

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Chayei Sara  
November 23, 2019 \*\*\* 25 Cheshvan, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Today's Portions

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Chayei Sara in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3174/jewish/Chayei-Sarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3174/jewish/Chayei-Sarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Sarah dies at age 127 and is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron, which Abraham purchases from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver. Abraham's servant Eliezer is sent, laden with gifts, to Charan, to find a wife for Isaac. At the village well, Eliezer asks G-d for a sign: when the maidens come to the well, he will ask for some water to drink; the woman who will offer to give his camels to drink as well shall be the one destined for his master's son. Rebecca, the daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel, appears at the well and passes the "test." Eliezer is invited to their home, where he repeats the story of the day's events. Rebecca returns with Eliezer to the land of Canaan, where they encounter Isaac praying in the field. Isaac marries Rebecca, loves her, and is comforted over the loss of his mother. Abraham takes a new wife, Keturah (Hagar), and fathers six additional sons, but Isaac is designated as his only heir. Abraham dies at age 175 and is buried beside Sarah by his two eldest sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/585783/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/585783/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah describes an aging King David, echoing this week's Torah reading, which mentions that "Abraham was was old, advanced in days." King David was aging, and he was perpetually cold. A young maiden, Abishag of Shunam, was recruited to serve and provide warmth for the elderly monarch. Seeing his father advancing in age, Adoniah, one of King David's sons, seized the opportunity to prepare the ground for his ascension to his father's throne upon the latter's passing — despite King David's express wishes that his son Solomon succeed him. Adoniah recruited two influential individuals — the High Priest and the commander of David's armies — both of whom had fallen out of David's good graces, to champion his cause. He arranged to be transported in a chariot with fifty people running before him, and invited a number of his sympathizers to a festive party where he publicizing his royal ambitions.

The prophet Nathan encouraged Bat Sheva, mother of Solomon, to approach King David and plead with him to reaffirm his choice of Solomon as his successor. This she did, mentioning Adoniah's recent actions of which the king had been unaware. Nathan later joined the Bat Sheva and the king to express support for Bat Sheva's request. King David acceded to their request: "Indeed," he told Bat Sheva, "as I swore to you by the Lord God of Israel saying, 'Surely Solomon, your son, shall reign after me and he shall sit on my

throne in my stead,' surely, so will I swear this day."

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### To Have a Why (Chayei Sarah 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/to-have-a-why-chayei-sarah-5780/>

The name of our parsha seems to embody a paradox. It is called Chayei Sarah, "the life of Sarah," but it begins with the death of Sarah. What is more, towards the end, it records the death of Abraham. Why is a parsha about death called "life"? The answer, it seems to me, is that – not always, but often – death and how we face it is a commentary on life and how we live it.

Which brings us to a deeper paradox. The first sentence of this week's parsha of Chayei Sarah, is: "Sarah's lifetime was 127 years: the years of Sarah's life." A well-known comment by Rashi on the apparently superfluous phrase, "the years of Sarah's life," states: "The word 'years' is repeated and without a number to indicate that they were all equally good." How could anyone say that the years of Sarah's life were equally good? Twice, first in Egypt, then in Gerar, she was persuaded by Abraham to say that she was his sister rather than his wife, and then taken into a royal harem, a situation fraught with moral hazard.

There were the years when, despite God's repeated promise of many children, she was infertile, unable to have even a single child. There was the time when she persuaded Abraham to take her handmaid, Hagar, and have a child by her, which caused her great strife of the spirit.[1] These things constituted a life of uncertainty and decades of unmet hopes. How is it remotely plausible to say that all of Sarah's years were equally good? That is Sarah. About Abraham, the text is similarly puzzling. Immediately after the account of his purchase of a burial plot for Sarah, we read: "Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything" (Gen. 24:1). This too is strange. Seven times, God had promised Abraham the land of Canaan. Yet when Sarah died, he did not own a single plot of land in which to bury her, and had to undergo an elaborate and even humiliating negotiation with the Hittites, forced to admit at the outset that, "I am a stranger and temporary resident among you" (Genesis 23:4). How can the text say that God had blessed Abraham with everything?

Equally haunting is its account of Abraham's death, perhaps the most serene in the Torah: "Abraham breathed his last and died at a good age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people." He had been promised that he would become a great nation, the father of many nations, and that he would inherit the land. Not one of these promises had been fulfilled in his lifetime. How then was he "satisfied"?

The answer again is that to understand a death, we have to understand a life. I have mixed feelings about Friedrich Nietzsche. He was one of the most brilliant thinkers of the modern age, and also one of the most dangerous. He himself was ambivalent about Jews and negative about Judaism.[2] Yet one of his most famous remarks is both profound and true: He who has a why in life can bear almost any how.[3]

(In this context I should add a remark he made in *The Genealogy of Morality* that I have not quoted before. Having criticised other sacred Scriptures, he then writes: "the Old Testament – well, that is something quite different: every respect for the Old Testament! I find in it great men, heroic landscape and something of utmost rarity on earth, the incomparable naivety of the strong heart; even more, I find a people." [4] So despite his scepticism about religion in general and the Judaeo-Christian heritage in particular, he had a genuine respect for Tanach.)

Abraham and Sarah were among the supreme examples in all history of what it is to have a Why in life. The entire course of their lives came as a response to a call, a Divine voice, that told them to leave their home and family, set out for an unknown destination, go to live in a land where they would be strangers, abandon every conventional form of

security, and have the faith to believe that by living by the standards of righteousness and justice they would be taking the first step to establishing a nation, a land, a faith and a way of life that would be a blessing to all humankind.

Biblical narrative is, as Erich Auerbach said, “fraught with background,” meaning that much of the story is left unstated. We have to guess at it. That is why there is such a thing as Midrash, filling in the narrative gaps. Nowhere is this more pointed than in the case of the emotions of the key figures. We do not know what Abraham or Isaac felt as they walked toward Mount Moriah. We do not know what Sarah felt when she entered the harems, first of Pharaoh, then of Avimelech of Gerar. With some conspicuous exceptions, we hardly know what any of the Torah’s characters felt. Which is why the two explicit statements about Abraham – that God blessed him with everything, and that he ended life old and satisfied – are so important. And when Rashi says that all of Sarah’s years were equally good, he is attributing to her what the biblical text attributes to Abraham, namely a serenity in the face of death that came from a profound tranquillity in the face of life. Abraham knew that everything that happened to him, even the bad things, were part of the journey on which God had sent him and Sarah, and he had the faith to walk through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil, knowing that God was with him. That is what Nietzsche called “the strong heart.”

In 2017, an unusual book became an international bestseller. One of the things that made it unusual was that its author was ninety years old and this was her first book. Another was that she was a survivor both of Auschwitz, and also of the Death March towards the end of the war, which in some respects was even more brutal than the camp itself.

The book was called *The Choice* and its author was Edith Eger.[5] She, together with her father, mother and sister Magda, arrived at Auschwitz in May 1944, one of 12,000 Jews transported from Kosice, Hungary. Her parents were murdered on that first day. A woman pointed towards a smoking chimney and told Edith that she had better start talking about her parents in the past tense. With astonishing courage and strength of will, she and Magda survived the camp and the March. When American soldiers eventually lifted her from a heap of bodies in an Austrian forest, she had typhoid fever, pneumonia, pleurisy and a broken back. After a year, when her body had healed, she married and became a mother. Healing of the mind took much longer, and eventually became her vocation in the United States, where she went to live.

On their way to Auschwitz, Edith’s mother said to her, “We don’t know where we are going, we don’t know what is going to happen, but nobody can take away from you what you put in your own mind.” That sentence became her survival mechanism. Initially, after the war, to help support the family, she worked in a factory, but eventually she went to university to study psychology and became a psychotherapist. She has used her own experiences of survival to help others survive life crises.

Early on in the book she makes an immensely important distinction between victimisation (what happens to you) and victimhood (how you respond to what happens to you). This is what she says about the first:

We are all likely to be victimised in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control.

This is life. And this is victimisation. It comes from the outside.

And this, about the second:

In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimisation. We develop a victim’s mind – a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy limits or boundaries.[6]

In an interview on the publication of the book, she said, “I’ve learned not to look for happiness, because that is external. You were born with love and you were born with joy.

That's inside. It's always there."

We have learned this extraordinary mindset from Holocaust survivors like Edith Eger and Viktor Frankl. But in truth, it was there from the very beginning, from Abraham and Sarah, who survived whatever fate threw at them, however much it seemed to derail their mission, and despite everything they found serenity at the end of their lives. They knew that what makes a life satisfying is not external but internal, a sense of purpose, mission, being called, summoned, of starting something that would be continued by those who came after them, of bringing something new into the world by the way they lived their lives. What mattered was the inside, not the outside; their faith, not their often-troubled circumstances.

I believe that faith helps us to find the 'Why' that allows us to bear almost any 'How'. The serenity of Sarah's and Abraham's death was eternal testimony to how they lived.

[1] I deliberately omit the tradition (Targum Yonatan to Gen. 22:20) that says that at the time of the binding of Isaac, Satan appeared to her and told her that Abraham had sacrificed their son, a shock that caused her death. This tradition is morally problematic. [2] The best recent study is Robert Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, Princeton University Press, 2015. [3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Maxims and Arrows*, 12. [4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 107. [5] Edith Eger, *The Choice*, Rider, 2017. [6] *Ibid.*, 9.

### A Family Reconciles: Hayyei Sara by Naomi Kalish <http://www.jtsa.edu/a-family-reconciles>

Parashat Hayyei Sarah is bookended with the accounts of the deaths of the two first Jews, Sarah and Abraham. The early part of the text spends much time describing the process by which Abraham secured land for Sarah's burial and then buried her. At the end of the parashah, we learn that Isaac and Ishmael buried their father Abraham together. Though the Torah describes these brothers' unity in concise and matter-of-fact language, they and their extended family must have worked hard to achieve reconciliation.

The last time the Torah describes Isaac and Ishmael together was the day of the celebration of Isaac's weaning. Sarah had taken note of Ishmael, became protective of her son, and ordered Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their home. (Gen. 21:9)

Early the next morning Abraham sent them on their way, and the text does not tell of the brothers having contact afterwards until Abraham's death when they bury him together. The text is vague about how Isaac and Ishmael reunited and reconciled.

The Torah does not provide us with information about the relationship between the brothers during the intervening years. Had Isaac and Ishmael not seen each other in the years since their separation? Do they know of the traumas each had experienced? Did Isaac know about Ishmael's expulsion by their father from his home and abandonment in the wilderness? Did Ishmael know about Isaac's near-death at the hand of their father during the Akedah (the Binding of Isaac)? Perhaps each of them greeted their reunion with anticipatory dread, as did the next generation of brothers, Jacob and Esau, who had an even more explicitly fraught relationship that originated in the womb. Leading up to their crucial encounter after years of estrangement, Jacob was even afraid that their reunion would result in someone's death, yet they interacted with unexpected grace. Offering gifts to Esau, Jacob tells his estranged brother that "to see your face is like seeing the face of God." (33:10) Later, the twins would meet again as they came together to bury their father, Isaac (33:29).

According to Monica McGoldrick, a Family Systems Theory therapist and educator, "death and other major loss pose the most painful adaptational challenge for it [i.e. the family]—as a system—and for each surviving member. Its impact reverberates through all the relationships in a family." When a change takes place in a family through an addition (marriage, birth, adoption) or subtraction (divorce, death), it opens up the possibility for both positive and negative change. McGoldrick writes, "loss can strengthen survivors, bring them closer together, inspire their creativity, and bring out their strengths." Conversely, "It can also leave behind a destructive legacy of dysfunctional coping

patterns.” Reading for multiple members of the extended family provides us insight into how together they experienced their grief.

The Midrash takes notes of a curiosity in the text: when Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham (and when Jacob and Esau reconcile), the younger brother is mentioned first. The Midrash interprets this to mean that Ishmael engaged in a process of teshuvah, repentance. (Gen. Rabbah 30:4, 38:12, BT Bava Batra 16b) One may read the word teshuvah as “repentance” or simply as “return.” Ishmael returned—to his estranged brother. For reasons we do not know, he gestured for his brother to lead the way.

Other midrashim assume an earlier reunion—and not only of Isaac and Ishmael but of numerous family members. After Sarah’s death, Abraham lives 35 more years, and the Torah does not tell us explicitly what he did during this period. Late in our parashah, we read that “Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah (25:1). Rashi explains that Keturah is identical to Hagar: Keturah was her name, and Hagar (creatively revocalized to “ha-ger,” “the stranger”) was a description of her status within the context of Sarah and Abraham’s household. Genesis Rabbah explains that she was named Keturah “because her deeds were as beautiful as spices [ketoret].” (61:4). The descendants of Abraham and Keturah include merchants of spices (See Gen. 37:25).

The home that Hagar established is a central location at this time of change in the family. After joining Ishmael in burying Abraham, Isaac “settled near Beer-lahai-roi,” the location central to Hagar’s story, where Ishmael’s birth was foretold (Gen. 16). It was in this location that Hagar became the first woman with whom God speaks directly. Unlike her later expulsion in the wilderness, during which she cries out, in this experience she speaks out and gives voice and story to her experience (16:8). She bestows a name upon God: “You Are El-roi,” which the Torah explains as reflecting her own transformation from her encounter with God: “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!” (v.13)

Hagar is a supporting character. Not clearly identified, she hovers throughout this parashah. She is the one who was seen and felt seen. Transformed, she has the ability to see, hear, and know others. Through their relationships with her, Isaac and Ishmael experience healing from their traumas and reconciliation with each other. Jonathan Shay, MD, a psychiatrist who works with veterans, writes that “healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community.” (Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character, 4). Claiming her name as Keturah, Hagar did just this. She creates a place of refuge, where one can be seen genuinely, where strangers become known, loss can be mourned, and a family can turn toward its future. (*Naomi Kalish is the Harold and Carole Wolfe Director of the Center for Pastoral Education.*)

### Chayeh Sora by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

<https://mailchi.mp/d599ce520635/weekly-davar?e=eof2ca6cod>

The portion begins with the death of Sara and Abraham’s search to find her a burial spot. In the end, he buys (for an extortionate price) a quaint little place called Hebron. Little did he realize the future problems this would cause. (There are 3 places in the land of Israel that the Jewish people actually bought. They are: Temple Mount, Hebron and Shchem/Nablus. It is interesting to note that these are 3 of the most hotly contested plots of land within Israel to this very day.)

Having buried Sara, he finds a wife, Rebecca, for Isaac and they marry. Abraham also marries again, this time to a woman named Keturah. He fathers 6 sons with her and sends them off to live in the Far East, sending with them the secrets of mysticism.

Abraham dies at 175 years of age and is buried, alongside Sara, by his sons Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael himself dies at the age of 137 and the portion ends with a listing of his 12 sons.

The rabbis tell us, based on an anomaly in the text of this week’s portion that Sara was as free of transgression at one hundred as she was at twenty; the reason why twenty is

considered an age that is free of transgression is because before twenty, in Jewish thinking, God does not hold human beings accountable for their actions.

Wait a minute, you might say, we Jews believe that a child is bar or bat mitzvah at age twelve or thirteen and from then on they are responsible for what they do? That accountability is only to society. We, human beings, will punish someone at that age for breaking the law. But vis a vis God, he or she has until they are twenty. God appreciates, after all, that we can't go from being children to being adults overnight. We need space to grow, develop, make mistakes and find our way in life. God overlooks the indiscretions of the teenage years to allow us the time for this to happen.

I became religious when I was seventeen. I went to Yeshiva (an Orthodox school of Jewish studies) in Jerusalem and resolved to live by Torah's strong code of values. However, at nineteen years and nine months I was discovered this idea that God does not hold a person accountable until they are twenty. As you can imagine, the gears of my teenage mind (if it can be believed that teenagers are endowed with a mind) started grinding. I still had three months to enjoy myself, minus the consequences, before a lifetime of needing to be good. I started planning my trip to Amsterdam, as that seemed like the most obvious place to engage in all sorts of depraved behaviour. (I considered Bangkok, but it seemed a bit too far away.) Stupidly, (or perhaps sensibly, depending on how you look at it) I went to speak to my rabbi before I went; and history will record that I never did.

Did I look at trying to do the right thing and live by a code of values as a chore, he asked? Surely it was a gift? Did I want to trade in the satisfying feeling of living a good and meaningful life for the momentary, but ultimately empty, titillations of a superficial world? Did I see no intrinsic value in living nobly, as a human being, rather than unbridling my animal passions to their wonts and proclivities? What was my plan, I thought to myself? To go and live as a mindless ape for a few weeks to build the foundations required for living as a thoughtful and sensitive human being?

Ultimately, as alluring and compelling Amsterdam was, it just made no sense to me and I chose not to go.

I wouldn't be honest if I said that I have no regrets about it. But, with perhaps more wisdom, certainly more years, I look back on my life at the times when I followed my base desires – and I know they did not bring me any sense of fulfilment. And when I look back at the decision I made to stay in Jerusalem for the last months of my twentieth year, and other decisions like it, they are the ones that have forged a path for me in life – my own path, my own human path – and made me honest and decent person that I try my very best to be today.

### [Sarah Lives By Rabbi Suzanne Brody](#)

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=7f250829-d587-4345-9a2d-fe9c977b70cb>

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.

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. (*Rabbi Brody is a Conservative Yeshiva Alum and Director of Education and Youth Programming at Temple Beth El in Ithaca, NY*)

[D'var Haftarah: Poetic Justice by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=7f250829-d587-4345-9a2d-fe9c977b70cb) (*Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*)

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=7f250829-d587-4345-9a2d-fe9c977b70cb>

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.

[Hayei Sarah by Rabbi David Markus](https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/)  
<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

I stopped counting how often I hear, "God loves me: I got a great parking spot." Even some clergy, spiritual directors and theologians have a soft spot for the Angel of Miraculous Parking. I too admit to invoking Hanayat-El (from hanayah / "parking") under my breath.

Perhaps it's a cute half-joke – seemingly easy and low stakes, gently cutting down to size the vast uncontrollability of modern life. And as spiritual thinkers of integrity and rigor, let's be candid about the many theological dilemmas of Hanayat-El: Why do bad parking spots happen to good people? Isn't God close to the broken-hearted driver on a hurried errand? Does God do parking but not highway traffic or airport delays? Vanity of vanities: all parking is vanity!

But Hanayat-El is no joke. Angel of Miraculous Parking or not, intercessory prayer – asking God for specifics – is a core Jewish spiritual tradition that heady left-brain modernity seems to forget, diminish or dismiss. And with good reason: asking God for specifics can risk our faith. What if we ask but the answer is no? What if we ask but get no answer?

Why, then, does Tanakh offer so many examples of intercessory prayer – starting with this week's Torah portion (Hayei Sarah) and the prayer of Avraham's emissary for success on his mission to find Yitzhak a wife?

Avraham assures his emissary that God's angel will go ahead of him and guarantee success (Gen. 24:7). Even so, the emissary asks God for specifics: "YHVH, God of my master Avraham! Grant me good fortune and deal mercifully for my master Avraham. Here I stand by the spring, as the city's daughters come out to draw water. Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I also will water your camels' – let her be the one whom You decreed for Your servant, Yitzhak" (Gen. 24:12-14).

Hanayat-El, meet Shiddukh-El, Angel of Miraculous Spousal Matches.

Yaakov prayed for safety from his brother (Gen. 32:10-13). Moses prayed to heal Miriam (Num. 12:13) and forgive the people (Num. 14: 17-19). Hannah prayed for a son (1 Sam. 1:10-11). Nehemiah prayed for success on his mission to re-spiritualize the nation (Neh. 1:5-11). David prayed that his son Solomon build the Temple (1 Chron. 29:18-19). From nearly the start of Tanakh to nearly its end, one intercessory prayer after another.

Granted, what's parking compared to romance, safety, healing, forgiveness, a child or a national mission? If we're given to intercessory prayer, maybe we reserve it for big things or to benefit others. But that impulse doesn't come from Tanakh: no sacred text limits intercessory prayer. Of course, God put it best by rhetorically asking Avraham, "Is anything too wondrous for God?" (Gen. 18:14) – a theme the prophets repeat (Num. 11:23, Is. 59:1). So why not also small stuff?

Rather, it is we ourselves who limit our prayer. Maybe we're afraid to pray. Maybe we imagine ourselves too rational to ask for specifics (but general prayer is fine). Maybe we invoke liturgy's prayerful words but don't attach to them yearning, belief or vulnerability.

Maybe we don't believe ourselves worthy. Maybe we don't believe at all. Maybe that's why Tanakh offers us so many examples of intercessory prayer – to cue this inward journey of encounter with the Holy One we call God. It's a call into relationship, whatever the specifics of our theology. It's a call to transcend ourselves and whatever inhibits our journey into encounter and transformation – specifics and all. If you're hung-up on the “specifics” part of intercessory prayer, you're not alone. Talmud's rabbis tripped over praying for specifics (m. Berakhot ch. 9). Some also held that we should pray only for what's possible, because “impossible” prayer would take God's name in vain. Modern greats like Rabbis Lawrence Kushner and Nehemiah Polen continue to wrestle the “intercession” part of intercessory prayer – but even they side with transformational prayer in full communion with the “specifics.” They write: “Prayer is not so much an act of petition, or a request for divine intercession, as a gesture of uniting our will with God's. We say, in effect, I now want what God wants even as I discover that God wants what I want. The goal is not the granting of a petition but the moment of the encounter itself. In that moment, both our will and, as it were, God's will are united. We do not seek to nullify our will (simply nullifying your prayerful request or need would only be another way of reinforcing its importance), nor do we seek to alter God's will. We seek literally to unite our prayer and our will with God's. Thus the innermost desire of the worshiper is revealed as a yearning to be with God, just as the innermost desire of God is to be with us. And this is the meaning of prayer” (My People's Prayerbook 2:160).

In that spirit, it's deeply symbolic that Avraham's servant of Tanakh's first intercessory prayer is nameless in Torah, but tradition identifies him as “Eliezer” (Gen. Rabbah 43:2) – literally, “My God is help.” Whether Eliezer's intercessory prayer was for the specifics he asked (which he didn't hesitate to ask), or for the transformational power of encounter (in the style of Kushner and Polen), either way Eliezer was named for it.

So are we all. (*Rabbi David Evan Markus (AJR Adjunct Faculty – Rabbinics) is senior rabbi of Temple Beth El of City Island (New York, NY) and Founding Builder of Bayit: Building Jewish, a spiritual innovation start-up for all ages and stages. Rabbi Markus also serves as Faculty in Spiritual Direction and past Board Co-Chair for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. By day, Rabbi Markus presides as Judicial Referee in New York Supreme Court, 9th Judicial District, as part of a parallel career in government service.*)

### Yahrtzeits

Larry Ozarow remembers his mother Mollie Ozarow (Malka bat Avraham Yitzhak V' Rais'l) on Monday November 25th (Cheshvan 27).