



בס"ד

**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego**  
**Study Guide &**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

פרשת חיי שרה  
לעלוי נשמת מרת מלכה בת ר' מרדכי, ע"ה

*Parshat Chaye Sarah*

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## **Partners In Torah San Diego**

### **Mission Statement:**

**Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text of interest to each participant. Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees, thinking is shared, and hearts are inspired.**

**Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.**

**Welcome. Thank you for coming. Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.**

## **Abraham and Sarah, a Requiem**

Both Abraham and his wife Sarah pass away during the narrative of this week's Torah portion.

Sarah's lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life. Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to cry over her. (Gen. 23: 1-2)

Now these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived: a hundred years, seventy years, and five years. And Abraham expired and died at a good old age, mature and content, and he was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him... (Gen. 25: 7-9)

Between these two accounts, Abraham instructed his loyal servant Eliezer to travel back to his relatives living in far off Haran to find and bring back a wife for Isaac. Eliezer's mission is successful, and he returns with Rebecca, who agrees to marry Isaac. They are married, and Isaac is consoled through his love of Rebecca for the loss of his mother, Sarah.

Although this is not readily apparent in the narrative, the twins Esau and Jacob are born, and are 15 years old at the time that their grandfather Abraham passes away. (The narratives only turns its attention to the household of Isaac and Rebecca in next week's Torah portion, because it remains focused on Abraham through his passing) Also of note is that Abraham passes away 38 years after Sarah's passing.

Unusually, the description given of Abraham upon his passing is that he “died at a good old age, mature and content.” Let’s consider this further.

Should Abraham have been content? When Abraham was introduced, (Gen. 12), G-d promises ‘I will make of you a great nation.’ When he passes away, he leaves behind one married son and his twin grandsons, one righteous, one wicked. Could anyone describe this as a great nation?

Abraham was promised ‘go forth in the land, its length and breadth, for to you I will give it.’ (Gen. 13) And yet, when Sarah dies and Abraham needs to bury her, he owned no plot of land. Abraham, in the midst of his grief, must go to the market and negotiate a proper spot to bury Sarah from the local people, who take advantage of him and insist that he pay an exorbitant price. Again, a promise unrealized.

Later, the Medrash contrasts the uncomplaining, accepting nature of Abraham to the impatience and questioning expressed by Moses. Not long into his mission to free the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, Moses questions G-d and complains ‘why have you sent me?’ Moses was mindful that the conditions of slavery worsened after his initial meeting with Pharaoh. (Exodus 6 – *Bereisheet Rabbah* 6:4) Certainly Abraham was more faithful and accepting than was Moses at that point. But to characterize Abraham’s life as ‘mature and content’? What was Abraham’s criteria for success, and how did he find such complete fulfillment?

Let’s begin by considering a subtlety of language. When G-d appears to Abraham to instruct him to circumcise himself, Abraham is told “go forth **before me** and become complete.” (Gen. 17:1) This is in contrast to the description of the righteous Noah, who we are told “Noah walked **with** G-d.”(6:9) Perhaps we can detect a key element to

Abraham's mission, in his going *before* G-d. What is implied is that Abraham is to be the one announcing G-d to the world, introducing G-d and making G-d known in the world. In this way, Abraham would in fact be the originator of many nations, even those nations whose concept of G-d differs, but remain within the domain of monotheistic belief. Today, with the added perspective of 36 intervening centuries, the world recognizes Abraham as the patriarch of three major faiths, each tracing their lineage and basing their beliefs on the manner in which Abraham conducted his life. But it certainly has taken a while.

We see this idea of Abraham playing a leading, advance role, reinforced elsewhere in this week's Torah reading. When Abraham tells his servant Eliezer, the head of his household to find his son a wife, he says 'I will have you swear by Hashem, G-d of heaven and G-d of earth.' (Gen. 24:3) Then, in explaining to Eliezer the necessity of Isaac not marrying a local girl, Abraham states 'Hashem, G-d of heaven who took me from the house of my father and the land of my birth ... (24:7). The commentaries wonder, is Hashem G-d of heaven, or G-d of heaven and of earth?

Rashi (foundational commentator, d. 1105, France) explains that Abraham was explaining to Eliezer that this future wife you are to seek for my son Isaac needs to be exceptional, because in my own lifetime, I have transformed G-d from being merely the G-d of heaven, yet unrecognized on earth, to now being G-d of heaven and of earth. For Isaac is to carry forward this mission, he will need a wife of exceptional spiritual stature, a match of him just as Sarah was a match for me. Abraham is making it clear that he was able to accomplish this great advancement of making G-d known to the world only because his household was shaped and designed by Sarah, his partner in life. This clarified the immense importance of Eliezer's mission in traveling a great distance to bring Rebecca to Isaac.

The Torah narrative next devotes a lengthy chapter with detailed and repeated conversations to the step by step process of finding Rebecca and Rebecca's determination to travel back to become Isaac's wife. The Torah makes it clear that Rebecca's exemplary kindness in greeting Eliezer, taking care of him, his men and their animals, and selflessly devoting all of her energies to welcoming these strangers from far away, demonstrates the superlative inner qualities which Rebecca had developed within herself.

It is noteworthy that Abraham, after Sarah's passing, plays little direct role and is no longer the focus of attention in the narrative. The final 38 years of his life without Sarah alongside of him are not of great importance. Instead our attention shifts to the household of Isaac and Rebecca, as together they continue the legacy which Abraham established.

The Medrash adds much color and detail to the simple statement that upon Rebecca's arrival to the land of Canaan, she moves in to the Tent of Sarah. States the Medrash, throughout Sarah's lifetime, the Divine Presence was evident, and it hovered over Sarah's tent. This was manifest to all: a Cloud of Glory above, the candles Sarah kindled each Friday before Shabbat burned throughout the week, only to be rekindled by Sarah for the following Shabbat, and the dough which Sarah prepared and baked for Shabbat remained fresh and warm throughout the week. These three signs of Divine closeness and affirmation disappeared when Sarah died, and returned as soon as Rebecca arrived, and remained present throughout their lives together.

This highlights a key component of Abraham's greatness, and an aspect of his life worldview which so endeared him to G-d. G-d stated confidently 'I know of Abraham (and love him because) he commands his children and his household after him to keep the way of Hashem by

performing charity and justice.’ (Gen. 18:19) Abraham devoted much time and energy to instructing his son, guiding him toward responsible adulthood and family life.

Nachmonides (early commentator, d. 1270, Israel) portrays Abraham’s state of mind at the end of his life as follows: the desires of his heart were satisfied, his soul was satisfied. Nachmonides goes on to say seemingly two different things. One, that this was a special blessing from G-d; and two, that it is a wonderful credit to Abraham that he was ‘satisfied with his portion’ and did not desire after extraneous or luxurious things.

We can ask Nachmonides – which is it, a particular blessing of tranquility from Above, or a spiritual / character achievement on Abraham’s part?

The profound answer is that Nachmonides is teaching us that this level of satisfaction and contentment requires both. Even when tranquility and clarity of thinking is provided by G-d it still requires a reciprocal, matching effort of developing an attitude of happiness with one’s lot. It takes determination to derive joy from one’s portion in life. ‘Who is wealthy? One who is joyful of his portion’ we are taught in Pirkei Avot. (Chapter 4, Mishna 1) Nachmonides, in applying this lesson to Abraham notes that high level satisfaction and joy of living is a partnership between the person and the Lord. Rather than resulting from any given set of circumstances, or even ‘promises’ fulfilled or as yet unfulfilled, it is only possible through effort and striving, and by placing one’s most enduring goals ahead of passing whims and status symbols.

So, as Abraham’s life drew to a close, what could he point to, what was in fact his ‘portion’? Any of us could instead make the case for Abraham to have been plagued by disappointment, complaining that so

much of what was to be expected was as yet unfulfilled. As a visionary founder of an Eternal People, Abraham realized that it would be upon the shoulders of his children and grandchildren that the future spiritual course of history was to depend. Abraham was able to align his happiness to fall within these long term goals.

Abraham was content to have been recognized during his lifetime as a 'Prince of G-d' by the people among whom he lived, respected by kings and rulers, and everyone with whom he interacted. He was understood by others as living a life inspired by his understanding of G-d's ways. He had grown to become a human reflection of his Maker, and the definition of how a person can show themselves to have been fashioned in G-d's image.

With this stature, Abraham was able to rebuke a powerful king, Abimelech, by explaining to him that 'there is no fear of G-d in this place.' His rebuke was accepted. (Gen. 20:11)

Abraham saw how G-d protects and preserves his spiritual legacy, and that although fragile and small, it was cherished and impactful. Although his beliefs and practices were not adopted by the world at large, they had become known, and G-d had become a frame of reference for those around him.

And, Abraham saw complete continuity of his spiritual mission take root within the home Isaac and Rebecca established together. This gave Abraham the sense of being 'mature and content' as he completed his earthly lifespan. Today we are witness to Abraham's enduring legacy.