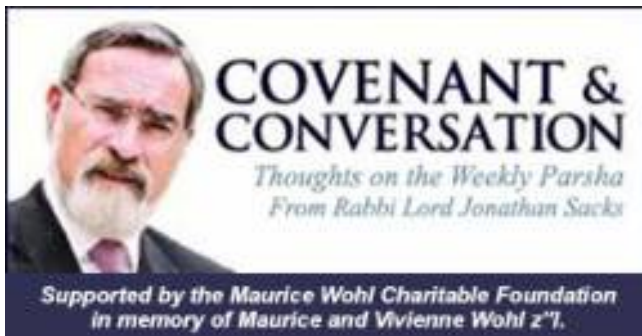


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Beginning the Journey

A while back, a British newspaper, *The Times*, interviewed a prominent member of the Jewish community and a member of the House of Lords – let’s call him Lord X – on his 92nd birthday. The interviewer said, “Most people, when they reach their 92nd birthday, start thinking about slowing down. You seem to be speeding up. Why is that?”

Lord X’s reply was this: “When you get to 92, you start seeing the door begin to close, and I have so much to do before the door closes that the older I get, the harder I have to work.”

We get a similar impression of Abraham in this week’s parsha. Sarah, his constant companion throughout their journeys, has died. He is 137 years old. We see him mourn Sarah’s death, and then he moves into action. He engages in an elaborate negotiation to buy a plot of land in which to bury her. As the narrative makes clear, this is not a simple task. He confesses to the local people, Hittites, that he is “an immigrant and a resident among you” (Gen. 23:4), meaning that he knows he has no right to buy land. It will take a special concession on their part for him to do so. The Hittites politely but firmly try to discourage him. He has no need to buy a burial plot: “No one among us will deny you his burial site to bury your dead.” (Gen. 23:6) He can bury Sarah in someone else’s graveyard. Equally politely but no less insistently, Abraham makes it clear that he is determined to buy land. In the end, he pays a highly inflated price (400 silver shekels) to do so.

The purchase of the Cave of Machpelah is evidently a highly significant event, because it is recorded in great detail and highly legal terminology, not just here, but three times subsequently in Genesis (here in 23:17 and subsequently in 25:9; 49:30; and 50:13), each time with the same formality. Here, for instance, is Jacob on his deathbed, speaking to his sons:

“Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife

Rebecca were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites.”
(Gen. 49:29-32)

Something significant is being hinted at here, otherwise why specify, each time, exactly where the field is and who Abraham bought it from?

Immediately after the story of land purchase, we read, “Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything.” (Gen. 24:1) Again this sounds like the end of a life, not a preface to a new course of action, and again our expectation is confounded. Abraham launches into a new initiative, this time to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac, who by now is at least 37 years old. Abraham instructs his most trusted servant to go “to my native land, to my birthplace” (Gen. 24:2), to find the appropriate woman. He wants Isaac to have a wife who will share his faith and way of life. Abraham does not stipulate that she should come from his own family, but this seems to be an assumption hovering in the background.

As with the purchase of the field, this course of events is described in more detail than almost anywhere else in the Torah. Every conversational exchange is recorded. The contrast with the story of the Binding of Isaac could not be greater. There, almost everything – Abraham’s thoughts, Isaac’s feelings – is left unsaid. Here, everything is said. Again, the literary style calls our attention to the significance of what is happening, without telling us precisely what it is.

The explanation is simple and unexpected. Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God

promises them two things: children and a land. The promise of the land (“Rise, walk in the land throughout its length and breadth, for I will give it to you,” Gen. 13:17) is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham’s descendants will be “a great nation” (Gen. 12:22), as many as “the dust of the earth” (Gen. 13:16), and “the stars in the sky” (Gen. 15:5); he will be the father not of one nation but of many (Gen. 17:5).

Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of land that he can call his own, and he has only one child who will continue the covenant, Isaac, who is currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled. Hence the extraordinary detail of the two main stories in Chayei Sarah: the purchase of land and the finding of a wife for Isaac. There is a moral here, and the Torah slows down the speed of the narrative as it speeds up the action, so that we will not miss the point.

God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, “Jewish grandchildren.”

Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone. By the very act of self-limitation (*tzimtzum*) through which He creates the space for human freedom, God gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the Flood, but Noah had to make the Ark. He gave the

land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is *not what God does for us but what we do for God*.

That is what leaders understand, and it is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take responsibility for creating the conditions through which God’s purposes can be fulfilled. They are not passive but active – even in old age, like Abraham in this week’s parsha. Indeed in the chapter immediately following the story of finding a wife for Isaac, to our surprise, we read that Abraham remarries and has eight more children. Whatever else this tells us – and there are many interpretations (the most likely being that it explains how Abraham became “the father of many nations”) – it certainly conveys the point that Abraham stayed young the way Moses stayed young, “His eyes were undimmed and his natural energy unabated” (Deut. 34:7). Though action takes energy, it gives us energy. The contrast between Noah in old age and Abraham in old age could not be greater.

Perhaps, though, the most important point of this parsha is that large promises – a land, countless children – become real through small beginnings. Leaders begin with an envisioned future, but they also know that there is a long journey between here and there; we can only reach it one act at a time, one day at a time. There is no miraculous shortcut – and if there were, it would not help. The use of a shortcut would culminate in an achievement like Jonah’s gourd, which grew overnight, then died overnight. Abraham acquired only a single field and had just one son who

would continue the covenant. Yet he did not complain, and he died serene and satisfied. Because he had begun. Because he had left future generations something on which to build. All great change is the work of more than one generation, and none of us will live to see the full fruit of our endeavours.

Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality.

Shabbat Shalom

QUESTIONS (AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE)

1. Why does God use *tzimtzum* (self-limitation)?
2. Does the knowledge that, eventually, the door closes for all of us, inspire you to action? If so, how?
3. What actions do you want to take to ensure you have begun the journey?



A Match for Yitzchak

Many years earlier, God had told Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land not

their own.¹ While this exile would unfold years later in the Land of Egypt, the description is just as apt for an earlier time as well: The Land of Canaan, the land that God promised would be inherited by his descendants, was a land where Avraham himself was a stranger.²

Perhaps Avraham had never felt these words as acutely as he did now. His wife had died, and as an immigrant he not only had no ancestral burial ground, he owned no suitable plot of land. He had no place to bury Sarah. Only as a result of a great deal of negotiation and large sums of money changing hands was Avraham able to acquire a suitable piece of property and give his wife a proper burial. Avraham was forced to overpay in order to acquire a parcel of land that had been promised to him by God.

His “strangeness” in this land is further highlighted by the lack of an appropriate match for his son. Rather than looking for a local girl, he sends his servant to a far-away destination to find an appropriate spouse for Yitzchak.

Tradition tells us that the name of Avraham’s servant was Eliezer, based on what we might describe as a “theory of preservation of characters.” Earlier in his life, Avraham lamented the fact that he and Sarah were childless and gave voice to his distress over the prospect that the only one who would inherit his legacy would be his majordomo, the head of his household staff – a man named Eliezer.³

Since that point, Avraham had produced two sons: Yishmael, who had been ousted, and Yitzchak, his true heir. Now, the erstwhile potential heir,

Eliezer, has been returned to his natural status, and is once again merely household help. Avraham sends him on a critical mission – to find a suitable match for Yitzchak.

Various midrashic passages provide more background information about Eliezer, identifying him as being related in one way or another to Avraham’s arch-nemesis, Nimrod – either as a former servant of Nimrod⁴, or as Nimrod’s son or grandson.⁵

When the time comes to find a wife for Yitzchak, this person – whoever he is, whoever he once was – is entrusted with the mission of securing Avraham’s legacy, and according to the midrashic account, he suggests his own daughter for his master’s son. When his proposal is rebuffed, he sets out on his mission⁶ – and we might wonder whether his efforts were wholehearted: Would he, as a faithful servant, make his best effort to find a wife for Yitzchak from far afield, or would he prefer to fail, forcing Avraham to resort to his earlier suggestion and “settle” for Eliezer’s daughter by default?

These two possibilities color our reading of what transpires when the servant arrives at his destination:

- (12) He said, “Eternal God, the God of my master Avraham, please give me success this day, and show kindness to my master Avraham. (13) Behold, I am standing by the spring of water. The daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. (14) Let it happen, that the young lady to whom I will say, ‘Please let down

your pitcher, that I may drink,’ and she will say, ‘Drink, and I will also give your camels a drink,’ let her be the one you have appointed for your servant Yitzchak. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master.” (Bereishit 24:12-14)

This is a prayer – and it may be read either as tainted by tremendous cynicism or as a testimony of his great faith: Not only does he “challenge” God and create a very specific test for a potential bride, he stipulates an almost impossible timeline:

(11) He made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the **time of evening**, the time that women go out to draw water.
(Bereishit 24:11)

He arrives in the evening and prays that God should show compassion for Avraham **“today.”** With the sun about to set, we wonder how this request can possibly be fulfilled. To compound matters, the cantillation symbol (the traditional “*trup*” or *ta’amei haMikra* indicating the parsing and reading instructions for the Torah text) on the word *vayomar* (“he said”), with which this prayer is introduced, has a *shalsholet* () indicating that this word is read in the most deliberate, most drawn-out manner of all, understood by many commentaries as an indication of hesitation or internal conflict. Our quandary remains: Does the servant hope to fail, and therefore provides only the smallest possible window for success, or is he so certain that God can and will do miraculous things for Avraham that the time constraints and probabilities are of no concern?

Either way, we should have no doubt why the sages identified the servant with Eliezer: This man truly lives up to the name which translates, quite literally, as “my God helps;” through him, God expresses His love for Avraham by immediately providing a wife for Yitzchak. By helping the servant, God helps the master⁷ – which is precisely the content of the servant’s prayer.

Rabbinic tradition suggests that this is a remarkable insight into life in the tent of Avraham, a snapshot of the household.⁸ The servant – Eliezer – has repeatedly seen miraculous things; in the life of Avraham, the impossible is not only possible, it is quite probable. Eliezer has seen Avraham walk out of the furnace; he has seen Avraham emerge victorious from the war of the kings. From his vantage point as an observer of Avraham’s life, the task with which he himself has been entrusted is, in a sense, an easy task. Eliezer had every expectation that God would help him to help Avraham, and enable him to fulfill his mission immediately so that he could return to Avraham with an appropriate bride to carry Avraham’s legacy forward.

The specifics of the test or task he sets up are no less instructive: He asks for God’s assistance in finding a young woman who will perform an act of unusual kindness, because only a person with an affinity for *hesed*⁹ could possibly join Avraham’s family, in which *hesed* is such an integral component.¹⁰

You have proven that it is she – She is fit for him since she will perform acts

of kindness and will therefore be worthy of admission into the house of Avraham. (Rashi, Bereishit 24:12)

In a certain sense, the fact that Avraham sent his servant back to his hometown¹¹ indicated that the successful candidate should be very “Avraham-like.”¹² It should therefore come as no surprise when Rivka chooses to accompany the man back to Canaan; it is clear to all concerned that God had chosen her,¹³ and she is willing to leave her land, her family and her birthplace with “Avraham-like” resolve. Aside from the family connection, her behavior, her outlook, her essence, were “Avrahamic.”¹⁴

Avraham had made it very clear that he would not consider a Canaanite woman for his son; he had commanded the servant to find someone from Avraham’s extended family.¹⁵ What, we might ask, would have happened had Rivka declined? Were there other potential candidates who could have met the “job description?” The servant raises this issue in his discussion with Rivka’s family:

And now, if you mean to treat my master with kindness and truth – tell me; and if not, tell me, that I may turn to the right or to the left.” (Bereishit 24:49)

TO THE RIGHT – to take a wife from the daughters of Yishmael. TO THE LEFT – to take a wife from the daughters of Lot who dwelt to the left of Avraham. (Rashi, Bereishit 24: 49)

Rashi, based on the Midrash,¹⁶ understood that the servant was referring to other potential

matches who met some, if not all, of the criteria: the daughters of Lot and Yishmael.

Interestingly, in an earlier comment, Rashi refers to a completely different set of alternative candidates – the daughters of Avraham’s comrades Aner, Eshkol and Mamre who were not from Avraham’s extended family – and does not consider the daughters of Lot or Yishmael.

THEN YOU WILL BE ABSOLVED OF THIS OATH YOU HAVE MADE TO ME – and take a wife for him from the daughters of Aner or Eshkol or Mamre. ¹⁷ (Rashi, Bereishit 24:8)

Despite the apparent suitability of members of the extended family, who ostensibly fit some of the criteria, in reality these candidates fall short of the mark. Apparently, to be truly suitable, the quality of *hesed* was not the sole criterion. To be a suitable wife for Yitzchak, the young woman would also need proper appreciation of Avraham and Sarah.

Yishmael did not value Sarah; this lack of regard began with his mother, from the moment Yishmael was conceived:

He went in to Hagar, and she conceived. When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was diminished in her eyes. (Bereishit 16:4)

HER MISTRESS WAS DIMINISHED IN HER EYES – She said, "As regards this woman Sarai, her conduct in private certainly can not be what it appears to be in public: she pretends to be a righteous woman,

but she cannot really be righteous since all these years she has not been privileged to have children, whilst I have had that blessing from the first union" (Bereishit Rabbah 45:4).

Hagar claimed that Sarah was an imposter, that she feigned righteousness but was in fact devoid of holiness. Hagar's proof was her own fertility – one night with Avraham and she produced an heir for Avraham, which Sarah was unable to do for so many years. Hagar created an unfounded correlation between fertility and righteousness, claiming that the real Sarah – the person below the veneer of piety – was empty, corrupt, unworthy.

The Kabbalistic description of this phenomenon is called a *klipah* (literally, a shell or husk), a pretender, a profane shadow or echo of holiness, a cheap imitation of the real thing.

Hagar's son Yishmael is cut from the same cloth as his mother; both display this *klipah* of *hesed*:

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Avraham, **mocking**. (Bereishit 21:9)

...Another explanation is that it refers to immoral sexual conduct, just as it says (in reference to Potiphar's wife), "To **mock** at me." (Bereishit 39:17) ... (Rashi Bereishit 21:9)

Yishmael's mocking or laughter of is related to immoral sexual practices, as is evidenced by other uses of this word.¹⁸ But what exactly was Yishmael guilty of in this instance? Some commentaries accuse him of exploiting his

father's elevated philosophy of love and caring, turning it into a cheap "pickup line" to snare unsuspecting women among Avraham's students who wished to practice *hesed*. Yishmael was the *klipa* of *hesed*; – rather than practicing loving-kindness, he espoused "free love."¹⁹

Rabbi Akiva taught: AND SARAH SAW [THE SON OF HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN, WHOM SHE HAD BORNE TO AVRAHAM, MAKING SPORT.] Now 'making sport' refers to nothing else but sexual immorality, as in the verse, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought to us, came in to make sport of me.' (Bereishit 39:17) This teaches that Sarah saw Yishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonor them. (Bereishit Rabbah 53:11)

Elsewhere, Rashi notes the midrashic account of the mean-spirited laughter and insinuations after the birth of Yitzchak, as 'jokesters' questioned Avraham's paternity.

AVRAHAM BEGAT YITZCHAK – Just as Scripture wrote, "Yitzchak, son of Avraham" it felt compelled to say "Avraham begat Yitzchak", because the cynics of that time said, "Sarah became pregnant by Avimelech. See how many years she lived with Avraham without becoming pregnant from him." What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He formed Yitzchak's facial features exactly like Avraham's, so that everyone had to admit that Avraham fathered Yitzchak. This is what is stated here: Yitzchak was the son of Avraham, for there is

evidence that Avraham fathered Yitzchak (Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 1). (Rashi, Bereishit 25:19)

Apparently Yishmael found this idle gossip amusing (or self-serving), and repeated it:

She assumed that the reason Yishmael made these disparaging remarks [about Yitzchak] was because he heard them from his mother. Our sages have a saying (Sukkah 56) that the prattle of children in public reflects either what they picked up from their father or what they picked up from their mother.

[Sarah heard Yishmael mocking]: Making fun of the feast in Avraham's home, Yishmael claimed that surely Sarah must have become pregnant from Avimelech. The reason he had not made such remarks already at the time Yitzchok was born, was because he had only overheard wicked gossip about this at a later stage, and now he repeated what he had heard; if he had said these things at the time of Yitzchak's birth, Sarah was unaware of it, as she was preoccupied with the birth. (Seforno 21:90) ²⁰

There are two sides of the coin of holiness; both involve giving to others, both are called *hesed*, but one is real while the other is counterfeit:

(17) “If a man takes his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness; it is *hesed*; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people: he has

uncovered his sister's nakedness; he shall bear his iniquity. (Vayikra 20:17)

Illicit, incestual relationships are also labeled by the Torah as a type of *hesed* – albeit the artificial, unholy kind.²¹

This will help explain why another possible source for a mate was rejected. The daughters of Lot are also members of Avraham's extended family. According to tradition, not only is Lot Avraham's nephew, he is also Sarah's brother, making him Avraham's brother-in-law; this dual relationship should make Lot and his family the perfect place to search for a bride for Yitzchak.

One wonders if Rivka's brother Lavan, who somehow insinuates himself into the middle of things, is worried that the unexpected visit by a representative of a long-lost family member was nothing more than a ruse, disguised as a marriage proposal, to lay claim to the family inheritance. Ironically, in the next generation, the son of Rivka and Yitzchak returns and does precisely that: Yaakov eventually walks off with all of Lavan's wealth.

It is worth noting that Rivkah's father Betuel was the son of Milkah and Nahor.²² Nahor was Avraham's brother, while Milkah was Lot's sister, Avraham's niece (and, according to tradition, Milkah and Lot had a third sibling – Sarah).²³ Rivka was related to both Avraham and Sarah, which would make her a perfect candidate.

Lot, like Rivka and Avraham, also practices *hesed*, but his *hesed* is tainted. When the marauding mob of Sodomites besieges his home demanding that he surrender his guests, Lot offers

up his daughters to placate the crowd, confusing true *hesed* with warped sexuality.

After Sodom is laid to waste, Lot's daughters follow in the father's footsteps, practicing a confused form of *hesed* by committing incest with their father. Their behavior – but even more so the warped philosophy that motivates and animates them, will ultimately place them beyond the pale; they and their descendants will not re-join the family of Avraham. They believe that the destruction from which they were saved was total and complete; to their minds, only they and their father survive, and the only way to reproduce and save humanity is through their father. However, this world view is based on a fatal error: How could they have imagined that Avraham, their righteous uncle who had removed himself from the influence of Sodom, was also wiped out along with their wicked neighbors? This is the precise inverse of Avraham's outlook: When told of the impending destruction, Avraham pleads with God, assuming that there must be more righteous people in the world, and at least a handful of people worth saving in Sodom – but when Sodom is destroyed, it never occurs to the daughters of Lot that there are any righteous people who were spared. They never considered that Avraham had survived, when in fact they themselves had been saved only in the merit of Avraham.²⁴ The world view which they had inherited from their father was distorted; Avraham, the greatest man of the generation, had been edited out of their family lore.

Just as Hagar underestimated Sarah, the daughters of Lot underestimated Avraham. The bride of

Yitzchak could not come from either of these branches of the family.

Only Rivka, a person of true *hesed*, takes a leap of faith; like Avraham and Sarah, she leaves her birthplace, her home and family, to join the family of Avraham. She alone appreciated the greatness of Avraham and Sarah and was willing to be a part of the journey they had embarked on years earlier and to re-join that branch of the family. She was, in every way, the perfect match for Yitzchak.

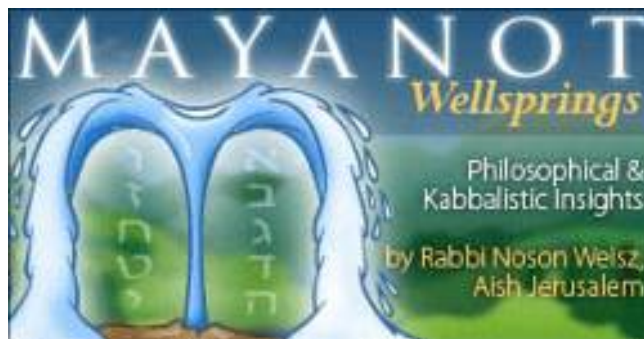
1. Bereishit 15:13. He said to Abram, "Know for sure that your seed will live as foreigners in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and afflicted four hundred years.
2. See Talmud Bavli 9a.
3. Bereishit 15:2. But Avram said, "O Almighty, Eternal God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one member of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!"
4. Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer Chapter 16; Midrash Hagadol 24:2.
5. Targum Pseudo Yonatan Bereishit 14:14, Midrash Aggadah Buber, Bereishit 16 siman 1, Hadar Zkainim 24:63. Hizkuni Bereishit 15:2, and Midrash Talpiot write that he was the grandson of Nimrod.
6. See Midrash Rabbah 59:9
7. See Midrash Rabbah 60:1
8. See Midrash Rabbah 60:8, Rashi Bereishit 24:42, Rav Dovid Zvi Hoffman Parashat Chaye Sarah AND I CAME THIS DAY – Today I started on my journey and today I have arrived here. Hence we may infer that the earth (the road) shrunk for him (i.e. that the journey was shortened in a miraculous manner) (Sanhedrin 95a). R. Acha said: The ordinary conversation of the patriarchs' servants is more pleasing to God than even the Torah (religious discourse) of their children, for the chapter of Eliezer (the account of his journey) is repeated in the Torah (i.e. it is written once as a narrative and again repeated as part of the conversation of the patriarch's servant) whereas many important principles of the Law are derived only from slight indications given in the Text (Bereishit Rabbah 60:8).
9. See Chatam Sofer in Torat Moshe Bereishit 24:14, who nuances this suitability of this relationship somewhat differently.
10. Midrash Aggadah
11. See Bereishit 24:4, see Ramban Bereishit 11:28, and 12:1.
12. See Malbim Bereishit 24:14.
13. See especially Bereishit 24:56. He said, "Do not delay me, when God has made my journey successful. Send me that I may go to my master." He said to them, "Do not delay me, now that the LORD has

made my errand successful. Give me leave that I may go to my master.

14. On the other hand, Rivka also takes the place of Sarah as evidenced by Bereishit 24:67, and especially the comments of Rashi on that verse. Yitzchak then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Yitzchak loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death. INTO HIS MOTHER SARAH'S TENT – He brought her into the tent and she became exactly like his mother Sarah – that is to say, the words signify as much as, [And he brought her into the tent] and, behold, she was Sarah, his mother). For whilst Sarah was living, a light had been burning in the tent from one Sabbath eve to the next, there was always a blessing in the dough (a miraculous increase) and a cloud was always hanging) over the tent (as a divine protection), but since her death all these had stopped. However, when Rebecca came, they reappeared" (Bereishit Rabbah 60:16)
15. Initially Avraham told his servant his servant to go to his land and birthplace (24:4). Subsequently the servant questions, if he were to fail to convince the perspective bride to come and marry a groom "sight unseen", could he bring Yitzchak there, then Avraham responds and mentions how God took him from "his father's home and birthplace" (24:7). The Servant apparently merges these two statements (which he understands is the meaning of the word "there" in 24:7) and tells Rivka's family that he was sent to the home of Avraham's "father and family" (24:38). See Abarbanel who catches this, and many other changes large and small in Eliezer's soliloquy. "...but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Yitzchak." The Eternal God, the Almighty God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I will give this land to your offspring' – He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there.
"...but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son."
16. Bereishit Rabbah 60:9.
17. For more on Aner, Eshkol and Mamre see Bereishit 14:13,24.
18. See the text and Rashi's comments on Bereishit 26:8 and 39:14, and Shmot 32:6.
19. See Siftei Kohen Vayikra 12:3, Megaleh Amukot Parshat Mishpatim.
20. This idea is echoed by R' Eliezer ben Eliyahu Ashkenazi in *Maase Hashem*, and in the Malbim Bereishit 21:9.
21. This type of relationship was needed to populate the world at the dawn of history, and it was part of God's kindness – *chesed* which temporarily allowed this form of relationship – so the world could exist see Rashi Vayikra 20:17, Yeurshalmi Sanhedrin 9:1, Pirki D'Rebbe Eliezer chapter 21, and Rashi Psalms 89:3.
22. See Bereishit 22:20, and 24:24(20) It happened after these things, that it was told Avraham, saying, "Behold, Milcah, she also has borne children to your brother Nahor: (21) Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, (22) And Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." (23) Bethuel

fathered Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Avraham's brother.

- (24) She said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor."
23. See Bereishit 11:29 and Rashi.(26) Terah lived seventy years, and fathered Avram, Nahor, and Haran. (27) Now this is the history of the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Avram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran fathered Lot. (28) Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim. (29) Avram and Nahor took wives. The name of Avram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran who was also the father of Yiscah.
24. See Bereishit 19:29. It happened, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Avraham, and sent Lot out of the middle of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived.



The Double Image

One would have thought that only a poor comedian desperate for a good line would attempt to establish a parallel between weddings and funerals. Yet according to our sages, it was the Psalmist rather than the comedian who first highlighted this connection. There is nothing satirical about it.

"For this let every devout one pray to You at a time when 'it' happens."
(Psalms 32:6)

Rabbi Chanina said that 'it' refers to a woman; that is to say, even the devout should pray to God to be sure to merit

a good wife. Rabbi Yochanan said that 'it' refers to burial; the devout should pray to God to merit a proper burial. (Talmud, Berochot 8a)

Marriages and burials have something in common. They both require a greater degree of Divine assistance than the other occasions that are parts of every normal life. Praying for their successful accomplishment requires a greater investment of effort and devotion than praying for other things.

This same linkage between marriages and burials is strikingly on display in this week's Torah portion whose major topics are the burial of Sarah in the Cave of *Machpela*, and the marriage of Isaac to Rebecca.

Let us attempt to reach some understanding of this seemingly odd match-up.

THE MACHPELA CAVE

The Cave of *Machpela*, the burial site of the matriarchs and patriarchs, is referred to ten times through the Book of Genesis, and the story of its purchase is described three times at length. What can be so significant about a particular cemetery that justifies the allocation of so much precious Torah space to the story of its acquisition?

The first clue: the Machpela cave has always been regarded as a place of pilgrimage by the Jewish people. Tradition has it that prayers offered at this site are especially effective. Our Sages tell us that the site was already recognized as holy in the times of Joshua (Talmud, Sotah, 34b). Caleb, one of the twelve spies sent by Moses to survey the Promised Land, and one of the two who survived

the experience, went there to pray for the inner strength to resist the lure of the conspiracy of the spies. It is his pilgrimage to the Machpela cave that saved him.

Nachmanides, one of the great Biblical commentators of the Middle Ages, writes to his son that he traveled all the way from Spain to be able to pray at the Machpela cave and to arrange a burial site for himself in the vicinity [see Letter #7, Chavel]. In those days the trip took an entire year and Nachmanides was not a young man when he undertook it. In general, the graves of *tzaddikim*, "the righteous ones," are considered favored prayer sites. Why? Surely, when the soul leaves, the body simply disintegrates and returns to the soil. How can there be any remnant of the personality that once inhabited it associated with such a lifeless, formless lump of clay?

SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

Another medieval commentator, the Ran, explains that the effectiveness of prayer at the burial sites of *tzaddikim* can be understood in terms of the special distinction Jewish tradition assigns to spiritual connections. A person who succeeds in establishing a new connection to God creates an eternal bond that will never disintegrate. After all God is above space-time. To Him, past, present and future have no existential meaning. It is we who experience time as a reality. We are born young, gradually age and finally die. None of these human experiences apply to the Divinity. The flow of time is part of our world, not God's [see Droshot Haran #8].

According to **our** perception of reality, Abraham and Sarah may have died four thousand years ago;

but as far as God is concerned, they are no more dead or in the past than they ever were. They are still walking around, fully active and very much alive in their own reality envelope. Their connection to God is still vibrant and alive and remains very much a function of the present from His point of view.

It is spiritual distance that separates us from God, not time, and spiritual distance has nothing to do with being alive or dead; the living person who cuts himself off from God is no closer to Him alive than dead. Rashi (Genesis 11:32) explains in the name of the Midrash that the wicked are already considered dead in their lifetimes; whereas the righteous are considered alive even after they die. After the passage of four thousand years we still begin all our prayers by attaching ourselves to God through the pathways created by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

THE DOUBLE FEATURE

In Hebrew, the word *Machpela* literally means "double." We all lead double lives. We live in the physical world - coping with its practical survival demands, making a living, raising children, planning for retirement. But the Torah teaches us that our activities have a dual aspect: the way we carry out the common activities of life has consequences in the spiritual world, and impacts on our relationship with God.

But wouldn't you expect that people who actually believed that all their mundane activities have a spiritual aspect as real and at least as important as their physical side to be focused on the spiritual consequences of their actions at least as much as they are concerned with their physical

ramifications? Doesn't the very fact that this is so rarely the case in practice indicate that we do not truly believe this?

Not at all. The problem: most of us find it extremely difficult to focus on two things simultaneously. This human limitation effectively forces us to ignore the spiritual consequences of our ordinary daily activities. We get too involved in coping with the everyday aspect of our problems to remain simultaneously conscious of what our activities are accomplishing in the spiritual world. We can only manage one life at a time. Although our lives are "double," we live them uni-dimensionally.

The people buried in the Cave of the *Machpela* were truly "double" people. Unlike us, they weren't very interested in the physical aspects of their lives. Their focus was always on the things their earthly deeds accomplished in the spiritual world; they never engaged in any mundane physical activity for its own sake; their focus was always on spiritual consequences.

COMPENSATION

Knowing our limitations, God enabled us to compensate for our lack of ability to devote the proper attention to spiritual consequences by giving us the Torah. The Torah teaches us how to manage the activities of our lives so that our mundane activities produce the desired spiritual results without our having to focus on the spiritual aspect of our activities at all. All we have to do is focus on the fulfillment of the commandments as we do on any earthly activity.

The Patriarchs had no such guide available to them. They had to figure out the spiritual consequences of their activities all by themselves. It was in the merit of their accomplishments in this area that God awarded us, their children, the Torah, and provided us with the means of following in their footsteps even though we are lacking in their ability to focus simultaneously on the dual aspects of being.

THE FIRST "DOUBLE" PERSON

The first person after Adam and Eve to be buried in the Cave of the *Machpela* was the Matriarch Sarah. She was clearly a "double" person par excellence, yet an incident that appears to encapsulate the diametric opposite of this double approach to life is directly attributed to her.

As the Torah relates the story, Sarah, a childless woman, persuades her husband to take a second wife, Hagar, so that raising the child of this union might help her, Sarah to conceive. How this approach to fertility problems works is beyond the scope of our discussion, but work it does, and sure enough, thirteen years after Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Sarah herself becomes pregnant and bears a son, Isaac.

Soon after her own son, Isaac is born, Sarah tells Abraham to banish both Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is reluctant, but God Himself appears and backs Sarah's decision, and they are duly sent away, without escort and with the most meager provisions. Hagar soon gets lost in the desert and God has to send an angel to provide her with water and save Ishmael's life. On the face of it, this is a record of horrendous cruelty and ingratitude.

As we shall see, if we manage to unravel the mystery of Sarah's motivations and comprehend her behavior we shall also find the key to the connection between weddings and funerals.

LIFE AND LAUGHTER

Reflection shows that far it must be Sarah's 'double-ness' that provides the background for the comprehension of the Ishmael story. Being a 'double' person means living with God constantly. Focusing on the spiritual consequences of everyday activities means keeping the image of God constantly before your eyes as laid out in the Shulchan Aruch [Orach Chaim, 1,1]. Passing the tradition of living with God down the chain of generations requires even more. God has to become a virtual member of your household. In her wisdom, Sarah perceived that Ishmael could not fit into this sort of environment.

"Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, mocking." (Genesis 21:9)

The Tosefta (Sotah 6,6) explains that the verb to mock, "*Mezachek*," employed in this verse also refers to idol worship, licentiousness, and murder. Strangely enough, Isaac's name in Hebrew, *Yitzchak*, derives from the exact same verb expressed in the future tense. The difference between Isaac and Ishmael is in the timing of their laughter. The Talmud explains (Brochot 31a) the futuristic connotation of Isaac's name; it is forbidden to release oneself totally to laughter in this world; total release to joy is reserved for the next world; hence the name of Isaac, *Yitzchak*, laughter in the future tense. Ishmael's laughter, *Mezachek* is expressed in the present tense.

Idol worship, licentiousness and murder are only possible in the absence of the awareness that I will need to give an accounting for everything I do in this world one day. You can only enjoy these activities fully by living entirely in the moment of the present. A "double" person is totally incapable of engaging in any of them. When Sarah observed that Ishmael needed to release unrestrained laughter and joy in this world, she knew immediately that he could not prosper in her household. Such unrestrained laughter demonstrated that he was clearly uni-dimensional.

"DOUBLE NESS" AND THE WOMB

But why was Ishmael uni-dimensional? Wasn't he a child of Abraham as much as Issac was? As they had the same father, the key to the difference between them must lie in their mothers. Unlike Sarah, Hagar was a one-dimensional person; Ishmael who was formed in her womb was born lacking a "double" aspect. Ishmael could not tolerate the atmosphere of constant focus on spirituality that prevailed in Abraham's house.

He defended himself against its influence by mocking it; our common human reaction to anything we perceive as exaggerated sanctity. We tend to mock people who take themselves too seriously, and our standard of what to consider "too seriously" tends to be extremely subjective. Sarah recognized that the son of Hagar and her son were not the same sorts of human beings, and they did not belong in the same household.

In Sarah's "double" house, the uni-dimensional Ishmael could be nothing more than a spoiler, bringing down its spiritual level and making himself miserable in the process. A child of

Abraham, Ishmael has his own greatness, but it could not emerge in Sarah's double household.

Severing the connection was beneficial for all concerned. Since the severance was affected with pureness of heart, solely to preserve the integrity of the spiritual connection of Abraham's household with God, its consequences could only benefit all concerned, including Ishmael. Had there been the slightest trace of jealousy or any other negative emotion motivating Sarah's behavior, it would have been unthinkable for God to support her decision to banish Ishmael.

BEING BORN "DOUBLE"

The spiritual quality inherent in Abraham's children is the subject of an open discussion that takes place between God and Abraham.

"The word of God came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Fear not Abram, I am a shield for you; your reward is very great.' And Abram said, 'My Lord God, what can you give me seeing that I go childless?' And He took him outside, and said, 'Gaze now toward the Heavens, and count the stars if you are able to count them!' and He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be!'" (Genesis 15:1)

Our Sages interpret the phrase *"He took him outside"* to mean that God removed Abraham from the natural order of things that is symbolized by the influence of the stars. Under the natural order of the universe Abraham could not reproduce. (Talmud, Yevomos, 64a)

Abraham could only bear children by being given access to a new power of reproduction injected

into the universe through a special spiritual pipeline established specifically for the purpose. Not only Isaac was born through this fresh connection, but Isaac's children as well. For just as Abraham could not reproduce naturally, neither could Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob had the same problem with his main wife Rachel. (Genesis 25:21, 29:31, Talmud, Ibid.)

The Talmud expresses this new power of reproduction in terms of a partnership; There are three partners in the formation of a person; the Holy One, his father and mother. (Niddah 31a)

JEWISH MOTHERS

The Ishmael story teaches us just how significant a role the Jewish mother is assigned in this new partnership. Studying the story explains the reason that Torah law teaches that Jewish identity is acquired through the mother. The fusion between the soul and the body takes place in the womb. It is there that the capacity to be "double" must make its first appearance. Ishmael's mother, Hagar, was not a "double" person herself, and no "double" connections could form in the environment of her womb.

The central thesis of this essay was stated plainly by Abraham himself before the birth of Isaac. When God informs Abraham that he will have a child by Sarah, he accepts the news with a singular lack of enthusiasm:

"O that Ishmael might live before You." (Genesis, 17,18)

It is quite apparent that Abraham understood that the birth of Isaac somehow represents a rejection of Ishmael. His reaction was to offer a prayer to

ask God to repair the defect that served as the grounds for the rejection of Ishmael. Abraham expressed all this in the words *"live before you."*

LIVING BEFORE GOD

We have explained that this concept of "living before God" is the true essence of being "double." The "double" person conducts his or her life in God's presence. He or she lives before God even as he goes about his everyday business. Abraham and Sarah weren't born "doubles." The patriarchs dedicated their lives to internalizing "living before God" and making it a part of their characters. They succeeded so well, that the capacity for "double-ness" was inborn in their children.

Not that "living before God" ever comes easy. Even a person born with a natural capacity for "double-ness" needs to work hard to actualize the potential. Only a life spent dedicated to Torah observance can bring out the spiritual qualities of "double-ness". Unfortunately, most of us allow our potential to live before God unexploited and dormant, preferring to live uni-dimensional lives; we never become the "double" people we have inherited the potential to become. We banish ourselves from Abraham's house. No one wants to kick **us** out.

PERMANENT CONNECTIONS

It is not surprising that the souls of those who **do** actualize their "double" potential never entirely leave this world. Such people spend their lives living before God. The connections they form between their mundane activities and their consequences in the spiritual dimensions of

existence elevate their physical selves to the level of spirituality. Spiritual connections with God, Who is beyond space-time are also beyond space-time; they do not dissolve upon the death of the people who forged them. The graves of the *tzaddikim* are sites that are especially suited to prayer - they are the sites where the connections between the spiritual and physical realms of reality are interred in the earth.

The people who first established and perfected this capacity to conduct "double" lives were interned in the Cave of the *Machpela*, the "Double Cave." No wonder that it has been a place for prayer and pilgrimages ever since.

THE MARRIAGE-BURIAL CONNECTION

The connection between marriage and burial is finally beginning to crystallize; we can begin to glimpse why marriage and burial may both require special devotion. When a man marries he interns the spiritual connection he has with God in his wife. It depends entirely on her whether he will succeed in passing this connection down to his children. When something is totally beyond my power, the only one who can help is God. I must turn to Him in prayer.

The spiritual connection a person establishes with God also passes out of his control upon his death. It survives his death, but any further use that is made of it is in the hands of others, and only God can help to insure that it remains a positive force in the unfolding of the God-man relationship that is Jewish history. Once again only prayer can help.

But there is a comfort in this lack of control. When the Palmist enjoins us to pray for something in God's name, he also conveys the message that our prayers will receive a favorable reception. In our own time, we are bearing witness to the power of the prayers of the earlier generations of Jews who prayed to God to protect the spiritual connection to Him they are passing down to their children. We see these prayers being answered in great numbers.



Avraham's Very Hard Day

According to tradition (Avos 5:3), God put Avraham to the test ten times, and he passed them all with flying colors. It is generally accepted that the ten tests were progressively harder, that once he proved himself in a lesser test, Hashem presented him with a more difficult test until he proved himself to have the highest level of faith. It is also generally accepted that the tenth and most difficult test was the *Akeidah*. After all, what could be more challenging than to be commanded to sacrifice the treasured child born to him in his old age?

Rabbeinu Yonah in Avos (ibid.), however, lists the *Akeidah* as the ninth test. What was the tenth?

When Avraham could not find a place to bury Sarah, he was forced to buy a plot from Ephron for an exorbitant sum.

The question springs out from the pages. True, it must have been exceedingly frustrating for Avraham to be forced to pay anything at all, let alone an exorbitant sum, for land Hashem had promised him as an everlasting birthright. True, it must have been difficult to deal with this frustration in his bereavement over the death of his wife Sarah. But still, is this at all comparable to the test of the *Akeidah*? Does this even begin to come close to being asked to sacrifice a son on the altar?

There is tendency among people to look forward to the golden years of retirement. They work very hard. They struggle to be successful, to build a reputation for themselves and to provide their families with a good standard of living. Then there comes a point in a person's life when he steps back and surveys all he has accomplished, and he says, "Enough! I've done all that could be expected of me and more. It's time to stop, to ease up on the pace, to sit back and enjoy life. After all, I've earned it!" And indeed, he has. There is no reason he should not enjoy his golden years of retirement.

But in the realm of spirituality, it is not so. There is never a point when a person can sit back and say, "I've done enough!" In the realm of spirituality, a person either moves up or he moves down; he never remains in one spot. If he "retires," he immediately goes into decline. The struggle for spiritual growth does not end until a person draws his very last breath.

When Avraham came back from the *Akeidah*, he had reached a level of achievement so exalted that the Jewish people throughout history are sustained by its merit. It undoubtedly took every last ounce of spiritual courage and fortitude he could muster to withstand such a horrific ordeal. And he did it! Avraham found those hidden reservoirs of strength and faith, and he showed himself ready to sacrifice his son if Hashem so commanded. And in the end, everything had worked out for the best. He had proved himself, and his son's life had been spared. Avraham returned home with a sense of boundless relief, ready to share his experience with his wife. One can imagine his shock when he found her dead, and his frustration when he encountered so many difficulties in bringing her to eternal rest.

Avraham could easily have raised his voice in righteous indignation and complained. "Enough already! How much do I have to go through? Isn't it enough that I have just gone through the ordeal of the *Akeidah*? Do I have to go through this as well? I have put in so many years of effort. I have glorified Hashem's Name in so many places for so many years. I have made so much *kiddush Hashem*. Don't I deserve a little respite to sit back and enjoy the golden years of my life?"

This was a very subtle test, the ultimate test, and Avraham could easily have reacted instinctively, as most people would. But he did not. He realized that he had one more important lesson to teach the world. By his example, he could demonstrate that there is no retirement from his service, that being a faithful servant of God is literally the work of a lifetime. There is no retirement. But the years are certainly golden.

Rav Eliahu Dessler, in *Michtav m'Eliahu*, offer a different explanation. He sees in this tenth and final test the demonstration of two of the most critical aspects of Avraham's personality.

Consider the situation. Avraham finds himself forced to conduct business dealings with the wily and duplicitous Ephron. He is exceedingly frustrated both by his own circumstances and by Ephron's opportunistic behavior. How does he conduct himself?

Imagine you set out to purchase a used car, or perhaps we should say a pre-owned car, and you run into the proverbial used-car salesman. He is wearing a loud checked suit and a fluorescent smile, and he bombards you with an incessant stream of high-pressure sales pitch. He turns a deaf ear to your stated preferences in price and model and does his best to persuade to buy the high-priced clunker that you absolutely do not want. After five minutes, you are gnashing your teeth and clenching your fists.

How do you speak to this man? Do you treat him with the respect and deference due any human being formed in the image of the Lord, the *tzelem Elokim*? Or do you respond to his crudeness with a crudeness of your own? Do you allow external frustrations get the better of you?

And how about internal frustrations?

I was recently at a supermarket, and I asked the person bagging my groceries not to make the bags too heavy.

"If you don't like the way I do it," he barked at me, "do it yourself!"

I was taken aback, to say the least. "Excuse me," I said. "Did I say something nasty to you? Why did I deserve such a response?"

The man gave me a sheepish grin. "Sorry. I had a hard day."

I guess that explains it all. He had a hard day, which gives him the right to give me a hard time, I suppose.

Having a "hard day" is obviously not a justification for rude behavior. But how about something that goes beyond your ordinary "hard day"? Imagine you have just come off an overseas flight. You have spent a solid hour watching the luggage circulate around the carousel until you have each piece memorized down to its smallest details, but your own luggage seems to have disappeared into thin air. You go to the ticket office to report your loss. Are you justified in snapping at the agent because of what you are going through?

Let us take this a little further. You are in the hospital attending a relative who is in serious condition, perhaps even in mortal danger. A doctor or nurse or some other hospital functionary gives you a hard time, and you respond with a sharp retort. Does your anxiety about the health of your relative justify such behavior?

Now let us consider Avraham's circumstances. He has just come back from the *Akeidah*, where he narrowly escaped slaughtering his own son. Can you imagine his mental and emotional state? Then he comes home to discover that Sarah, his wife of a century, has died and that he has to go through some difficult negotiations in order to secure a

burial plot for her. I suppose one could safely say that Avraham was having a rather "hard day." To top it all off, he must contend with Ephron, who may not have been wearing a checked suit but was certainly no better than the sleaziest used-car salesman.

This was Avraham's test. He could have played hardball with Ephron. He could have wiped the floor with him. But he didn't. He treated him with the respect and deference due every human being. Just because he was having a hard day, he did not have to make Ephron suffer.

On the night Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's *rebbeztin* died, he was standing in the hall of the hospital trying to deal with his profound grief. A student of his, whose wife had just given birth, was also in the hospital at the time. The student noticed Rav Shlomo Zalman in the hallway, and he ran over to give him the wonderful news. He was so excited that it did not even occur to him to ask what his *rosh yeshivah* was doing in the hospital at that time of the night.

Rav Shlomo Zalman gave the student his warmest blessing and graced him with his famous smile, so full of love and sheer joy. The student walked away with his heart singing, completely unaware that his *rosh yeshivah* had been told just a few minutes earlier that his wife had passed away.

Following the example of his forefather Avraham, Rav Shlomo Zalman saw no reason to diminish his student's joy in the very least just because he himself was suffering.

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