

Parashat Chayei Sarah

November 14, 2020, 27

Heshvan 5781

Torah: Genesis 23:1-25:18;
Triennial 24:10-52

Haftorah: I Kings 1:1-1:31

Possession: A Romance
Ilana Kurshan

In the immediate aftermath of Sarah's death, Abraham is consumed by the task of purchasing a plot of land in Canaan in which to bury his wife. At first the Hittim offer the land for free, and indeed we might think that Abraham would take them up on the offer – after all, God has just promised all the land of Canaan for him and his descendants. But in spite of the divine promise, Abraham insists on a financial deal that is fair and square, and he buys the land at full price for 400 shekels. This seems at first glance to be merely a dry account of an economic transaction, but when we dig deeper and look beneath the surface—this is, after all a story about burial—we see that for the rabbis of the Talmud, the burial of Sarah became the basis for

several foundational discussions about marriage, ownership, and what it means for our love to outlive us.

On the first page of Masechet Kiddushin, the tractate of the Talmud that deals with betrothal, the rabbis draw explicitly on the story of Sarah's burial to derive the law that a man may betroth a woman in any one of three ways – with money, with a document, or by means of sexual intercourse. The rabbis explain that the way we know that a woman may be betrothed by means of money is because of the story of Abraham's burial of Sarah in our parsha. Just as the Torah uses the term "take" (*kicha*) to describe how a man marries a woman ("When a man takes a wife and possesses her," Deuteronomy 24:1), so too does the Torah use this term to describe Abraham's purchase of a burial plot ("Let me pay the price of the land, take it from me," Gen. 23:13). And since we know that Abraham purchased the land with money, the rabbis conclude, we also know that a woman may be betrothed by means of money.

The notion of a woman being acquired by money—as if the woman is an object that can be owned—is antithetical if not outrageous to our modern sensibilities, especially since the transaction must always be the husband's initiative. But as the analogy to Abraham's purchase of a burial plot suggests, a woman is actually not like a commodity that can be transferred freely from one person to another, but rather like land, which is something else entirely.

Throughout the Talmud the rabbis distinguish between moveable property (*m'taltelin*) and land (*karka*). Moveable property like a refrigerator or a bicycle can be owned fully. But as we know from the laws of the sabbatical year (Leviticus 25:23), the only one who truly owns the land is God; we humans are merely temporary custodians put on this earth to work it and to safeguard it. Land may belong to someone, just as one spouse may belong to another in marriage; but land, like a person, can never be truly owned.

And while the analogy between betrothal and burial may still seem unromantic, we must remember that it is not just any land that Abraham is buying – it is land in Canaan, the beloved homeland of the Jewish people, and the land that God has promised him. Abraham's love for Sarah thus becomes a metaphor for the Jewish people's love for the land of Israel. Our parsha suggests that theirs was quite a fierce love; when Sarah dies, Abraham weeps profoundly over her loss: "Sarah's lifetime came to one hundred and twenty-seven years...and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her" (23:1-2). Regardless of how complex their marriage may have been—there was tension over the angels' visit, tension over Hagar and Ishmael, and at least according to the midrash, tension over the Akedah—Abraham was devastated by Sarah's death.

The Talmud in Bava Batra (58a) tells a story about a sage named Rabbi B'na'a whose job it was to mark burial sites so that people would not inadvertently step over them and contract impurity. When he came to the cave where Abraham and Sarah were buried, he discovered that Abraham was lying between Sarah's arms, and she was caressing his head. It is a testament to the power of love to outlast even death, as articulated so beautifully in the Song of Songs (8:6): "For love is as fierce as death." On account of the force of his love for this woman to whom he promised himself in marriage, Abraham was determined to bury Sarah in the land promised to him by God. His "taking" of this land, like the "taking" of a woman in marriage, is not merely an economic transaction, but a model of what it means to be possessed by a love we can never truly own.

All You Ever Needed to Know, You Could Learn by a Well

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Avraham's servant, sent to find a wife for Yitzhak, chooses the town's well as a testing ground:

Text: Bereshit 24:17-21

(14)"Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels too', she the one whom you have appointed for your servant Yitzhak..." (15)Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rivkah, who was born to ...Avraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. (17)The servant ran towards her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." (18)She said, "Drink, my lord." And she hurried to let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. (19)When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have finished drinking." (20)And she hurried and emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels. (21)The man gazed at her, keeping silent, to learn whether the LORD had made his journey successful or not.

- Why does the servant choose this test to find a wife for Yitzhak?
- Why do you think that the servant does not help himself to some water from the well? (You might want to consider the economics of wells – digging, ownership, scarce resources.)

- Compare what she was asked to do and what she did. What does the discrepancy tell us about her?
- Why do you think that she pours the water into the trough before going to get more water from the well?
- What might the servant have learned about Rivkah as he watched her silently?

Commentary: Hizkuni Bereshit 24:20

***She emptied her jar into the trough** – She had proper manners in that she did not pour into the spring what Eliezer (the servant) left over.*

- Manners often reflect social necessities. What concern would this one reflect?

Commentary: R. David Zvi Hoffman Bereshit 24:21

***The man gazed** –...it would have been appropriate that the servant would not leave it to the girl to draw water for all his camels without helping her. And here he is watching her silently, trying to ascertain the goodness of her heart, if indeed the LORD had made his journey successful.*

- What criticism might we level at the servant's behavior? Why is he behaving in such a manner? In light of this criticism, what do we learn about Rivkah?

Bat Sheva and Chosenness Bex Rosenblatt

The parallel between Abraham and David is obvious - both of them are founders, creators of something new.

Abraham is the first Hebrew, the founder of our people. David is the first king in Jerusalem, founder of a dynasty and a political entity. And yet, as is the case for so many founders, it is unclear whether the projects they create will outlive them. Abraham is driven by his need for a successor. David spends much of his adult life failing to manage succession among his sons. The question driving the Abraham story, the David story, and indeed much of the Tanakh is how does this project continue - how do we pass our inheritance from generation to generation.

The answer to this question in this week's parasha and this week's haftarah, 1 Kings 1:1-31, can be found in the secondary characters, Abraham's servant and Bat Sheva. The story of Rebecca coming to Canaan is bizarre. At sixty-seven verses, longer than most biblical stories, the story focuses on Abraham's unnamed servant, usually identified as Eliezer from Genesis 15, Abraham's servant and potential heir. By this point, he is no longer in the running for succession from Abraham. Rather, he is sent to find a wife to continue the line through the chosen successor, Isaac. What's more, his name is no longer even worth mentioning. He becomes someone through whom the project of the Jewish people passes, but not someone we remember. (For a very interesting alternative take, check out Perry, Menakhem. "Counter-Stories in the Bible: Rebekah and her Bridegroom, Abraham's Servant." *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 27.2 [2007]: 275-323). However, for this one story, this one link in the continuity of the Jewish project, he is absolutely necessary.

Likewise, in 1 Kings 1, Bat Sheva steps out of the shadows to ensure the project is passed on. As her husband, the king, lies incapacitated on his bed and the political future of the nation hangs in the balance, Bat Sheva grows verbose. She speaks the exact words necessary to convince her ailing husband of the course of action necessary to save her, her

son, and the nation. Although Nathan the prophet has instructed her what to say, Bat Sheva uses her particular knowledge to change her speech and achieve the necessary goal.

Why is it that secondary characters such as Abraham's servant and Bat Sheva ensure the passing down of our inheritance from generation to generation? The answer lies in our relationship with chosenness. It is difficult to understand why Abraham was chosen by God to start our people. The same is true for David. Most of all, we struggle to understand our role as the chosen people, wondering what it is that makes us special, that makes us better. These are the questions of the founders, of people like Abraham and David, who start the project and wonder why they merited to start it. More useful is to look at these stories of secondary characters. Bat Sheva and Abraham's servant understood at the core of their beings that they were dealing with something larger than themselves. When we take our ego out of chosenness and consider rather how we can act as part of a larger whole, we are able to achieve continuity of that inheritance, something worth being chosen for.