor and affirmed that there indeed was food and lodging for the caravan. Right there, on the spot, the servant bowed himself to the ground and worshipped.

26 Then the man bowed low and worshiped the Lord. 27 And he said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned His kindness and His trustworthiness toward my master; as for me, the Lord has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers." (Genesis 24:26-7)

I'm certain that had I been the girl, I would also have run home to tell my family about this stranger! She forgot to lead him and his caravan home. The text seems to indicate that for Rebekah (and Moses), her grandmother Milcah was an important woman.

24 She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, Milcah's son, whom she bore to Nahor." (Genesis 24:24)

Moses also wrote that the girl ran to her mother's household (no name given) and shared the evening's news. Her brother Laban ran out to bring in the caravan after preparing for them. Laban took care of the servant, his men and their camels personally. Again, we see the family trait of hospitality.

After dinner was set on the table and before they started eating, the servant recounted to everyone around the table, and perhaps the servants listening to the conversation, what his mission was, the parameters, and how YHVH had answered his prayer. He then asked if he could take Rebekah back to Isaac as his wife. The brother and father agreed, and then the servant again worshipped. He gave gifts of gold and clothes to Rebekah, her brother, and her mother. Oddly, nothing is said about giving any gifts to Bethuel, Rebekah's father. In effect, what probably was going to be an ordinary dinner became an impromptu wedding celebration.

The next morning, the servant was anxious to depart. Rebekah's brother and mother didn't want him to leave just yet, but stay ten more days. He refused because he wanted to return to his master with Rebekah. They then called for Rebekah and asked if she was willing to depart. She agreed. Her nurse also went with Rebekah.

This recounting shows that Bethuel was not a strong leader of his house as his son and his wife seemed to be making most of the decisions. However that may be, the caravan departed and went back to Canaan.

When the caravan arrived, Isaac was in the field and saw them. In turn, Rebekah saw Isaac and asked the servant who he was. Recognizing that he was her betrothed, she veiled herself, indicating her change of marital status.

Once Isaac had taken Rebekah as his wife, Abraham now took Keturah as his wife and other women as concubines and had children with them. It is a shame that the early church and later the Catholic church disregarded this clear example of remarriage after the death of the first wife because so many suffered needlessly. These later children were given gifts and sent away so that Isaac's right to the covenant would not be challenged. Moreover, if these children had not also been sent away, there would have been problems with Ishmael. Abraham needed to be fair to everyone.

To conclude this parashah, I want to note that there are many examples of the various men doing their respective duties. Hospitality was very prominent in this section. I hope that every man who reads this considers hospitality as a cardinal virtue.