

This week's parashah, Chayei Sarah, follows after the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, and is the parashah in which the patriarchal narrative shifts from Avraham to Isaac as a grown man. In the beginning, Chapter 23 of Genesis is taking up with Sarah's death and Avraham's mourning rituals, as well as his purchase of land for her burial site in Kiryat Arba, now Hebron. Chapter 24 is most famous for the adventure of Eliezer, servant of Avraham, on his quest to find a wife for Isaac. He asks for and receives a sign from God that Rebecca is the chosen one when she responds to his request for water by offering to draw water for his camels as well. There are complex negotiations with Rebecca's family (Avraham's relatives) about whether and when she we will go.

Finally, they set out. And then, 62 verses into the parashah, we finally encounter Isaac as an agent in the narrative for the first time since he questions his father on the way to the *akeidah*. We do not hear from or about Yitzchak mourning his mother. We do not hear from or about Yitzchak in the conversations about finding a wife for him.

But in Genesis 24: 62-63, we hear: "Yitzchak had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-laChai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negev. And Yitzchak went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching."

But why does Isaac only appear now? Where was Isaac in the mourning process for Sarah? Why didn't he have any input into the conversation about choosing a spouse?

So there are so many reasons that commentators give, but I came across one this week that I found very compelling. As far back as midrash Rabbah, commentators have pointed out that Be'er LaChai Roi is connected to Hagar, Sarah's mistreated maidservant. In Parashat Lech Lecha, two weeks ago, I spoke about how Hagar ran away to the wilderness when Sarah mistreated her. She met an angel at a well, who gave her the prophecy that her son would be a great nation, and that she should tough it out under Sarah. Hagar named that well, "Beer La'Chai Roi," "Well of the Living One Who Sees Me." And then we don't hear about that well again until this parashah, when Yitzchak appears in the narrative on his way home from there. Genesis Rabbah and Rashi both suggest that "he had gone there to bring Hagar back to Abraham that he might take her again as his wife."

In other words, after Sarah dies, Yitzchak goes to reinstate her rival, the second wife that she banished. Contemporary Rabbi Shai Held wrote this week, "Perhaps Isaac, newly traumatized, goes to find comfort in his father's other wife, undoubtedly bearing some deep traumas of her own. Perhaps, newly traumatized, Isaac also has newfound compassion for Hagar's predicament and seeks not only to be consoled but also to offer consolation. Having been made to suffer at Abraham's hands, he has a newfound capacity to embrace those who have endured a similar fate."

There is another hint in these two verses that support Held's reading. Verse 63 says "vayetzei Yitzchak lasu'ach baseh," which is what gets translated, "Yitzchak went out walking in the fields." But "lasu'ach," is a hapax legomenon, a word that appears only once in Torah and is therefore really challenging to translate.

One of the more famous interpretations of this word is in the Talmud, Masechet Brachot 26b, which credits Yitzchak for developing the minchah, afternoon prayer service, and uses this word as the proof, tying it to the word, “sicha,” conversation, as in conversation with Hashem.

But I stumbled across another commentary last night: A medieval translator, Rav Yehuda Ibn Ba’lam, ties the word “suach” to “sichim,” bushes and says Isaac was “מן אחד השיחים” – from one of the bushes, that is, Isaac was strolling among the trees.”

Which sounds vague enough *except* that last week, I discussed how, in Genesis 21, after Abraham banishes Hagar and Ishmael and they run out of water in the wilderness, “וַתִּשְׁלֶךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים” – “she cast Ishmael under one of the bushes.” *Echad hasichim*, “one of the bushes,” here is the same phrases that the medieval commentator was using to translate this mysterious verb that Yitzchak was doing, “lasuach.”

Which, by itself, might seem like too belabored of a hint to do anything with it. But the two verses introducing Isaac, one after the other, first mention, *Beer laChai Roi*, with its obvious connection to Hagar, and then have this tantalizing connection to Ishmael. . .

I’d like to imagine that not only did Yitzchak go to seek comfort and communion with his estranged stepmother, Hagar, as Rabbi Held suggests based on the earlier midrash, but that “*lasuach*” means he traveled the same wilderness seeking his banished half-brother, Ishmael, whom Hagar had cast under *echad hasichim*, “one of the bushes,” so many years earlier.

But this is not just about a cute close reading of two verses. If we imagine that Yitzhak spent the majority of the two chapters following the akeidah and Sarah's death wandering the wilderness seeking his estranged and banished step-mother and half-brother, what does that suggest for us?

It suggests that the response to heal grief and trauma is twofold- first to allow ourselves absence from the usual narrative. Yitzhak didn't go on with his life and work as per usual. For any of us, whether we are dealing with grief over a loved one, or any other traumatic disruption to our lives, our tradition encourages us to take time off, to actually give attention to our grief, rather than pushing through.

But the commentaries suggest that Yitzhak doesn't just hunker down alone, and they remind us, too, to seek out fellowship and solidarity with others who have been traumatized. Whether we seek it through the formal structures of support groups, or the less formal structures of rallies, or dare I say Shabbatservices, the healing process requires face to face connection and community.

Right now, I know so many of us feel regularly retraumatized by the state of the world, and the default activities – news bingeing, posting on social media, or just shouldering through as usual do not allow us either the attention or fellowship that we truly need. Yitzhak reminds us that we need wilderness, we need space, and we need to reach out to each other.

Shabbat shalom.