Chayei Sarah: What Lives On

Finding Strength in Our Parsha

The elections have left many of us upset and concerned about Israel and the Jewish people. Our position in the world can feel very tenuous.

What is there in our parsha that can give us strength as we enter Shabbos?

A Parsha About Life—or About Death?

Our parsha is called **Chayei Sarah—the life of Sarah**. Yet Sarah passes away at its beginning. What follows are three major events: the purchase of Me'aras Hamachpelah, the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka, and Avraham's marriage to Keturah.

All three arise from Sarah's passing. Her burial requires the purchase. Yitzchak's marriage brings him comfort after losing his mother. Avraham's marriage to Keturah follows her death.

On Yitzchak's comfort, Rashi explains:

כָּל זְמַן שֶׁאִמּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם קַיֶּמֶת, כָּרוּךְ הוּא אֶצְלָהּ, וּמֹשֶׁ מֵתָה הוּא מִתְנַחֵם בְּ אִשְׁתּוֹ

"While a person's mother is alive, he is attached to her; after her passing, he finds comfort in his wife."
Rashi, Bereishis 24:67

That episode, too, specifically concerns the loss of Sarah. Even Avraham's additional children belong to the new chapter following her passing.

> ***Why is a parsha whose events follow Sarah's death called "Sarah's life"?***

We need to establish two things: **what the Torah means by life, and what defined Sarah's particular life.**

Life That Does Not Stop

The Torah requires **מַיִם חַיִּים—living spring water** for certain forms of purification. The Mishnah explains that a source that periodically stops flowing—even once in seven years—does not qualify. It flows now, but its flow does not endure.[1]

The fullest meaning of life is enduring life. Ultimately, that belongs to Hashem:

וַה' אֱלֹקִים אֱמֶת הוּא אֱלֹקִים חַיִּים

"Hashem is the true G-d; He is the living G-d."
Yirmiyahu 10:10

We connect ourselves to that life by attaching ourselves to Him:

וְאַתֶּם הַדְּבֵקִים בַּה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם חַיִּים כֻּלְּכֶם הַיּוֹם

"You who cling to Hashem, your G-d, are all alive today."
Devarim 4:4

When we learn His Torah, live by His mitzvos, and educate our children to follow that path, we connect ourselves to life that endures beyond our years.

That explains the Gemara's statement that **Yaakov Avinu did not die**:

מַה זַּרְעוֹ בְּחַיִּים אַף הוּא בְּחַיִּים

"Just as his descendants are alive, so he is alive."
Ta'anis 5b

His children continue the life of Torah and attachment to Hashem that he established. Their continuation reveals that his own life was rooted in something enduring.

> ***His life continues through the life he gave them.***

Now we can ask: **What was the particular life Sarah gave to the Jewish people?**

[1] Bamidbar 19:17; Mishnah Parah 8:9.

Avraham: A Father to the World

Avraham was Yitzchak's father. But he was also Yishmael's father. His relationship extended beyond the family from which the Jewish people would emerge. Hashem called him:

אַב הֲמוֹן גּוֹיִם

"A father of a multitude of nations."
Bereishis 17:5

Avraham taught the nations about Hashem. He welcomed travelers and brought them closer to their Creator—even people who worshipped the dust of their feet. **His mission reached outward, to humanity.**

That helps us understand his relationship with Yishmael. Yishmael was also his son. Avraham cared deeply about him and his future.

Sarah: The Mother of Yitzchak

Sarah was the mother of Yitzchak. The Jewish people would descend from **her son**. Her particular mission was to safeguard his distinct identity and spiritual future.

When she recognized the danger Yishmael posed to Yitzchak, she told Avraham:

גָּרֵשׁ הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ

"Send away this maidservant and her son."
Bereishis 21:10

She explained that Yishmael would not inherit together with her son, Yitzchak. The Torah tells us how painful this was for Avraham:

וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ

"The matter was very distressing in Avraham's eyes because of his son."
Bereishis 21:11

Avraham was a father to both children. His life's work was bringing people close. ***Sarah recognized that Yitzchak's future required a boundary.***

“Listen to Her Voice”

Hashem told Avraham:

כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּ קֹלָהּ

“Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice.”
Bereishis 21:12

And Hashem explained:

כִּ י בְיִצְחָק יִקָּ רֵא לְךָ זָרַע

“For through Yitzchak your descendants will be called.”
Bereishis 21:12

Sarah insisted upon a distinction between Yitzchak and Yishmael. Yitzchak carried the covenant and the future of Klal Yisrael. That future needed protection.

Rabbi Wolf emphasizes that Sarah wanted **Avraham himself** to uphold this separation. She called upon him to send Hagar and Yishmael away, so that the distinction she understood would govern his actions as well.

> ***Avraham’s concern embraced the world. Sarah safeguarded the particular future of Yitzchak and the Jewish people.***

Avraham was, of course, also Yitzchak’s father and the founder of our people. The distinction here concerns the particular emphasis of their missions: his relationship reached the nations; she insisted upon safeguarding Yitzchak’s unique place within that wider world.

This was Sarah’s life’s work: protecting the continuity of the Jewish people.

The Test Comes After Her Passing

Now the question becomes sharper. After Sarah passes away, does that distinction survive? Does Avraham continue to uphold what she established?

The answer appears in all three events of our parsha. ***Each one shows Avraham continuing the mission Sarah championed—even when she is no longer physically present.***

1. A Burial Place for Our Avos and Imahos

Who was already buried in Me'aras Hamachpelah? **Adam and Chavah—the ancestors of all humanity.** Their relationship was with every nation.

One might therefore have viewed the cave as belonging to humanity generally, a place where distinguished people from other nations could also be buried.

Yet Avraham purchases it for Sarah. It becomes the burial place of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, Yaakov and Leah—the Avos and Imahos of the Jewish people.

A place associated with the beginnings of humanity becomes the particular resting place of our founding family. The first event after Sarah's death carries her mission forward.

2. Even Eliezer Had a Different Destiny

Next, Avraham sends Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer was a man of exceptional stature. Chazal explain his name, **דַּמֶּשֶׂק אֱלִיעֶזֶר**:

דּוֹלֶה וּמַשְׁקֶה מִתּוֹרַת רַבּוֹ לַאֲחֵרִים

"He draws from his master's Torah and gives others to drink."
Rashi, Bereishis 15:2

He taught Avraham's Torah, served him faithfully, and experienced extraordinary miracles on his mission. Yet when he hoped his daughter might marry Yitzchak, Avraham declined. Rashi records:

בְּנִי בָּרוּךְ וְאַתָּה אָרוּר, וְאֵין אָרוּר מִדַּבֵּק בְּבָרוּךְ

"My son is blessed, and you are under a curse; one under a curse cannot join with one who is blessed."
Rashi, Bereishis 24:39; referring to Eliezer's Canaanite lineage

Eliezer's greatness was real. But closeness to Avraham did not erase **Yitzchak's unique destiny**. His marriage would establish the next generation of the Jewish people.

Rivka Enters Sarah's Tent

Eliezer returns with Rivka, and the Torah tells us:

וַיְבִאָהָ יִצְחָק הָאֹהֱלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ

"Yitzchak brought her into the tent of Sarah, his mother."
Bereishis 24:67

He marries her, loves her, and finds comfort after his mother. ***The home Sarah established now has someone to continue it.***

3. "Everything He Had—to Yitzchak"

Finally, Avraham marries Keturah and has six more sons. These, too, are his children. Yet the Torah states:

וַיִּתֵּן אַבְרָהָם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ לְיִצְחָק

"Avraham gave everything he had to Yitzchak."
Bereishis 25:5

The other sons receive gifts. Then:

וַיְשַׁלְּחֵם מֵעַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ

"He sent them away from Yitzchak, his son."
Bereishis 25:6

Avraham provides for them. But Yitzchak remains the bearer of the particular inheritance and mission. **The distinction Sarah insisted upon continues among Avraham's own children.**

Three Circles—One Continuing Life

The events move steadily inward: from **humanity**, to **Avraham's household**, to **his own children**. In every circle, Avraham upholds the particular future Sarah safeguarded.

Rabbi Wolf's point is that her life finds expression **not only during her lifetime, but also—and especially—after her passing**. Its continuation proves that her mission endured beyond her physical presence.

> ***These events are "Chayei Sarah": what Sarah lived for remains alive.***

Stamford, Connecticut—1950

In **1950**, Marcia Lieberman moved with her husband and three children into a home on Strawberry Hill Court in Stamford, Connecticut. Her son Joe was eight.

Stamford was hardly a bastion of Orthodox Jewish life. Rabbi Yisroel Deren, a close family friend, recalled that the Liebermans were among very few young families observing Shabbos.

On summer Shabbos afternoons, neighborhood children would head for the beach. Marcia prepared games and refreshments and welcomed children into her home. **She made her house a place children wanted to be.**[2]

She took responsibility for her children's experience of Shabbos. They needed to feel its warmth and beauty.

Years later, in *The Gift of Rest*, Joe recalled coming home from school on Friday and smelling the chicken soup, meat and kugel. He would lift the soup-pot lid and help himself to a taste.

Even as an adult, he continued doing it. When his wife, Hadassah, caught him tasting from the pot in his mother's kitchen, she was taken aback. He cheerfully defended it as his tradition.

But he remembered more than the food. He credited his father with providing an intellectual foundation for his faith, and his mother with giving it spiritual depth and a Jewish home in which to grow.[3]

> ***She was giving her child something he could carry into the world.***

Thirty-Eight Years Later

By **1988**, Joe Lieberman was Connecticut's attorney general, running for the United States Senate against the incumbent, Lowell Weicker.

The Democratic state convention was scheduled for **Saturday, July 30, in Hartford**. Governor Bill O'Neill would put Lieberman's name forward for the nomination.

But Lieberman himself would be absent.

His Own Convention—and He Would Not Come

A newspaper column published beforehand explained that Lieberman would remain at home in New Haven observing Shabbos. His acceptance speech would be recorded in advance and shown by video.[4]

> ***His own nominating convention—and he would not come.***

This was a major moment in his political career. His party was gathering to nominate him for the United States Senate.

He arranged for his speech to be there.

He would keep Shabbos.

Lieberman later remembered the newspaper photographs the next day. Instead of the familiar picture of a candidate raising his hands in celebration, there was his face on a screen.

During the campaign, Christian voters told him how much they respected his religious commitment. He reflected that the willingness to be himself—which his parents and childhood rabbis had encouraged—had actually helped him.[5]

The values nurtured in his childhood home had accompanied him into public life.

What Made His Mother Proudest

Lieberman won the election. Before beginning his work in Washington, he and his family visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a brachah.

Later, speaking before an audience of thousands, Marcia described that visit. She was proud that her son had become a United States senator. But she was even prouder that:

> ***"Before he began his work as Senator he went to ask for G-d's blessings."[6]***

That was a Jewish mother's measure of success. Her son had entered the Senate carrying the knowledge that there was Someone above the Senate.

Our Responsibility Begins at Home

We began with the elections and our concern about the world around us.

Avraham Avinu reached out to that world. We, too, have responsibilities beyond our homes. We must speak up for Israel, help our fellow Jews, and do what we can.

But Sarah teaches us to safeguard the particular responsibility entrusted to us: **the continuity of our own Jewish families.**

There is no parsha called *Chayei Avraham*. There is a parsha called **Chayei Sarah**, showing how the future she protected continued after her passing.

We cannot determine every election or change every political leader. At home, however, we have decisions to make every day. We decide what receives our time, what earns our admiration, and what fills the conversation around our tables.

We cannot control every choice our children and grandchildren will make. ***We can take responsibility for the Jewish life we offer them.***

Marcia Lieberman could not determine who would govern America. She could prepare a Shabbos in Stamford, Connecticut, that her son would remember decades later.

We can do that, too.

This Shabbos, let us give our families warmth, Torah, attention, and pride in being Jewish.

> ***Give them something precious to carry into the world—and a Jewish life they will want to carry forward.***

Sources and attribution

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[2] Chabad.org, "Joseph Lieberman, 82," 2024 (Rabbi Deren's recollections).

[3] Joseph I. Lieberman with David Klinghoffer, *The Gift of Rest*, excerpt.

[4] Bob Conrad, "Lieberman up to speed in Senate race," *Manchester Herald*, June 15, 1988.

[5] 18Forty, "Senator Joe Lieberman: The Gift of Shabbos," interview transcript.

[6] Rabbi Yisroel Deren, tribute to Marcia Lieberman, June 26, 2005. Only the quoted sentence is presented as her verbatim wording.