

Was Abraham Changed by Sarah's Death?

“Sarah lived to be 127 years old—such was the span of Sarah’s life. Sarah died in Kiriatharba (that is, Hebron) in the Land of Canaan, and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.” (Gen.23:1-2).

In the Jewish cycle of readings these verses open a section of Genesis which is known to the Jewish people as ‘the life of Sarah.’ It is a curious title, considering that this reading, extending over two chapters, opens with her death! Already we are being drawn into a fascinating question: how might the biblical stories which follow these verses, occurring after Sarah has died, be revealing of her life?

One answer arises in the midrash, the creative storytelling traditions of Judaism. The midrash observes that Sarah’s death occurs just seven verses after one of the most compelling passages in the bible: the *Akedah* (Gen.22:1-19), the story known to Jews and Christians respectively as the ‘binding’ or ‘sacrifice’ of Isaac. According to the Rabbis, the near-death of Isaac is such a traumatic event that, upon learning what her husband almost did to their son, Sarah dies of grief.¹

It is an arresting thought. In the face of a firm tradition (both Jewish and Christian) that esteems Abraham for his unwavering obedience to God’s demand to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, the midrash throws a spanner in the works: Sarah’s grief. A grief so devastating that it sounds a ‘No’ to the forementioned event, or at least raises a serious doubt. Perhaps the path of obedience to divine commands is a little more complex than it first appears—not only for Sarah, but for Abraham. In this light, can we sense a deeper reason why the Bible records Abraham’s mourning (quoted at the top of this page)?

Taking up this midrashic insight, contemporary Jewish commentators (especially women such as Rabbi Elyse Goldstein) note that it opens the door to fresh insights into Abraham’s relationship with

God. If we look closely at the Genesis narrative which continues after Sarah’s death, we see that Abraham is never quite the same person again. Previously his faith was characterized by large-scale, public events. In pursuit of his God he travelled to foreign lands, fought wars and mounted a dramatic rescue for his kidnapped nephew. He negotiated with kings, argued with God about justice for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and scaled a mountain to accomplish a horrifying feat for a faith-testing God.

But after Sarah’s death, his activity changes. It is predominantly domestic: he buries his wife, he arranges a marriage for Isaac, he marries again and attends to the future of his children in such a way as to prioritize Isaac. Perhaps, say the commentators, Abraham—through Sarah’s death—has heard a different divine voice: not theophany on a mountain top but the transformative power of relationships. He has heard a truth which, at her moment of death, Sarah understood with terrifying clarity: there is no special holiness to be found gazing at the stars if your own child’s life is at stake. Holiness is right here: at home, in the joys and struggles of everyday family life.

Whether or not you favour this interpretation, I am sure you will agree that it raises challenging questions concerning the complexities of discerning God’s call... Food for thought, from inter-generational conversations around an ancient biblical text. •

1. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:7, §1

Bibliography: Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (New York, 1992); Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastes* (New York, 1983); Goldstein, ed., *The Woman’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, VT, 2000).

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