



WEEKLY PARASHA

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Parashat Chayei Sarah | October 25, 2013 / 21 Cheshvan 5774

The Mixed Blessing of Retirement

After the climax of the *akeida* at the end of last week's parasha, Avraham and Sarah quickly disappear from the scene in this week's parasha. Sarah, of course, dies at the very beginning of the parasha, but even Avraham quickly fades into the background. The spotlight moves to Avraham's servant, to Rivka and her family, and then to Yitzchak. While Avraham remarries and sires many children, this appears almost as a footnote, and we read soon thereafter of his death and burial.

Now, we would expect this fading out of Avraham when the story shifts its focus to Yitzchak, as it does in *parashat Toldot*, just as Yitzchak fades into the background when Yaakov moves to the foreground in *parashat Vayetze*. However, in *Chayei Sarah*, Yitzchak has not yet moved to center stage, and yet Avraham has already moved into the background. Why is that?

I believe what we are seeing is Avraham's retirement. Avraham has struggled all his life. To call out in the name of God, to battle kings and to save his nephew, to deal with kings who would take his wife, but most of all to have a son who would succeed him. Finally, after much struggle - first in believing in a divine promise that was not materializing, then in believing it to have been fulfilled through Yishmael only to see that possibility rejected by God, then in finally having a son through Sarah only to have it followed by God's incomprehensible command to bring his son as a sacrifice, and then in offering his son up only to be told to take him down - finally, finally, he has

the son that he has been promised, and all is well. "And God blessed Avraham with everything" (Breishit 24:1). Avraham has the son that he has always prayed for and he has achieved all that he has set out to achieve. His struggles are finally over.

But with the end of struggle, also comes the end of challenge, the end of meaning and of purpose. Consider the contrast that we are presented with at the end of *Vayera*. Avraham comes down from the mountain after almost sacrificing his one son that Sarah bore to him at his advanced age, and what does he hear? That, in the meanwhile, his brother, Nachor, has effortlessly had eight children through his wife, Milkah. And Avraham is the one with the blessing! But such is the case. A blessing means work, a blessing means struggle. Avraham is at the center of history. Every part of Avraham's life is imbued with meaning, both for him and for future generations. Meanwhile, his brother Nachor might be having eight children and living the good life, but he does not exist on the historical scene. His life is not one of significance, not one of meaning.

What then happens to Avraham when he stops struggling? He moves into retirement and off of center stage. He will now have six more children and another wife, but they are nothing more than a footnote, a parentheses. It is the life of challenge - the life that produced

Yitzchak, that presented him with ten trials that he lived up to in his service of God - that is the life worth recording.

Struggle gives purpose to our lives. More than that, only those things that we struggle for, that we sacrifice for, are the things that we truly hold dear. This point is made in the Jewish context by Yishayahu Leibowitz in "Religious Praxis" (in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*). There he compares the symbol of Christianity - the cross - with a somewhat analogous Jewish symbol of sacrifice - the *akeida*. Both speak to the notion of sacrifice, but in profoundly different ways:

[Christianity's] symbol, the cross, represents the sacrifice God brought about for the benefit of mankind. In contrast, the highest symbol of Jewish faith is the stance of Abraham on Mount Moriah, where all human values were annulled and overridden by fear and love of God. . . No doubt a religion of values, an "endowing religion" such as Christianity. . . is capable of gratifying certain psychic needs. Today, "seekers of religion" or "seekers of God" in order "to fill a vacuum in the soul" are legion. Such a religion is likely therefore to attain some popularity. It will never become an educative force. Men like comforting religions which require no effort, but they do not revere them or take them seriously. It is a basic psychological fact that men respect and adore only that which is demanding, which requires sacrifices and imposes duties."

It is in this vein that the midrash teaches that "Three great gifts were given to the Jewish people. . . are acquired only through suffering. . . and they are: Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World-to-Come." (*Sifrei, vaEtchanan*). To achieve the things that are most important, we must struggle to achieve them. And though our struggle to achieve them, they become most important to us.

Anything truly worthwhile in our lives, anything worth having, anything that we treasure, is a thing that we have had to work for, a thing that we have had to sacrifice for.

Just as it was with Avraham's struggles on account of his children before and after they were born, just as it was with all our foremothers who were childless and struggled to have children, so it is with all of us and our children. The more we sacrifice, the more we invest in our children, the more we endure *tza'ar giddul banim*, the pains of child rearing, whether we want to or not, the stronger our bond with them is, the more they mean to us, the more every moment with them is imbued with meaning.

For every one of us, we must make sure that we do not move into an early retirement from life, from its struggles and from its accomplishments. Let us make sure never to lose sight of those things that are truly important - God, Torah, the Land of Israel, *Klal Yisrael*, and of course, our family and our children. Let us always be prepared to endure the struggle that is necessary, necessary because what we struggle for is so important, and necessary because it is through the struggle that they will become ever so important to us.

Shabbat Shalom!

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