Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chayei Sarah

Life Lessons from Sarah

Although the name of this week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*, means "Sarah's lifetime," the portion in fact opens with her death and Abraham's subsequent attempt to purchase a burial plot for her from the local Hittites:

בראשית כג:א-ב 1. וַיִּהְיוּ חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשֶׁבַע שָׁנִים שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה: 2. וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הִוא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וְלִבְכֹּתָהּ:	**Genesis 23:1-2** Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial."

- **Why do you think Abraham specified to the Hittites that he was a "resident alien" when asking to purchase a burial site?**
- **This source captures the moment when Abraham shifts from actively mourning his loss to addressing practical concerns. When you have experienced difficulty or loss, has attending to practical details felt like a comfort, a burden, or something in between?**

Just as Abraham eulogized Sarah and reflected on her life, in this sheet we will examine several sources about Sarah and use them to draw lessons for our own lives as contemporary Jews.

The first source comes from Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a prominent nineteenth-century German rabbi, scholar, and communal leader. His commentary on the Torah, originally written in German, combined classical interpretation with innovative approaches, allowing him to uncover new dimensions of the biblical text. Here, commenting on the opening verse of *Chayei Sarah*, he pays close attention to its precise phrasing in order to explore Sarah's character:

Rabbi Hirsch on the Torah, Genesis 23:1

All these years are called “the life of Sarah.” She lived in all of them. The whole of her 127 years of existence was life—a lively, cheerful, important, good life, with no moment that she would have wished had never been. And still, the account concludes: “the years of the life of Sarah.” This lifetime of Sarah was only a period, only one part of her life. For life is not measured by the span of time given to us to live here. The righteous are called living even after their death; they continue from strength to strength, in an ever-progressing development.

“God,” it says in Psalms 37:18, “knows the days of those who live completely for Him.” There is no day, no moment, that is not recorded in God’s book. Such a life of 127 years down here contains no day that is unimportant, but its true inheritance lies in the completely unlimited future. For, as our Sages simply remark on this verse, it says: “These are but the years of the life of Sarah.”

- **What do you think Rav Hirsch means when he says that “the righteous ones live on down here after their death”?**
- **Rav Hirsch describes Sarah as someone who lived her entire life with joy and purpose. Can you think of someone you have met—whether someone you know well or only a passing acquaintance—who embodies this quality of Sarah’s?**

- What do you think Rav Hirsch means when he says that “the righteous ones live on down here after their death”?
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Bereshit Rabbah 60:16

“Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah”—all the days that Sarah was alive, there was a cloud suspended over the entrance to her tent. When she died, that cloud ceased. When Rebecca came, the cloud returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were kept wide open [for guests]. When Sarah died, that opening ceased. When Rebecca came, the opening returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, there was [divine] blessing bestowed upon her dough. When Sarah died, that blessing ceased. When Rebecca came, it returned. All the days that Sarah

בראשית רבה ס:טז

כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קַיֶּמֶת הָיָה עָנָן קָשׁוּר עַל פֶּתַח אָהֳלָהּ, כֵּיוָן שֶׁמֵּתָה פָּסַק אוֹתוֹ עָנָן, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁבָּאת רִבְקָה חָזַר אוֹתוֹ עָנָן. כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קַיֶּמֶת הָיוּ דְּלָתוֹת פְּתוּחוֹת לִרְוָחָה, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁמֵּתָה שָׂרָה פָּסְקָה אוֹתָהּ הָרְוָחָה. וְכָל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קַיֶּמֶת הָיָה בְּרָכָה מְשֻׁלַּחַת בָּעִסָּה, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁמֵּתָה שָׂרָה פְּסְקָה אוֹתָהּ הַבְּרָכָה, כֵּיוָן שֶׁבָּאת רִבְקָה חָזְרָה. כָּל יָמִים שֶׁהָיְתָה שָׂרָה קַיֶּמֶת הָיָה נֵר דּוֹלֵק מִלֵּילֵי שַׁבָּת וְעַד לֵילֵי שַׁבָּת, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁמֵּתָה פָּסַק אוֹתוֹ הַנֵּר, וְכֵיוָן שֶׁבָּאת רִבְקָה חָזַר. וְכֵיוָן שֶׁרָאָה אוֹתָהּ שֶׁהִיא עוֹשָׂה כְּמַעֲשֶׂה אִמּוֹ, קוֹצָה חַלָּתָהּ בְּטָהֳרָה וְקוֹצָה עִסָּתָהּ בְּטָהֳרָה, מִיָּד וַיִּבְאֶהָ יִצְחָק הָאֳהֱלָה. אָמַר רַבִּי יוּדָן לִמְדָתְךָ תּוֹרָה שֶׁאִם יִהְיֶה לָאָדָם בָּנִים.

	was alive, there was a lamp kindled from Shabbat night until Shabbat night. When Sarah died, that lamp ceased. When Rebecca came, it returned. When he saw that she was acting just like his mother, separating *ḥalla* in purity, and shaping loaves from her dough in purity, immediately, he "brought her into the tent."

- **What can we learn from this source about the kind of mother Sarah was and about her relationship with Isaac?**
- **If you were to write a version of this source about your mother, or another parental figure in your life, what would take the place of the open doors, the Shabbat lamp, and the braided bread?**

Not every story about Sarah paints her in a positive light. Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak), a medieval rabbi, biblical commentator, grammarian, and philosopher, suggests that we can learn from Sarah's mistakes as much as from her virtues.

This passage comes from his commentary on the story of Sarah and her maidservant Hagar. Sarah initially encouraged Abraham to have a child with Hagar after realizing that she herself was unable to conceive. Once Hagar became pregnant, however, Sarah treated her harshly:

רד"ק, פירוש על בראשית טז:ו וַתְּעַנֶּהָ שָׂרַי. עָשְׂתָה עִמָּהּ יוֹתֵר מִדַּאי וְעָבְדָה בָּהּ בְּפֶרֶךְ, אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁהָיְתָה מַכָּה אוֹתָהּ וּמְקַלֶּלֶת אוֹתָהּ וְלֹא הָיְתָה יְכוֹלָה לִסְבֹּל וּבָרְחָה מִפָּנֶיהָ. וְלֹא נָהֲגָה שָׂרָה בָּזֶה לְמִדַּת מוֹסָר וְלֹא לְמִדַּת חֲסִידוּת, לֹא מוּסָר כִּי אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁאַבְרָהָם מוֹחֵל לָהּ עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ, וְאָמַר לָהּ עֲשִׂי לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינַיִךְהָיָה רָאוּי לָהּ לִמְשֹׁךְ אֶת יָדָהּ לִכְבוֹדוֹ וְלֹא לְעַנּוֹתָהּ; וְלֹא מִדַּת חֲסִידוּת וְנֶפֶשׁ טוֹבָה כִּי אֵין רָאוּי לְאָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת כָּל יְכָלְתּוֹ בְּמַה שֶּׁתַּחַת יָדוֹ, וְאָמַר הֶחָכָם מָה נָאוָה הַמְּחִילָה בְּעֵת הַיְכֹלֶת, וּמַה שֶּׁעָשְׂתָה שָׂרַי לֹא הָיָה טוֹב בְּעֵינֵי הָאֵל... וְכֵן זֶה הַסִּפּוּר נִכְתַּב בַּתּוֹרָה לִקְנוֹת אָדָם מִמֶּנּוּ הַמִּדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת וּלְהַרְחִיק הָרָעוֹת.	**Radak on Genesis 16:6** Sarai overburdened her with work, and made her perform the work in an intolerably harsh manner. It is even possible that the word includes physical as well as verbal abuse of Hagar by Sarai. The Torah testifies that Sarai did not act morally and piously toward her. From a moral point of view, although Avram had given her a free hand when he said "do to her as appears fit in your eyes," she should have treated Hagar in a manner befitting her status as a wife or legal companion of Avram. From the point of view of practicing piously, she should have treated a subordinate with all possible consideration. The scholar Ibn Gabirol said "how beautiful is the attribute of practicing forgiveness in

	circumstances when this is possible!" Sarai's actions as reported were not pleasing in the eyes of the Lord… The reason why this whole story is preserved for all future generations in our chapter is to teach moral-ethical lessons, and to warn us not to indulge in injustice.

- **The Radak quotes the scholar Ibn Gabirol in support of his argument. How would you explain the connection between Ibn Gabirol's point and that of Radak?**
- **This source distinguishes between moral and pious perspectives, arguing that from both points of view Sarah behaved incorrectly. Do you think these two perspectives will always point toward the same course of action, or can you think of a situation in which they might lead to different conclusions?**

This final source comes from *Esh Kodesh* (*Sacred Fire*), a collection of eighty-six discourses delivered by Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe, in the Warsaw Ghetto. Referred to by the author as "Torah Novellae from the Years of Fury," the work grapples with the suffering he and his followers endured, seeking to sustain faith while rejecting simplistic explanations for the horrors around them.

Rabbi Shapira recorded and annotated these sermons over several years before entrusting the manuscripts to a group that buried them for safekeeping. In this sermon, delivered in November 1939, he expands on the story of Sarah's death at the beginning of our portion, connecting her suffering to that of the Jewish people during the Holocaust:

Esh Kodesh, Jewish Year 5700, Chayei Sara The holy books, specifically in the work Ma'or VaShemesh at the beginning of Parashat Va'era by the holy Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Rimanov, explain the Talmudic statement that "the covenant was established through salt" and "the covenant was established through suffering." Just as salt preserves meat when used in the right measure but becomes unbearable when overused, so too suffering must be balanced to be bearable and mixed with mercy. Rashi comments that Sarah's death is juxtaposed with the Binding of Isaac because upon hearing about it, her soul departed from	**אש קודש, שנת ת"ש, חיי שרה** אמנם איתא בספה"ק מאו"ש בריש פ' וארא מהרב הקדוש איש אלקים מו"ה מנחם מענדיל זצוק"ל מרימנוב, על הגמרא נאמר ברית במלח ונאמר ברית ביסורין מה מלח ממתקת הבשר אף יסורין ממרקין וכו' דהיינו מה מלח אם מוסיף יותר מכשיעור אי אפשר לקבל הנאה מהבשר רק דוקא אם נמלח כשיעור, בך היסורין יהיו ממוזגים שיהיה יכולת לקבלם ויהיו ממוזגים ברחמים עכ"ל הק', והנה רש"י פ' ולמה נסמכה מיתת שרה לעקדת יצחק שע"י וכו' פרחה נשמתה ומתה, היינו שמש"ר רעיא מהימנא סמך מיתת שרה לעקדת יצחק כדי להמליץ טוב בעדנו ולהראות שע"י יסורים ח"ו יותר מדאי מה נעשה, שפרחה נשמתה, ועוד באם נעשה כן בשרה, צדיקת גדולה כזו שבת ק' כבת ב' לחטא וכו' ושני חיי שרה שכלן שווים לטובה ומ"מ לא יכלה לסבול יסורים קשים, ומכש"כ אנחנו.

her body, and she died. The faithful shepherd, Moshe Rabbeinu, juxtaposed Sarah's death with the Akedah [Binding] to advocate on our behalf, illustrating that excessive suffering can cause even the greatest soul, like Sarah's, to leave the body. If Sarah, who was as pure at one hundred as she was at twenty, and whose years were all equally good, could not withstand such intense suffering, how much more so can we not endure. Additionally, it can be said that Sarah herself internalized the Akedah to such a degree that it caused her soul to depart—also for the sake of Israel. She showed Hashem that Israel cannot withstand excessive suffering. Even those who survive severe suffering often have their strength, spirit, and minds diminished. There is little difference between partial death and total death in such cases. This explains why the Torah emphasizes "the years of the life of Sarah." It might seem that Sarah failed compared to her previous years by allowing the Akedah to affect her so deeply. However, since she did so for the sake of Israel, the Torah affirms that all her years, including those affected by the Akedah, were equally good. May Hashem have mercy on us, all of Israel, and quickly bring salvation, both spiritually and physically, with revealed kindnesses.	עוד אפי"ל שגם שרה אמנו עצמה שנתנה כ"כ אל לבה מעשה העקדה עד שפרחה נשמתה, לטובת ישראל עשתה, להראות לדי' איך א"א לישראל לסבול יסורים יותר מדי, ואפילו מי שבחמלת ד' נשאר חי גם אחר יסוריו מ"מ חלקי כחו ומוחו ורוחו נשברו ונאבדו ממנו, מה לי קטלי' כלו ומה לי קטלי' פלגא. וזה שמתרץ הפסוק שני חיי שרה, שלכאורה חטאה שרה נגד שאר שנותיה שהי' לה לחיות באם לא לקחה כ"כ אל לבה מעשה העקדה, אבל כיון שלטובת ישראל עשתה מרמז הפסוק שני חיי שרה, היינו שנותי' שלאחר הקכ"ז כולן שוות לטובה כי גם עמהן לא חטאה, לכן ירחם ד' עלינו כל ישראל ויושיענו במהרה ברוחניות וגופניות בחסדים נגלים

- **Rabbi Shapira raises but ultimately rejects the possibility that Sarah failed by allowing the Akedah to affect her so deeply. In what sense might her reaction be understood as a failure, and why does Rabbi Shapira ultimately reject that interpretation?**
- **Rabbi Shapira compares suffering to salt: a small amount can be beneficial, but too much becomes unbearable. Do you agree with the view of suffering implied by this comparison? Are there experiences that have shaped your own perspective on this question?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. What is one lesson you will take from Sarah into your own life, whether from the sources on this sheet or from your previous knowledge of her character?
2. The patriarchs and matriarchs are often seen as role models in Jewish tradition. Yet, at least according to the Radak in the fourth source, the Torah is also willing to portray Sarah as having serious moral failings. How do you think we should relate to role models when they fall short? Should their failings be minimized, actively confronted, or approached in some other way?
3. After learning these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question that you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Chayei Sarah visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Chayei Sarah page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Chayei Sarah topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Sarah, the Matriarchs, Hagar, and the Binding of Isaac.

In the last source, Rabbi Shapira alluded to an exegetical story told about Sarah's death in which she dies of sorrow when she (falsely) hears that Abraham killed their only child, Isaac. You can find one of the traditional versions of this story here, in Hebrew and English. For a more modern spin on the story, you can listen to "River So Wide" by the band Girls in Trouble.

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