

As I mentioned at the Congregational meeting last night, this week's parashah, Chayei Sarah, "the life of Sarah", begins with the death of Sarah, and its aftermath.

Perhaps I am particularly attuned to mourning in this parashah, having just lost my grandfather, the last elder of his generation, and guided my family through his funeral. This year, I am called by the resonances of mourning that I find at the beginning of this parashah.

The second verse of the parashah states, Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan : וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ : – And Avraham came to eulogize her weep for her.

First of all, commentators note that phrase, "Avraham came." And ask: Where had he been? Was he not with her when she died?

Rashi says Avraham was living in Beer Sheva, and Ramban clarifies that they were living together in Hebron, but Avraham had just made a day trip to Beer Sheva, from which he returned as soon as he heard that Sarah had died.

However, Bereshit Rabbah, 58:5 suggests that Avraham came from Mt. Moriah, where he had just tied Yitzhak on the altar for sacrifice – although the akeidah narrative in the previous chapter does say that Avraham returned to Beer Sheva.

Rabbeinu Bahya, another medieval commentator, insists, however that had Avraham been in a physically different place, Torah would have named that place explicitly. He writes: "The meaning of the word וַיָּבֹא is simply that Avraham roused himself (from his shock) in order to eulogise Sarah."

I think these commentators and their confusion speak to ways that death both requires and creates dislocation. Often, the presence of a loved one will tether people to life, such that people only die when their loved one leave the room or fall asleep. There is a story of the death of Rabbi Yehuda haNasi in the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 104a, that the constant prayers of his disciples kept him alive, and he could only die when a maidservant shattered an earthenware jug and distracted them from their intentions.

On a more contemporary note, when I am counseling the family members of someone who is near death and in pain, I will often advise you to tell that person – even if she is no longer responsive – that she has your permission to go.

Sometimes people need a distance, a letting go from their loved ones, to die. So wherever Avraham physically was, I do not wonder that Sarah, bonded with him for as long as she was, died in a moment when he wasn't fully present.

And death disorients. Even if Avraham was right there, as Rabbeinu Bahya notes, he needed to rouse himself in order to face his new reality, to face the grief and let himself cry for his wife.

Having done that, the third and fourth verse of the chapter describe Abraham standing and addressing the Hittites, who presumably have been silent witnesses to his grieving, saying, “גֵרְתוֹשֵׁב אֶנְכִי עִמָּכֶם” “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a land-holding for burial among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”

As Rabbi David Seidenberg has noted, this is occurring on land that Hashem had already promised to Avraham, so it is remarkable that he identifies himself as a stranger, a resident alien. All the more so given that he prove his military dominance in the battle with the four kings, as I discussed two weeks ago, and that the Hittite respond by referring to him as “God’s chosen among us.”

But Avraham is in the midst of grief. So divine promises of a distant future are less relevant than the currently reality. In Talmudic terminology, the wife of a great rabbi so often referred to as his בית, his home, which is perhaps problematic from a gender liberation perspective, but may also be reflective of the reality of two people who love each other and build a life together, as Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes sing, “Home is wherever I’m with you.” Whatever promises await his descendants, with Sarah dead, Avraham is now profoundly homeless.

Beyond the personal grief, coming face to face with death also shakes our sense of stability. The notion of what belongs to us, what is permanent, must fade when we acknowledge that nothing is permanent, that anything we hold – or at least, hold tangibly - in this life will ultimately turn to dust, as we will, too. We are all strangers and resident aliens in this life, guaranteed nothing, not even the next breath.

Most of the time, we can go days and even years at a time in the in the illusion of permanence and stability, holding that reality at bay. But an encounter with death will bring that reality close.

No wonder that Avraham says, “sell me a holding” – some land, something to hold onto, something that may be passed to my descendants, that will outlast my own fragile life.

The holding he bought is known as ma’arat hamachpela, the cave of Machpelah. Its location in the present-day city of Hebron is known and revered to this day, a holy site to Jews and Muslims. But rather than being a guarantee of stability, the Cave of Machpelah is one of the most fraught sites in a very fraught region. It is place of a high tension and segregation between Jewish settlers and pilgrims and Palestinian locals and pilgrims. Hebron was the site of a massacre against its ancient Jewish population by a mob of Palestinians in 1929. Much more recently, in 1994, on Purim, an Israeli Jew named Baruch Goldstein entered the Muslim section of the Cave of Patriarchs and opened fire, killing 29 worshippers and wounding more than 125.

I don’t share this to make any political hypothesis about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though I have gone there in the past and certainly will in the future. But for now, what strikes me is the understandable human flaw in Avraham’s urge to find stability in the face of the death of his beloved wife through acquiring a permanent landholding. The land is no guarantee against death.

After the negotiations with the Hittites and the burial is complete, in Chapter 24, Avraham turns his attention to the matter of finding a wife for Yitzhak. And here is where I think, perhaps time has done its work, perhaps he has allowed himself the honest fullness of his grief: Because after Avraham’s servant, Eliezer has brought Rivka home as wife for Yitzhak, the last verse of Chapter 24 says, “Yitzhak then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death.”

Ultimately, the things we can hold with our hands are impermanent. But the love lasts, and can be passed from generation to generation. How remarkable that Rivka, who never knew Sarah personally, could yet unlock and inherit the legacy of love that she left. How remarkable that Avraham could find his way, perhaps even unconsciously, to giving Yitzhak that legacy that mattered most: a new person with whom he could be at home.

May our grief, as disorienting as it will be, help us, too, to find our way to what matters most.

Shabbat shalom.