

### **‘Father Knows Best?’**

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*“Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan. Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and cry for her”.*

Parashat *Chayei Sarah* opens with a funeral. Sarah, wife of Avraham and mother of Isaac, has passed away in Hebron at the age of 127, and Avraham arrives to eulogize her life and mourn her death. Sarah’s death follows almost directly the account of the Binding of Isaac found in last week’s parashah.

Rashi derives from the near-juxtaposition of these stories that the Binding caused Sarah’s death. He cites a midrash which concretizes this reading by having Sarah die when Satan shows her a true vision of Avraham prepared to slaughter their son. Others suggest that while Sarah did not die immediately, the episode estranged her from Avraham. Thus Avraham “came” for her funeral rather than being there for her death. One clear message of this story is that religious experience, and relationship with G-d, are not always productive of happiness and successful human relationships.

Avraham seeks to bury Sarah in Hebron. An elaborately formal scene follows in which the locals, collectively and individually, offer him a grave for free, while he seeks to pay full price; whether the result of this negotiation is a fair price, a bargain, or massive overpayment is debated by commentaries through the ages. Regardless, the underlying theme of the negotiation is whether Avraham will now see himself as a local. Avraham identifies himself from the outset as an alien and resident rather than as a citizen, and seeks to avoid being under obligation to the Canaanites. This reprises his refusal to take any spoils of war after rescuing Sodom (14:23).

Now a widower, Avraham assigns his lead servant, traditionally Eliezer, the task of finding a wife for his son and heir, Yitzchak.. Genesis 24:2-3 reads as follows:

*“And Avraham said to his servant, the elder of his household, who controlled all that was his: ‘Please place your hand under my thigh. I will make you swear by Hashem, G-d of the Heavens and G –d of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from (among) the daughters of Canaan, in the midst of whom I dwell.”*

Our discussion this week focuses on several issues arising from Avraham’s rather peculiar instructions.

- 1) Avraham is in Canaan by Divine command, and was ordered by G-d to leave his birthland and culture behind. He has at least an alliance, and more likely a genuinely covenantal friendship, with three Canaanite brothers (14:13). Why, then, is he so insistent that Yitzchak not marry a Canaanite woman?**

- 2) **Why does Avraham send a servant to find a wife for Yitzchak, rather than sending Yitzchak himself? Does Yitzchak even know that the servant has been sent?**
- 3) **Why does Avraham make the servant swear not to marry Yitzchak to a Canaanite woman, rather than making Yitzchak himself swear not to marry such a woman?**

Malbim\* suggests that Avraham believed that he was sent to Canaan to rescue the degraded Canaanite culture, not to learn from or be nurtured by it. He thus sought to make sure that Yitzchak remained an outsider in that culture. K'li Yakar\* argues, even more darkly, that Avraham wished Yitzchak to avoid entanglement with any culture. Sending for a foreign wife antagonized the locals by implying that their daughters were not good enough for his family, while insisting that Yitzchak's chosen bride come to Canaan rather than vice versa protected Yitzchak from Charanite influence. Others suggest that the Canaanites committed sins of the flesh, whereas the Charanites committed sins of the spirit. Avraham saw a wife from Charan as the lesser of two evils, on the ground that assimilating a child of idolaters to monotheism would be easier than assimilating the child of sensualists to moderation.

Whatever Avraham's reasons for rejecting Canaanite women, his instructions to Eliezer raise the suspicion that Yitzchak himself could not be trusted to choose a proper wife. Netziv\* argues instead that Yitzchak was not allowed to leave Canaan. This standard midrashic claim sees Yitzchak as having permanently acquired the sanctity of a sacrifice as a result of the Binding. It is validated by Genesis 26:2, in which G-d forbids Yitzchak to leave Canaan during a famine, whereas Avraham did so without Divine objection and Yaakov will do so with Divine encouragement. Others suggest that Yitzchak would not have actively sought a wife at all.

None of these readings explain why Avraham did not make Yitzchak himself swear not to marry a Canaanite woman. Meshekh Chokhmah suggests that this question may be the source of the halakhic rule that parents may not coerce their children to marry or not marry. This seems to beg our question, however, as it assumes that Yitzchak would not have assumed such a restriction willingly.

I offer as food for thought the possibility that Yitzchak and Avraham were not on speaking terms at this point. On the way to the Binding, the Torah says twice that Avraham and Isaac walked together; on the way from the Binding, Avraham walks together with his servants, but Yitzchak is conspicuously absent. The trauma of the Binding may also have made Yitzchak incapable of seeking marriage. We noted above the midrashic contention that Sarah's death was an indirect consequence of the Binding, and add here that in 24:67 Yitzchak's acceptance of Rivkah as his mate is associated with his final acceptance of Sarah's death.

But I think a still more stimulating approach can be developed from a lecture I heard from Rabbi Joshua Berman in Yeshivat Har Etzion. He suggested that Yitzchak

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\* **Meir Lob ben Jehiel Michael** (1809 - September 18, 1879), better known as the **Malbim**, was a Russian **rabbi**, preacher, and author. The name "Malbim" is derived from the **Hebrew** initials of his name, and became his family name by frequent usage.

\* **Kli Yakar** (1550-1619) After serving as *rosh yeshiva* (dean) in Lemberg, **Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz** became the spiritual leader in Prague. He was an inspiring speaker who electrified his audiences with his highly-charged and breathtaking sermons. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim's most important work is *Kli Yakar*, a classic commentary on the *Chumash* (Pentateuch). [www.wordiq.com/definiion](http://www.wordiq.com/definiion) → keyword: kli yakar.

spent much time meditating on his relationship with Avraham's firstborn, Yishmael. In Genesis 21:10, Sarah demanded Yishmael's expulsion for Yitzchak's sake, and Avraham agreed. Yitzchak had great difficulty dealing with the collateral damage caused by his status as favored son. Rabbi Berman's evidence was the prominence of the place B'er Lachai Roi in Yitzchak's life; B'er Lachai Roi is where, in 16:14, Hagar is informed of Yishmael's destiny. In 24:62, just before he meets Rivkah, Yitzchak is "coming from coming" there, a perplexing phrase that may indicate that he went there frequently but never stayed, or perhaps that he started for there many times but never made it all the way. In 25:11 Yitzchak finally settles in B'er Lachai Roi after burying Avraham together with Yishmael. The burial is the only verse in which Yitzchak and Yishmael appear together as adults.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Berman suggests that Avraham's death finally enables Yitzchak and Yishmael to achieve closure. My suggestion is that Yitzchak's guilt about Yishmael's suffering made him incapable of rejecting people, and he therefore would not on his own have been able to reject the Canaanites around him.

Yitzchak's inability to reject, or choose between, people follows him throughout his life. My wife Deborah contends that Yitzchak hoped to have only one child, a plan G-d frustrates by blessing him with twins. When he needs, ultimately, to reject Esav in favor of Yaakov, he cannot do so directly, although he does allow Rivkah to manipulate him into the proper result by means of a very crude stratagem.

The narrative as a whole is strikingly blunt about the potential human costs of genuine religiosity. G-d does not enable His adherents to avoid hard choices, or to avoid the negative consequences of those choices even when made correctly. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik argues that even the search for spiritual peace was antithetical to the Jewish religious consciousness; I'm not sure I would go that far, but at the very least, failure to achieve such peace should not be seen as indicative of overall religious failure.

Shabbat shalom  
Aryeh Klapper

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<sup>1</sup> Note also that in 24:63 Yitzchak goes out "lasuach" in the field, and in 21:15 Hagar throws Yishmael under one of the "sichim".