

Parashat Chayei Sarah, 5774 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

How to keep perspective amidst the stress of sorrow, to hold to life in the face of death? One midrash suggests that Abraham was coming from burying his father, Terach, when his wife, Sarah, died. Our hearts break with his. There are moments in Torah when time is an illusion, page and parchment the grounding of our own lives, as well as theirs. We are there in the grip of shared and universal human emotion. These are people we know and care for, celebrating their triumphs as our own, crying for their grief and sorrow. We live and we learn and we sanctify and strive to bring meaning to all moments of life.

Of all of my teachers, my mother is the one who taught me the most that death is part of life. As she was Sarah Chava, I always feel a connection to her teaching with this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chayei Sarah*. The portion opens telling of Sarah's death, but the words mean "the Life of Sarah." So we learn from *Sarah imenu/Sarah our mother*, that death is part of life. There is a wholeness to her life, all of its moments and stages woven together, as expressed in the way her age is given, *me'ah shannah, v'esrim shannah, v'sheva shanim/a hundred years and twenty years and seven years*. All of our days count, each to be filled with its own meaning. That is also what we learn from our father Abraham, both in his response to Sarah's death and as his own death draws near later in this portion. We are told of Abraham, *Avraham zaken, ba ba'yamim/Avraham was old, he had come through the days*. There is an obvious question. If he was old, hadn't he come through the days, why both phrases? We learn that the two are not the same. To come through the days is not simply about becoming old, but about how we live, how we come through the days of our lives, investing each with meaning, making each day count.

Throughout *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, there is a thread of kindness that weaves together life and death as part of one fabric. *Chesed/loving-kindness*, the word itself and its expression in deed, is a constant theme throughout the portion. Of what it means to come through our days, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, *a day in which we do not do an act of kindness/yom she'ayno bo chesed/is not considered as a day in our lives*. The ultimate expression of *chesed shel emes/true loving-kindness* is in our response to the needs of the dead, from whom there can be neither acknowledgement nor reward. So for all of his grief, Avraham's last act of kindness for Sarah is to purchase a plot and to bury her, as his sons Yitzchak and Yishma'el will soon do for him.

Such loving-kindness is given practical expression in a Jewish community through the work of the *Chevra Kaddisha/the Holy Society*. The *Chevra Kaddisha* is much more than a burial society, bringing caring and comforting attention to the

range of needs attendant on a death. The emergence of a pluralistic *Chevra Kaddisha* in Boston is of deep meaning and significance, with a number of Nehar Shalom members training to participate in the holy work to be shared among many congregations.

The work of the *Chevra Kaddisha* expresses an essential wholeness. As the newborn baby is helpless, so too is the dead who lies before us. As we welcome the newborn with love and selfless caring, so we bid farewell to the dead. One we do in joy, the other in sorrow, two moments in life's turning. The holiness of birth is a moment of awe. To be present at the moment of a life's entry into the world is to be enveloped by holiness, suffused with the sanctity of life and the presence of God. To be present at the moment of death is also awesome, at the moment of a last breath, the departing of a soul. Then too, the room is filled with holiness, with the sanctity of life and the presence of God. The primary function of the *Chevra Kaddisha* is to prepare the body, sacred vessel that housed a soul, for burial. As we cleanse and clothe the newborn baby upon its arrival, so we wash and clothe the dead upon their departure. It is the fabric of life, a garment woven on the loom of each day, a thread of kindness that joins beginning and end.

Crying for our mother Sarah, *Sarah Imenu*, feeling Abraham's grief as our own, we become the blessing of their memories, making each day count through acts of kindness, affirming life in the way of our living it as we come through the days.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor