

Introduction to Parsha #5: Chayei Sarah¹

Torah: Genesis 23:1 - 25:18

Haftarah: I Kings 1:1-31

B'rit Chadasha: I Corinthians 15:35-58



Avraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah.

[Genesis 23:19a]

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is Petition #2: *Teshuvah* [Turning/repentance]

Vayihyu chayei Sarah – And Sarah lived ... ***me'ah shanah ve'esrim shanah v'sheva shanim*** – a hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years ... ***sh'nei chayei Sarah*** – the years of Sarah's life ... ***Vatamot Sarah*** – and Sarah died **Genesis 23:1-2a.**

The critical test of *Moriyah* is now complete – and behold ... *od Yitzchak chai* - Yitzchak is *still alive*! Against all odds, the point man of the Holy One's Strategic Initiative in its 2nd generation has survived the raging fire, the cords that bound him in their cruel grip, and the flint-knife that pressed so firmly against his neck – and the long-anticipated heir to the covenant mantle and baton is none the worse for the wear! *Hallelu-Yah!* He breathes! He sees! He hears! He walks! He laughs! Alas, it is not so with Sarah. Sarah breathes – and laughs – no more. The fragile *nefesh* season in which her eternal spirit abode in a physical, mortal body has come to an end. Unbeknownst to Avraham and Yitzchak, the test of *Moriyah* was in part a strategic distraction, choreographed by the Author of Life to divert their attention from what was about to happen to their beloved Sarah. As they were soaring spiritually from their wild ride of Transcendence, Sarah was slipping through the great 'vanishing point' portal humans call 'death'. Avraham and Yitzchak come

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back home after their *Moriyah* mountaintop experience to learn that even for men who follow the way of the Holy One with all their heart there is no guarantee of tomorrow. Sometimes, even for great men of *emunah*, there is no miraculous healing for those we love. Sometimes, even for faithful servants of the Almighty, the Strategic Initiative and Grand Plan of the Holy One take us to the valley of the shadow of death – and right into the teeth of bereavement. We Sometimes, even for friends of God, there is no sign, no wonder, no miracle – only well-meaning friends shaking their heads, bringing meals we are too distraught to make for ourselves, and trying to say, each in his/her own unique way: “*I am so sorry ... for your loss*’. Sometimes, even for the spiritual elite, there is no Divine Visitation, no theophany, no rush of angels’ wings when we feel like one should come. Sometimes, even for patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets of the Most High, Heaven is – or at least seems - maddeningly silent. Sometimes, even for the most humble, thankful, and joyous soul, there is no comfort, no consolation, and nothing anywhere close to a satisfactory explanation. , too, know the bitter sting of heartbreak. We, too, experience the soul-numbing disorientation phenomenon of grief. Our lips dutifully whisper *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet* even as deep within our anguished hearts a voice we hardly recognize is screaming ***Eli! Eli! Lamah azabtani?*** – *My God! My God! Why (for what and to what end) have you departed/separated Yourself from me?* In such times there no prayer but the mourner’s *Kaddish*; and there is nothing to be done but rend garments, make the absolute worst kind of arrangements that a human being can make, beat the drum slowly, *sit sheva* in stony silence, listen to the empty platitudes ... and prepare to embrace the inevitable onset of ‘why’ and ‘what if’ questions, pangs of guilt, daggers of blame, flashes of anger, interminable days of confusion, even longer long nights of loneliness, and powerful sensations of being hollowed out to a bare shell, all leading inexorably to pulsing waves of sobs, tears, and pain.

Were it not for the ‘*protective custody/grace bubble*’ in which the Holy One silently but lovingly envelops us Were it not for the *comfort blanket* the *Ruach HaKodesh* spreads over us as Were it not for the hope that His Words of Life, Health, and *Shalom* bring Were it not for being put in remembrance of the Covenant assurances He has made concerning us and our seed forever.... Well, Beloved, there is no need to complete any of those sentences. There is no need to ponder, or worry about, any of those ‘*were it not fors*’. He is faithful. He steps out of the unseen realm, breaks the finity barrier, crashes our pity party, and takes charge – and eventually, *it is well ... it is well with our souls*.

To Everything There is a Season

There a time to laugh; but, alas, in this life there are also plenty of times to weep.

For Avraham and Yitzchak, the former has given way to the latter. Sarah, the love of Avraham's life, who taught us to laugh, will laugh no more. While Avraham and Yitzchak were on their great Moriyah Adventure, Beautiful Sarah – the cherished confidante and companion who has supported Avraham through every transition and trial of his radical Covenant life - slipped out of sight. She passed through a torn veil. The eyes of his *ishet chayil* – i.e. woman of virtue, valor, and strength - will never again sparkle as he covers her with his tallit and sings his *Erev Shabbat* blessings. Avraham has heard his *ishah's* sweet laughter for the last time. His very special *ezer kenegdo's* days on earth are done. ***Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet*** – *Blessed are you, O Holy One our God, Hidden/Eternal King, Whose decrees are all consistent with and faithful to His Plan.*

Oh Avraham, dear father of all persons of *emunah*; oh, Yitzchak, blessed child of all the Covenant's promises and custodian of all its mysteries, we see your grief. ***Ha-makom u'nachem etchem betoch sh'ar availai Tziyon v'Yerhusalayim*** - *May the Holy One arise and comfort you with all those who mourn in Tziyon and Jerusalem.* Go ahead, dear heroes of the hall of faith - weep as long and as deeply as you need. But do not grieve as those who have no hope. Remember the Covenant. Remember the promises. Remember the Grand Plan for the Redemption of Mankind and for the Restoration of Creation to its Edenic state of beauty, fruitfulness, and harmony. As you have learned so many times since that first ***Lech Lecha*** moment, for a man who walks and talks with, cuts covenant with, and serves the Creator of the Universe, every 'ending' is also a 'new beginning'; and every painful loss is offset by a far greater, even more joyful, far more lasting, gain. Our hands reach out across the ages to embrace you, Dear Patriarch, and we stand with you proclaiming with one unified voice:

Y'hei shlama raba min-sh'maya

May there be abundant peace from heaven,

v'chayim aleinu v'al-kol-yisrael, v'im'ru: "amein."

and life for us and for all Israel. And say, "Amen".

Oseh shalom bimromav

He crafts wholeness, wellness, and peace in His celestial heights;

hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu

may He craft wholeness, wellness, and peace for us

v'al kol-yisrael, v'imru: Amein.
and for all Israel! And say, "Amen"².

The Time Has Come for a Changing of the Guard

Welcome to *Chayei Sarah* - the 'parsha of the changing of the guard'. This parsha marks the passing of the first matriarch – and later also the first patriarch - of the Covenant era. But it also marks the revelation, unification, and commissioning of the next great patriarch/matriarch team – *Yitzhak Avinu* and *Rivkah Imanu*– who will form the 2nd link in an unbroken chain of Covenant Keepers that continues to grow to this very day.

We will grieve for Avraham and Sarah this week, as is right and proper. But though we will start the weak sowing in tears, we will conclude it on *Shabbat* reaping in joy. The Great Redemptive and Restorative Plan that the Holy One introduced to the world through Avraham and Sarah's great love story will go on – and on – and on. For the Holy One has declared to Avraham:

I have made you a father of many goyim – i.e. nations, ethnicities, people groups.
I will make you exceedingly fruitful,
and I will establish goyim from you, and bring forth kings from your seed.
And I will establish My B'rit with you and your seed with you
in their generations, an eternal/everlasting covenant,
to be God to you and to all your seed after you.

[Genesis 17:5b-7]

Gird Up Your Loins: The Times – They Are A-Changin'!

As we enter the week of 'the changing of the guard' all of physical Creation is testifying of the same theme. In the Northern Hemisphere the leaves of the trees are in various stages of changing color and falling to the ground. In the Southern Hemisphere the trees are bursting into bloom and breaking forth in fresh life. Seedtime and harvest; cold and heat; summer and winter; darkness and light. See **Genesis 8:22**.

In the physical realm of earth, you see, the constant, faithful witnesses of the continuing viability of the Covenant are the trees. Consider the ancient olive trees in Gat-Shemane. Consider the cedars of Lebanon, the aspens of Colorado, and the birches of the Shenandoah Valley. Season after season, the great trees stand. Specific blossoms, fruit, and leaves come and go. But the life-source – the rock

² These are the concluding words of the ancient 'Kaddish' prayer, or mourner's sanctification of the Holy One, which is spoken daily for 30 days after the death of a spouse, a child, or a sibling. It is designed to facilitate healing by gently recentering the thoughts and emotions of the mourner to the Holy One, His wisdom, His goodness, and His eternal plan.

from which they are Hewn – remains, abides, and carries on. Even when one old patriarch dries up, succumbs to insects, disease, or rot, and falls, its place is taken by another. In the spiritual realm there is a constant, faithful witness as well. It is *ha-Brit* – *i.e.* the Covenant. Generation after generation, millennia after millennia, the *B'rit* stands. Specific men, women and movements ascend for a brief moment, then are gone. But the life-source – the rock from which all the living water flows – remains. It abides in the B'rit. And it continues to bring forth new life, new leaf, new fruit, and perpetuating seed, each in season. As for you, Dear Reader, may the testimony of your life from this point forward be:

[I will] *be like a tree, planted by the rivers of living water,
which brings forth its fruit in season.*

[Psalm 1:3(a)]

*I am like a green olive tree in the house of Elohim;
I trust in the mercy of Elohim forever and ever.*

[Psalm 52:8]

We Are All Branches of the Same Great Tree

In the course of our readings this week we will say a gracious *goodbye* to the first of our beloved matriarchs, Sarah, and say a hearty *hello* to our second beloved matriarch, *Rivkah* [Rebecca]. So what, you say? Oh, Beloved. These are not just *women of the Bible* – they are your *FAMILY*. These are the trees from the holy seed that dwells in your body, soul, and spirit emanated. They are the trees. They are the source of the fruit that bears the seed. They are *a part of your bloodline*. *Who they were* will always be a significant part of *who you are*.

There is, you see, *a little of Sarah and a little of Rivkah in all of us*. This week is therefore probably a good time to stop and consider the significance of the impact that not only they, but also other *women* of faith in your ancestry, have had on your life. It is a week when it is especially appropriate to *give thanks for the positive influences* of the Godly women you have been privileged to know. I believe it is also a special season ordained by the Holy One in which He calls all of us to *release old hurts* and to *receive healing for old wounds*.

A Chayei Sarah Travelogue

The parsha of changing the guard begins by abruptly informing us that Sarah, our beloved Matriarch, has died. For 127 years this *Kingdom princess* walked the dusty roads of this planet gracefully. She faced and overcame life's challenges - and her own mistakes - with dignity. She taught us to love and walk in *shalom* – *but also in wisdom* - through it all. Ah, but just when we felt like we were finally getting to know what made her 'tick', suddenly, she was gone.

Sarah was the first, and prototypical, matriarch of our people. She set the bar. She established the benchmark. She transcended. She trusted. She walked it out. She put on the garments of *tzedakah* and *mishpat*; she wore them – and she wore them well! And that is why Covenant daughters of all generations, past, present, and future, receive blessings in her name above any other. From the womb, their fathers and mothers pray over them: *May you be as Sarah* Oh, yes, precious princesses of the Kingdom – *May you be as Sarah indeed!*

Sarah taught us many things. She taught us how to *deal gracefully, but wisely, with disappointment, hardship, adversity, and personal failure*. She taught us how to *entertain strangers* – alert to the possibility that we could be entertaining angels unawares. Perhaps most importantly she taught us how to *laugh* again. So, I invite you to join with me as we have a little *family celebration* of the tremendous nurturing power of a woman's *love* - even as we acknowledge and shudder at the damage that can sometimes be inflicted by a woman's *scorn*. I warn you, a part of you is going to *die* this week. But do not fear, for a part of you is also going to be *sought out, tested, and ransomed from darkness* this week. And after having been bought *with a great price* that part of you will - if and to the extent you surrender to the process - find yourself *in your Bridegroom's embrace, will experience the light of your Bridegroom's countenance, will taste the pleasures and plumb the depths of your Bridegroom's love, and will take up residence in a place of honor in your Bridegroom's household*

But *Sarah Imanu's* time to dance across Torah's stage has come to an end. For in the second verse of this week's parsha we are told: *Vatamot Sarah – And Sarah died ... at Kiryat-Arba. Genesis 23:2*. It is interesting that the Divine Author gives us no warning whatever that our beloved matriarch is even under the weather, much less *dying*. Neither in this parsha nor anywhere else will Torah inform us of the cause or even the specific circumstances of her death. We are not privileged to hear a parting blessing from her lips. We are simply told that she is *gone*.

Before the week is over, the changing of the guard theme will affect the patriarchal side of the family as well. For Torah will tell us: *Vayigva vayamot Avraham - And then Avraham breathed his last and died ... besevyah tovah zaken v'savea - in a good old age, an old man and full [of years] ... vaye'asef el-amav - and was gathered to his people. Genesis 25:8*.

Introducing Death and Burial – and the Great Mystery of the Grave and That Which Lies Beyond

After receiving the stunning news of Sarah's passing we are given a detailed account of Avraham's negotiations for and purchase of a burial plot for her. Avraham will purchase this place, called *Machpelah*, from the sons of *Chet* [*i.e.* the

‘Hittites’] for the extravagant if not exorbitant price of 400 shekels of silver.

*Avraham weighed out the silver ... four hundred shekels of silver,
currency of the merchants.*

*So the field of Efron that was in Machpelah ... and the cave which was in it,
and all the trees that were in the field, that were within all the surrounding borders,
were deeded to Avraham as a possession.*

And ... Avraham buried Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre.

This parcel of real estate - a field and a cave near Hebron - will become the first tract of land in *Eretz Kana'an* to come under Hebrew dominion.

Introducing Covenant-Style Bride Selection and Matriarch Development Protocols

After Sarah is laid to rest Avraham will set about the process of acquiring a bride for Yitzchak – and a new matriarch for the fledgling *Kingdom-of-Heaven scented counterculture* nation the Holy One has enlisted him in building. Here is how the inspired Author tells us the bride selection process started:

*Avraham said to the oldest servant of his house, who ruled over all that he had,
“Please, put your hand under my thigh, and ... swear by the Holy One,
the God of heaven and the God of the earth,
that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Kena’ani ... ;
but will go to my country and to my family, and take a wife for my son*

No pressure Eliezer³ – it is just the future of the world as we know it that has been entrusted to you and the 10 camels Avraham has sent with you!

We will travel with Eliezer to the ‘well of matriarchs’ in Charan. We will hear his prayer. And then we will be told: *And ... before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rebekah, who was born to Betuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nachor, Avraham’s brother, came out with her pitcher on her shoulder.*

We will marvel at the process and circumstances of the selection of *Rivkah bat Betuel* of Charan as Yitzchak’s bride – and we will ponder the prophetic significance for us living today, for our children, and for our children’s children, of the fact that *Yitzchak brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Yitzchak was comforted after his mother’s death.*

After a marriage covenant is secured for Yitzchak we will see the focus of the Torah narrative turn back to Avraham. Our beloved patriarch Avraham will remarry, we will discover, and will become the father of 6 more nations.

³ The servant sent to find a bride for Yitzchak is not identified by name in this parsha. It is assumed by most commentators to have been Avraham’s chief servant, Elazar of Damascus. **Genesis 15:2.**

*Avraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah.
And she bore him Zimran, Yokshan, Medan, Midyan, Yishbak, and Shuah.*

We will then see Avraham pass away at the ‘good old age’ of 175 years. We will even see Yitzchak and Yish’mael working side by side for the first time, as they lay Avraham – who loved them both – to rest alongside Yitzchak’s mother Sarah. For we will read: *And his sons Yitzchak and Yishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.*

Chayei Sarah will then conclude with a description of Avraham’s genealogy, which will prepare us for the transition to the next parsha we will study – the parsha the sages called *Toldot*, meaning ‘generations’.

What Life-Source Lies At the Essence of This Week’s Parsha?

This week’s parsha tells us all about ‘*the life of Sarah*’. The manner in which Torah is going to cover this fascinating subject will prove very interesting. Torah is not going to tell us about the ‘life of Sarah’ in the same way it has told us about the ‘life of Avraham’. For instance, we will not in the text of *Chayei Sarah* read one word about either Sarah’s God-encounters or her life experiences. About what then will we read in this parsha that will teach us about ‘the life of Sarah’? We will read in the text of this parsha about only two things pertaining to Sarah’s life: first we will read about her *funeral*; then we will read a little about *the legacy she left behind* – and how the matriarchal mantle she wore was picked up by *Rivkah* and carried forth into the next generation.

The Adventures of Sarah

Part of the legacy we receive from Sarah is that this beloved matriarch believed in and followed her ‘dreamer’ husband where few women would go. In response to a Divine call that she did not even personally hear she nonetheless - at Avram’s word - left the only home she had ever known, as well as all her family members, and struck out on an odyssey fraught with both hardship and extreme peril.

Sarai/Sarah was extremely beautiful, with a kind of beauty that did not diminish even in the latter stages of her life. She was so beautiful that wherever she went, rich and powerful kings, men accustomed to getting what they wanted, desired her. This put Avram’s life in danger, for he stood in the way of those who desired Sarai. To protect Avram from being killed therefore Sarai agreed when entering a dangerous new domain to tell people she was Avram’s sister. This was her way of protecting Avram. But it definitely did not protect Sarai/Sarah. Twice in her life, once in Egypt when known as Sarai, and once in Gerar after she became known as Sarah, she found herself being taken into the harem of a foreign king.

Sarai/Sarah’s ‘harem’ adventures, however, turned out to be the first real evidence

she received of the Holy One's goodness and blessing. Though taken into two powerful kings' harems she was in both cases miraculously protected, losing neither her life nor her marriage nor her virtue nor her place in the Divine Plan for the redemption of mankind.

As aforesaid, Sarai/Sarah was barren during all the years of life when most women expect to bear and raise children. The emotional fallout from this barrenness led her at one point to make the one decision in her life that she would most live to regret. Desperate to give her beloved husband the son and heir he so badly wanted she entrusted Avram into the tent and arms of Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant/personal assistant and confidante – somewhat in the same manner in which Avram had, years before, entrusted her into the harem of the Egyptian king. It was an ill-conceived and ill-fated plan – precisely because it worked so well. Hagar became pregnant with Avram's child, as planned – but that changed everything. Strife entered Sarai/Sarah's relationship with Avram for the first time, and mutual jealousy destroyed Sarai/Sarah's second-closest relationship, that with Hagar.

Sarah did not have her first recorded God-encounter until she was 90 years old. But in the course of that encounter the Holy One awakened her *laughter in her –and in the world*. Following that encounter, by Divine empowerment, she was even able to conceive, give birth, and nurse at her own breasts the child through whose bloodline all the Holy One's promises were to be fulfilled. The child, of course, became known as *Yitzchak* – he will laugh!

Sarah quickly realized that in order for the plan of the Holy One with regard to Yitzchak to come to fruition it was going to be absolutely necessary for her to make *tikkun* for the biggest mistake of her life – the Hagar/Yish'mael fiasco. She therefore successfully lobbied, first with the Holy One, then with Avraham, to have her stepchild Yish'mael (Ishmael), along with her former closest confidante Hagar, *karat*⁴ [i.e., cut off, cut away, pruned from] from the covenant community. She thereby assured that Yitzchak would not suffer either the abuse or the evil influence of the

⁴ The first occurrence of the Hebrew verb *karat* in Torah was found in parsha Noach, where the Holy One was discoursing with Noach after the Flood. The Holy One told Noah that He would never again *karat* all flesh ... *by the waters of a flood...*" **Genesis 9:11**, Then, near the end of parsha **Lech Lecha**, the Holy One used the term again, instructing Avraham that any "*uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that person is to be karat - cut off - from his people; for he has broken my covenant.*" **Genesis 17:14**. The Hebrew verb *karat*, *kaf, resh, tav*, means to *cut*, particularly to *cut off, cut down, or cut away*. Using the analogy of a fruit tree, the good horticulturalist *karat*'s shoots and limbs that endanger the health, diminish the productivity, or mar the beauty of the tree. We call this '*pruning*'. When the term *karat* is used in connection with human beings, the cutting off aspect of *karat* can be physical, spiritual or social. A person "cut off" in this manner is not necessarily killed or cursed, but is, instead, like Yish'mael, driven out of the family and thereby separated from the blessings of the covenant.

people who despised him most.

Consider My Servant Sarah

In another context the Holy One was able to say of *Iyov* [Job] “***Have you considered my servant Iyov. There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil***” [Iyov 1:8]. It appears something similar could be said of Sarai. Such a woman is worth more than the most precious jewels. She is indeed an *eishet chayil* – a woman of virtue – as described in Proverbs 31.

Hebrew *midrash* tells us that Sarah’s life was supernatural – at least from the time she married Avram. The ancient legend says that the candles she lit on Shabbat each stayed lit for seven days – until it was time to kindle them again⁵. The legend teaches also that the *challah* bread Sarah baked each Friday for *Erev Shabbat* stayed fresh all week, until she replaced it the next *Erev Shabbat*. And finally, the *midrash* tells us that throughout her marriage to Avraham a pillar of fire – representing the *Sh’kinah* Presence of the Holy One - rested over Sarah’s tent.⁶

One cannot review these legends without realizing that the ancients were connecting Sarah’s tent with the *Mish’kan* [Tabernacle], its menorah [light which did not go out], its table of showbread [ever fresh *challot*, replaced each Shabbat], and the *Radiant Cloud of His Presence* that rested above the *kafar* [covering/’mercy seat’] of its *aron k’desh* [holy Ark]. What was the point? The point, Dear Reader, is that we are all to consider our purpose in life to be that which the ancients ascribed to Sarah – to make an earthly *home for the Manifest Radiant Presence* of the Holy One. Each of our *houses* should reflect the holiness of the Temple. The *face* of every one of us should radiate the Divine light of the Holy One. The *mouth* of every one of us should pour forth fresh portions of the Bread of Life from the Word of the Holy One every day empowering all who know us. Our *hearts* should be the resting place for the Holy One’s Radiance in our sphere of influence. Our *hands* should be constantly yielded as instruments of the Master, used by Him, in His timing, to fulfill His purposes on the earth, and make *tikkun* for the evil that has been released in the world by those who live according to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

If someone writes us an epitaph, let it be:

“He/she was an ever-burning light to all those who walked in darkness.”

⁵ I do not report these legends to suggest you should [or should not] *believe* them. I am not concerned with their *historicity* – *only what they tell us about the perspective of the ancients on Sarah’s life.*

⁶ Literally ‘*a cloud was tied to her tent.*’ See *Midrash Rabbah* – Genesis 60:16. These legends about Sarah are the subject of extensive commentary by Rashi, among others.

He/she was a continual source of bread for all those who were hungry.

*He/she had a heart which, like the burning bush of Sinai,
was engulfed in the Holy One's pillar of fire, yet he/she was not consumed.*

Such was *the life of Sarah*. She was *not 'perfect'*. She was *by no means sinless*. She laughed, it seemed, at all the wrong times. She sometimes saw more negative than positive in people and situations. And in her fleshly desires to help the Holy One's plans along she made some very, very serious mistakes. But even in the midst of her failings she was ever shedding light, ever laying forth the bread of life, and ever *making her heart and home a habitation for the Holy One*. Go thou and do likewise, Dear Reader.

A Woman of Deep, Abiding Beauty

Many times in Torah Sarah is described as being very beautiful. Let us consider the nature and essence of Sarah's beauty. In Genesis 12:11, as Avram was en route to Egypt to 'ride out' the famine he found when he got to *Eretz Kena'an* [the land of Canaan], Torah records him saying to Sarah:

Hineh-na yadati ki ishah yefat-mar'eh at
I realize that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.

Ordinarily beauty is considered an asset. Avram however realized that in the world in which he lived, where rich and powerful people like Pharaoh, into whose domain he was about to enter, took by force any woman he considered beautiful, being married to a beautiful woman could be hazardous to his health. Avram's manner of dealing with Sarah's beauty was to have her pretend she was his sister, not his wife. This allowed him room to negotiate with Pharaoh rather than put him in a kill or be killed position.

But just what kind of beauty was it that Sarah possessed? By the time she and Avram went to Egypt she was already 65 years of age⁷. While people lived longer in those days [Sarah lived to age 127, Yish'mael to age 137, Avraham to age 175, and Yitzhak to age 180], and thus Sarah was by no means *ancient* or *invalid* when she and Avram went to Egypt, at 65 she was certainly no 'spring chicken' either! Moreover, the custom of the era – and the necessity of desert life – was for a woman to, at least in the presence of males, cover most of her face with a veil and to dress very, very modestly, in layers of loose, flowing robes which concealed all their womanly attributes and endowments from view.

Both the desert and the dress of the ancient desert were great *equalizers*. If you

⁷ This can be deduced from Genesis 17:17, where Avram describes himself as 100 years old, and Sarah as 90 – making them 10 years apart in age. We are told that Avram was 75 when he left Charan, hence Sarai, who was 10 years younger, had to be around 65.

were to take the most sought after cover girl, model, or starlet today, dress her in ancient desert dress, cover her face with a veil, ride her around on a donkey or camel in the windstorms and heat of the desert for a few months, and then put her fully covered in a line-up with the homeliest daughters of the desert, do you really believe you could tell just by looking which one the model, cover girl, or starlet was? Not likely, Dear Reader. So what was it about Sarai that would cause Avram to fear that a man like Pharaoh, who could have any woman he wanted, would want *her*? The beauty of which Avram spoke in Genesis 12:11 had to be much more than the superficial stuff of cover girls, fashion models and starlets. It had to deal with something way, way, way beyond a pretty face or a well-shaped body.

To understand Sarah perhaps we need to look at beauty from a Hebraic rather than a Greco-Western, mindset. The Hebrew word translated as ‘beautiful’ in Genesis 12:11 is *yafat, yod, feh, tav*, an adjective derived from the verb root *yafah, yod, feh, hey*. This word, usually translated into English as to ‘be beautiful’ is actually a Hebraic pictographic mural of the hand [*yod*], and the mouth [*feh*], serving as a source of revelation and inspiration [*hey*]. While Sarai at 65 may - or may not - have been a 21st Century ‘knockout’ under all those flowing robes and veils she was definitely beautiful in DEED [hence the *yod*/hand], and in WORD [hence the mouth/*feh*]. And not only were what she *did* and what she *said* beautiful, those words and actions were also *inspiring* and full of *revelation* [hence the *hey*/window]. And of course the fact that the *hey* at the end of the word used in Genesis 12:11 was replaced by a *tav* [to transform the verb *yafah* into the adjective *yafat*] meant in a pictographic sense that the revelation and inspiration which Sarai’s deeds and words directed people was *the fulfillment of the covenant* [*tav*]⁸. What made Sarah ‘beautiful’ thus was that both her deeds and her words *made the richness and blessing of the covenant of the Holy One come to life wherever she went*.

Sarah’s Double-Portion Blessing

Sarah was not just beautiful – she was *blessed*. In Genesis 17:16 the Holy One spoke of Sarah to Avraham, saying:

***I will bless her ... and give you a son from her;
I will bless her ... so that she becomes nations –
kings of peoples shall come from her!"***

Hebraically, to ‘bless’ [*barach, beit, resh, kaf sofit*] means *to release the object of the blessing from restrictions and limitations*.

Note the two separate blessings the Holy One pronounced over Sarah. The *first blessing* was that Avraham would have a son through her. This blessing released

⁸ The Hebrew letter *tav*, the final letter of the *alef-beit*, is the picture of a seal used to complete and finalize a covenant.

her not only from the restriction/limitation of a barren womb, but also the restrictions of her and her husband's age and infertility. This first blessing came to fruition in her lifetime, in the birth of Yitzchak. The second blessing the Holy One spoke over Sarah was that she would '*become nations*', and that '*kings of peoples shall come from her*.' This second part of the blessing was much broader and all encompassing – involving *multiple generations to come*. Thus, this part of the blessing *could only come to fruition after her death*. This second blessing, therefore, released Sarah from the restriction of *mortality*.

Sarah, you see, did not just live on in Yitzchak. She lives on today, *through the nation she mothered - Am Yisrael [the people/nation of Israel]*. What then is '*Sarah's life*'? It is you, and me, and our children, and our children's children. Every time a child or old woman chuckles with glee, angels smile and proclaim across the universe: 'THE SWEET LAUGHTER OF SARAH LIVES ON!' It is us, her descendants, who make manifest the nuanced beauty of the LIFE OF SARAH. The life of Sarah is *the life of the Hebrew People*.

The Introduction of the Promise of Eternal Life

In both this week's Torah and haftarah portions a generation of the Holy One's people will approach and in some cases enter into death; however, in both cases a new generation will be called upon and commissioned to "take up the torch" of the Holy One.

In the case of Avraham, the text of Torah will tell us that not only did he die – but that afterwards *vaye'asef el-amav* – *i.e.* he was '*gathered to his people*'. **Genesis 25:8[c]**. This is viewed by many as the introduction in Sacred Writ to the idea of life after death. The promise of "eternal life" is, of course, the heart cry of modern evangelical Christendom. "*If you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?*" is the question asked from pulpit after pulpit, on street corners, and even in television commercials. But it is important to understand that eternal life is not a doctrine that suddenly sprung into existence with the appearance of Yeshua and His little Galilean band of *talmidim* [*i.e.* disciples]. From the discussion in Genesis 5 of Enoch's failure to see death, to the common statement concerning the patriarch's that they were "*gathered to [their] people*"⁹, to the passionate

⁹ The statement in Scripture that a deceased person is '*gathered to his people*' [see e.g. **Genesis 25:8, 49:29**] always occurs *before* any reference to that person's burial. In other words, burial is always something that happens later, after the person has been 'gathered to his people'. The implication is that the person himself [or herself] has already departed *long before* and been gathered to his or her people by the time his or her body is lowered into the grave. Hebrew tradition therefore understands the words "*gathered to his people*" to be referring to the departed soul being ingathered among the souls of those who have already left this physical world. The phrase "gathered to his people" alludes to nothing less than the immortality of the human soul.

expressions of the Psalmist, to the ascendancy into Heaven of *Eliyahu* [Elijah], the TaNaKh is chock full of the promise of eternal life.

Eternal life is in Hebrew thought not a subjected for theological debate, but assumed as a natural reality – an essential part of our ‘framework of givens’. But as real and assumed as it is, eternal life - at least in the modern context of life “after death” - is *not* the focus of the Bible, and *nor should it be our focus*. The focus of the Bible is upon *life on earth*, not life in Heaven or Hell. Here and now – in this life - we are to connect with the Holy One, identify ourselves with His Will and His Ways, and thereby start fulfilling our purpose, *here* and *now*, and in the few short years between our natural birth and our natural death.

Haftarah Chayei Sarah **I Kings 1:1-31**

This week’s haftarah is all about the procedure for the transference of the torch of power in the earthly realm. The curtain will open to find David “old and stricken in years”. After forty years of bearing the pressure of reigning over Israel his health is declining rapidly. The time is rapidly approaching for the man ‘after the Holy One’s own heart’ to transfer the reigns of the kingdom. Who should his successor be? The eldest son of David’s line, *Amnon*, as well as the most charismatic of David’s brood, *Absalom*, have preceded him in death. The most likely candidate to succeed David therefore seemed to some to be *Adoniyah* - David’s fourth son overall and his firstborn by *Chagit*. Adoniyah had the support of *Yoav* [Joab] and of *Aviatar* [Abiathar], the priest. But *Natan* [KJV ‘Nathan’] the prophet, Tzadok the *kohen* [KJV ‘priest’], and the chiefs of David’s ‘mighty men’ all felt Adoniyah was the wrong person to lead the nation.

This week we will see Adoniyah make a strong ‘push’ to have himself anointed as king in David’s stead. A series of court intrigues will make it look like his usurpation of the throne of David is a ‘done deal’ that cannot be reversed. But the Holy One laughs at the intrigues of men.

The torch of leadership of Israel will indeed pass this week - but it will not pass to Adoniyah. It will not pass to any son of *Chagit*. The torch will pass instead to the son of David’s mistress of scandal, *Bat-Sheva*. The king who will reign in David’s place will be the man we will come to know as *Sh’lomo* [Solomon]. He will not by any means be perfect; but despite his many imperfections this king will be blessed mightily by the Holy One. It will be his kingdom that provides the most comparable prototype for the Messianic Kingdom to come.

The Apostolic Message for the Week

I Corinthians 15:35-58

The readings I have selected from the writings of the apostles to correspond to parsha *Chayei Sarah* are taken from the fifteenth chapter of the first letter written by Rabbi Shaul of Tarsus [also known as ‘Paul’] to those in the city of Corinth who claimed Yeshua as their Messiah. Shaul will clarify for us in inspiring terms what it means to die – and be raised up - ‘in Messiah’. He will teach us that we are not to approach death – or for that matter, life – as those who have no hope. We are to embrace death in its proper time as merely the appointed time to trade mortal, earthly bodies of corruption, dishonor, and weakness for immortal, heavenly bodies of *incorruptibility, glory, and power*.

As we have borne the image of those made of dust, let's also bear the image of the heavenly.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last shofar.

For the shofar will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

[I Corinthians 15:49-53]

Many, distracted by the pleasures and numbed by the heartaches of this world, have lost the ability to feel excitement over and have lost the ability to be stirred by Shaul’s promise of ‘eternal life’ in Messiah. Oh that we might regain his passion for the World to Come!

*May you be diligent in keeping the candle of Sarah burning,
and yet look ever forward in great expectation to being ‘gathered to your people’,
as was she, at the Holy One’s appointed time.*

The Rabbi’s son

Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week

The Second Petition: *Teshuvah* [The Prayer of Return]

Ha-shiveinu Avinu l’Torah-teichah

Bring us back, Our Father, to Your Torah

v’koraveinu malkeinu l’avodeicha

and bring us close to You, Our King, that we may serve You.

v’ha-chazireinu b’t’shuvah sh’leymah l’faneicha

And may our turning bring us Face-to-face with You.

Baruch Atah Adonai,

Blessed are You, O Holy One,

ha-rotze b’teshuvah

Who stirs in us a desire to return.