

Over the last couple messages I've shared up here, I've talked about faith - what faith is founded upon, and what it looks like in the lives of God's people. In Part One I talked about God's covenants, that God binds Himself to His words and the stipulations of His covenants. God, in effect, says to His people, "This is what I did for you. This is what I will do for you. This is what you are to do for me."

In Part Two, I expanded upon the idea that faith is not merely believing something but acting upon what is believed, especially at a critical moment in time where the choice made will determine the entire rest of a person's life course. Rahab, a harlot of Jericho, was the example. All of Jericho had heard about the exodus from Egypt of a vast throng of people who were slowly making their way toward Jericho, which happened to be a city on the edge of the very land that HaShem had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants.

When Rahab one day came face to face with some spies that had been sent by the approaching Hebrews, she also came face to face with her crisis of faith: do I help these people whose God is apparently a lot more powerful than any of the gods of Egypt, or do I turn them over to the king of Jericho? This wasn't an easy decision. Hiding the spies would most assuredly place her and her family in danger of being caught and executed as traitors. But Rahab made a risky faith decision. She decided she would cast in her lot with the bigger God. And she was rewarded for it.

In this third installment, we are going to look into two key elements of Abraham's faith. The 11th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews describes what faith is by giving examples of it in the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. And which of these does the chapter say the most about: Abraham. God spoke to him concerning two things that to this present day have occupied the hearts of the Jewish people: a homeland and descendants.

Our Torah portion this week is called *Chayei Sarah*. There are two main events: the death and burial of Sarah, and the securing of a wife for Isaac. Have you ever noticed how much detail Torah goes into about each of these? Why so much detail in relation to these two specific matters? Torah, which means teaching or instruction, does something very deliberately here in *Chayei Sarah* which we must not miss. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has some brilliant insight into this in his d'var Torah on *Chayei Sarah* from October 2013. He writes:

A while back, a British newspaper, *The Times*, interviewed a prominent member of the Jewish community. . . 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?"

[The man'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."

Something like that is the impression we get 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 **“a sojourner and foreigner among [them],”** 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.”** 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 event, 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, 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 Rebekah 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 mention, 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.”** 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 leaves nothing to chance. He does not speak to Isaac himself but to his most trusted servant, whom he instructs to go **“to my native land, to my birthplace,”** and find the appropriate woman. He wants Isaac to have a wife who will share his faith and way of life...

As with the purchase of the field, so here, the 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 had promised 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”**) is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham’s descendants will be **“a great nation,”** as many as **“the dust of the earth,”** and **“the stars in the sky”**; he will be the father not of one nation but of many.

Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of the land that he can call his own, and has only one child who will continue the covenant, Isaac, [who was] 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, so that we will not miss the point, [which is]:

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, He 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*. (I would respectfully amend Rabbi Sacks' statement there slightly by putting it this way: *What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is not only what God does for us but what we do for God in response*.)

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 next chapter, to our surprise, we read that after Sarah's death, Abraham takes another wife and has eight more children. Whatever else this tells us . . . it certainly conveys the point that Abraham stayed young the way Moses stayed young, **“His eye undimmed and his natural energy unabated.”** 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 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 and 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. It would make achievement like Jonah's gourd, that 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.

I hope you are inspired by Rabbi Sacks' words. For Abraham, the death of his beloved Sarah brought into sharpened focus just where he stood in relation to the two promises God had made to him about the land and about his descendants. And Abraham shifted into a higher gear.

Consider our haftarah passage. David is old. He needed assistance just to stay warm. His son Adonijah seizes the opportunity to put himself forward as the next king of Israel. Nathan the prophet finds out. Nathan knew that Solomon was to inherit the throne. So he goes to Solomon's mother, Batsheva, tells her what's going on, and the two of them go to King David and tell him. Upon hearing these reports about what Adonijah was doing, old king David shifts into a higher gear and that very day places Adonijah's brother, Solomon, on the throne of Israel and Judah.

In our *Besorah* reading from Matthew 3, Yochanan the immerser begins preaching repentance out in the wilderness of Israel, and then one day the Messiah comes walking up to him. Yochanan's work suddenly shifted things into a higher gear for all of Israel.

Sarah's death and Isaac's bachelorhood brought to the forefront of Abraham's mind the promises of God about a land and descendants. Adonijah's actions to put himself on the throne brought to the forefront of David's mind God's promise concerning Solomon. HaShem had told Yochanan the Immerser that **"He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining, this is the one who immerses in the Ruach HaKodesh."** John 1:33

Things happen, good things, and bad things, - stuff happens - to individuals, to families, to communities, even to entire nations. Those that can look at it all through the focused lens of God's sure promises, will choose to shift into a higher gear of action, action that moves in the direction of seeing the promises of God brought to fruition.

I'm not 92 like the man at the beginning of Rabbi Sacks d'var Torah. But here at the age of 66 I see more and more clearly all the work I still need to accomplish before my life comes to an end, and, as much as I would like to just lie back and rest, I find myself being shifted into a higher gear, and I thank the LORD for the energy He gives me to do what must be done.

So may what is happening before your very eyes these days call evermore clearly to mind the promises of God, and may you also, like Abraham, like David, like Yochanan, be shifted into a higher gear of action!

BaShem Yeshua.