

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

However, since she was also somehow able to give birth at the age of 90, perhaps she just matured at a different rate than the vast majority of women today. Even so, it's human to make mistakes from time to time, and I find it hard to believe that Sarah could live so long without sinning even once. More problematic, to me, is the fact that the midrash concludes with the notion that "when she was twenty, she was like a seven-year-old as regards to beauty." Personally, I find *this* a rather disturbing notion.

When I think about these milestone years in Sarah's life, I find myself reflecting on the legacies that we leave behind for the people who knew us at different times in our lives. I am reminded how the childhoods of the friends we gain as adults remain somewhat of a mystery to us. Likewise, Sarah's childhood is not recorded in the Tanakh. We don't know who she was as a seven-year-old. We first meet Sarah as an adult, someone who is already married. We know that this phase of her life was one in which Sarah was a model of hospitality. She was able to awaken people's souls, bringing them closer to God through Judaism. By the age of one hundred, Sarah had become a mother and begins to reveal some of her emotions to us. She seems less perfect and therefore appears as fallibly human as the rest of us.

When we hear of someone's passing, our memories are of the person we knew, from whatever time our lives intersected. When Sarah died at the age of 127, to some, she was still the girl they knew at age seven. To others, she was the young woman of twenty. Yet others mourning Sarah knew her as the centenarian. We are always a combination of who we once were, of who we have become, and even a bit of who we will yet be.

As Rashi says about the years of the life of Sarah, "all of them [were] equally good," and, I would add, all of them contain moments worth remembering.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Chayei Sarah

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

November 23, 2019 | 25 Heshvan 5780

Annual | Genesis 23:1-25:18 (Etz Hayim p. 127-141; Hertz p. 80-89)

Triennial Genesis 23:1-24:9 (Etz Hayim p. 127-132; Hertz p. 80-83)

Haftarah | 1 Kings 1:1-31 (Etz Hayim p. 142-145; Hertz p. 90-92)

D'var Torah: Sarah's Lives

Rabbi Suzanne Brody, Conservative Yeshiva Alum & Director of Education and Youth Programming at Temple Beth-El in Ithaca, NY

It's tough to sum up a person's entire life in just a few words. Often we start off by mentioning the number of years that someone lived, as if that could capture one's essence. This week, we read that "the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years," (Genesis 23:1) as if this tells us everything that we need to know about who our matriarch Sarah was. Rashi, quoting the 4th century midrash Genesis Rabbah (58:1), explains that Sarah's age was recorded in this unusual format with "the word 'years' written after every digit ... to tell you that every digit is to be expounded upon individually." Given the many ways in which one changes throughout the course of life, there is a certain logic to this explanation.

However, I have difficulty with the rest of this midrash. Our Sages say that "when she was one hundred years old, she was like a twenty-year-old regarding sin. Just as a twenty-year-old has not sinned, because she is not liable to punishment, so too when she was one hundred years old, she was without sin." Given that liability for punishment comes with the onset of puberty, and we celebrate this milestone at 12 or 13, it's unclear why Sarah would have not been liable for punishment until she was 20.

D'var Haftarah: Poetic Justice

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The paradigm of the Jewish hero, King David, was also, in many ways, quite a tragic figure. Though his life was marked by great achievements, it was also tainted by sinful acts. He was a great warrior, a masterful poet, and a triumphant king; but he was also a man with a sometimes uncontrollable libido. Scripture's message seems to be that David's greatness and libido were linked. When it was properly reigned in, David possessed the vitality to face and overcome even the greatest challenges. When not properly reigned in, it compromised his judgement and unleashed forces that caused great catastrophes to befall him and his house. And as we will see in our haftarah, there is a kind of poetic justice that David ends his life both literally and figuratively impotent.

Like most heroes, young David was a font of energy, but the elderly David we encounter in our haftarah cannot even keep himself warm. His servants thought to remedy his sorry state by proffering him a concubine: "And his servants said to him: 'Let then seek out for my lord the king a young virgin, that she may wait upon the king and become his familiar. And **lie in your lap (v'shakhva b'hekeha)** and my lord the king will be warm.' And they sought out a beautiful woman through all the territory of Israel, and they found Abishag the Shunamite and brought her to the king." (1 Kings 1:3-4). The intentions of the servants are quite transparent - they hoped not just to warm his body, but to reignite his libido and with it, his heroic vitality. But despite the physical warmth Abishag provided, David's sexual appetite was not re-kindled: "And the woman was very beautiful, and she became familiar to the king and ministered to him, but the king **did not know her (lo yidaah).**" (1 Kings 1:3-4)

The poetry here is subtle and profound. This literal "lying down" (**v'shakhva**) with Abishag that fails to awaken David's libido looks back at the time that his libido caused him to sin and "lay down" with Batsheva, the wife of Uriah the Hittite: "And David sent messengers and fetched her and she came to him **and he lay with her (vayishkav ima).**" (2 Samuel 11:4) And that David "did not [carnally] know" (**lo yidaah**) Abishag looks forward to the palace coup launched by David's son, Adonijah: "Then Nathan [the prophet] spoke to Batsheva, the mother of Shlomo: 'Have you not heard that Adonijah, the son of Haggith reigns, and David **does not know (lo yadah)**'" (1 Kings 1:11)

The upshot of these "clues" is that the Biblical author did not want us to forget the original cause of David's troubles. He wanted to remind us that great appetites can lead to greatness and the attainment of mastery only when they themselves are mastered. But all actions have consequences; one way or another, one gets one's comeuppance. Larger than life characters - even those we consider heroes - are not immune.

Parashah Study: Chayei Sarah

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The parashah opens with the death and burial of Sarah, continuing to Avraham's efforts to find a wife for his son Yitzhak.

TEXT - Bereshit 23:19-24:4

And then Avraham buried his wife Sarah... Avraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Avraham in all things (Bakol). And Avraham said to his senior servant... go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Yitzhak.

- The position of "Avraham was now old... and the Lord had blessed Avraham in all things" raises some questions:
- Which story does it belong to?
- What light does the verse cast on each of these stories?
- The Torah states "The Lord blessed Avraham in all things". What would you consider being blessed in all things?
- What would make that blessing tangible and lasting?

COMMENTARY - Ramban (Nachmanides) on Bereshit 24:1

Blessed Avraham in all things (Bakol): With a long life, and wealth, and sons, all that a human can desire (based on Ibn Ezra). The text mentions this to say that he was complete with all and didn't lack a thing except seeing children from his son that would inherit his position and honor. Our rabbis have a wonderful reading: ...he had a daughter and her name was Bakol (=in all)...

- What story does Ramban connect the verse to?
- In what areas of life does Ramban (who quotes Ibn Ezra) consider a "blessing in all things"?
- Out of the list that he brings at the beginning, what does Ramban focus on in the end?
- What does he seem to add to the list? What do you think of his addition?