Chayei Sarah: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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Sarah dies at the ripe old age of 127, and is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron, which Abraham purchases for the occasion. Abraham then sends his servant, Eliezer, to the land of Charan **to find a wife for Isaac.** Eliezer arrives at the village well and **asks God for a sign**, saying that he will ask the local women for a drink of water, and the woman who offers a drink to his camels as well will be Isaac's betrothed.

Rebecca, the daughter of Bethuel, Abraham's nephew, appears at the well and does exactly that. She returns with Eliezer to the land of Canaan, where she and Isaac get married and fall in love. Abraham takes a new wife and fathers six additional sons, but Isaac remains his only heir. Abraham, too, dies at the age of 175, and **Isaac and Ishmael together bury him besides Sarah.**

"She became his wife, and he loved her."

Take a deeper dive

At the core of this week's parsha is Isaac and Rebecca's meet-cute story, a tale that would've delighted any self-respecting Rom Com writer. Consider, for example, the moment these two giants met: "And Rebecca lifted her eyes," the Torah tells us, "and saw Isaac, and she let herself down from the camel." The Hebrew, as always, is punchier, informing us that Rebecca didn't merely slide down elegantly, but fell. She was literally knocked off her seat by seeing the man she was about to marry.

That's charming! But, a few lines later, the parsha tells a very different story. "And Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother," we learn, "and he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her."

The word sequence matters here. A lot: **First comes marriage, only then comes love.** Because the Torah understands very well the temptation and the strength of infatuation, yet it teaches us that a union that survives and thrives isn't rooted in attraction or even in affection—both wax and wane—but in shared virtues and a shared path for the future.

Isaac and Rebecca were a perfect pair because they clearly understood their joint mission: To continue in the path of Abraham and Sarah, to shepherd humanity to ever-greater emotional and spiritual heights, and to correct the failures of those first two humans knocking about in the Garden.

And they had an amazing teacher in Abraham.

When he begins negotiations for his wife's burial cave, the cave's owner, Ephron the Hittite, offers to give it to Abraham for free. But Abraham adamantly refuses, insisting to pay for it outright. Why?

The rabbis, no surprises there, offered their share of explanations. A very common one has to do with Abraham's desire to make sure no future hater of the Jews claims that Abraham's descendants have no right to the promised land. He wants to buy it and own it outright, leaving no room for doubt or accusations.

But there's a deeper meaning here, a lesson in how we all should conduct ourselves. Abraham, the late, great Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, taught us, insisted on paying full price because he knew that without toil, we cannot sustain the sacred spirit of the Divine. And that, the Rebbe concluded, was an instruction to each one of us: **If we want to sustain the sacred spirit, we must work for it rather than expecting things merely fall in our laps.** That's what Abraham did with the cave, what Isaac and Rebecca did with their marriage, and what all of us must do with our own lives.

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