

November 22, 2008, Chayei Sarah, Loss and Love

Several years ago, I heard an interview with the journalist who said that the most important lesson she ever received in journalism was in high school. Her teacher gave the class an assignment. She said, I want you to write the headline for the high school newspaper. Here's the story. You write the headline. Next week, the president of the United States will be coming to visit our small town and everybody will be lining the streets in a parade to visit him in the middle of the day.

So they all wrote their headlines: President to visit Podunk, wherever it was, parade to happen in town. And the teacher looked through all of the headlines and she said, none of you got it right. The correct headline is "No School on Tuesday." Because, she said, the headline that matters to your reader is the one that affects his or her life.

Now, this same conflict that the teacher was pointing to exists actually every time we read the Torah, because the Torah speaks obviously on multiple levels. But I now want to speak about two important levels on which the Torah teaches. And you see it happen this morning. One is world historical level about the Jewish people, and the other is a personal level, because it's a story of men and women of parents and children of siblings. And this morning when we have a story about Abraham and Sarah, it operates on both levels. And I can prove it to you.

A question that rabbis asked, a question that was asked and eloquently answered by our scholar in residence, Michael Oren this morning, is, why does Abraham have to pay for a burial plot for Sarah when he's promised the land? It's not fair. It's not right. God says, this land is yours and it belongs to your descendants forever and ever. And I, the creator of the universe, give it to you, and then he's got to negotiate. So there is, as you heard, a world historical reason, what it means for the Jewish people and what it means to inherit the land.

But I want to look at it interpersonally. I want to propose an answer that has nothing to do with Abraham's sense of mission as the progenitor of the Jewish people and everything to do with Abraham's sense of himself as the husband of Sarah. In order to understand better what I'm saying, let me take you from an ancient practice to a contemporary one.

All of you, every single one of you, I don't care what you say, has re-gifted. You know it. Someone gave you something and you took a look at it and you said, I don't really want this, but I'm going to a party next week and I think I can close it so that they'll never know it was opened and I'll get it wrapped and then they can regift it to someone else and my responsibility will be done, right?

There used to be a joke that Johnny Carson would retell each year that there was one fruitcake in the country and it just kept going around and around and around, and no one actually ate it, but it was okay because it fulfills your obligation. Some people have closets full of gifts that they have received, now we know who they are, in order that they give them to someone else.

Now, if it was your child's bar or bat mitzvah, if it was your 50th wedding anniversary, you wouldn't reach into that closet. There are times when you can give a gift you've received, but there are times when it has to come from you and you know it. And you would feel inauthentic as a parent to give your child for his bar mitzvah something that you had received a few weeks earlier, however wonderful it was. You might say, here, I'm giving this to you. I received it, but I'm also buying you something that's special just for you. Because love can't be recycled. It has to be direct.

And here's what I want to propose with absolutely no evidence in the text, but I still want to propose it. Maybe God said to Abraham, I give you this land, and Abraham said, that's fine, that's good, but where Sarah is going to be buried, that land I want to buy. I don't want to receive it from God and give it to Sarah. That doesn't feel right to me. We have shared a lifetime together. I can't give her something else that someone gave me. I have to give her something that I earned and I buy. That's what it means to love someone. It has to be direct, unmediated.

Maybe Abraham is teaching us a lesson here that has not to do, or at least not only to do with the Jewish experience in history, but with what it means to love someone, and what it means to give something someone whom you love. Because if it doesn't cost you, if it doesn't mean something to you, then it's not a gift of love. And this is the last gift that Abraham will be able to give to Sarah, the last tangible gift, which is a place for her to rest forever. And he doesn't want to take it from God and give it to Sarah. That doesn't feel right. In fact, that isn't right.

And Abraham teaches two lessons at the same time. One is not only the necessity of giving a gift that is really yours when it's a gift of love, but the other is what we learn in Shir Hashirim, in the Song of Songs, that love is as strong as death, that the moment that Sarah died, Abraham didn't stop loving. And in fact, if you think about it, the Jewish tradition as a tradition begins the moment that Sarah dies, because she's the first person in the Jewish tradition who has passed away and who, as the generations come after, we have to remember and learn from and emulate.

So at that pivotal moment in our history, Abraham wants to say that the connection is not broken by death, that love endures past the grave. And that what it means to love is that you have a direct, unmediated connection between heart and heart, between giver and the one who receives.

And that's why at the end of his life, Isaac and Yishmael, his children who have been at odds with each other, they come together to bury him next to Sarah because they saw how at the moment that Sarah died, Abraham put love first, not inheritance, not promise, not stature in the world, not the fact that he was the first representative of the creator of the universe. No. At that moment, he was a husband and a father. And that is perhaps the most powerful lesson that he can teach.

It is a painful and powerful irony that the first piece of land that we own in Israel as Jews is a burial plot. But the first piece of land that we own in Israel as Jews was an act of love, was a

gesture of connection between husband and wife, was a promise that love doesn't die in the grave. And that, I suppose, coming full circle is a gift of God who gave us souls that don't disappear and hearts that can love even beyond the visible presence of those whom we remember.

So we are always reading the Torah on two levels, on the level of history and the level of heart, and they come together and that's what it means to have a sacred scripture, something that you can return to again and again. That's why this parsha, which is about the death of Sarah, is called Chayei Sarah, the story of her life, because they are intertwined as they are with us all, and she and Avraham together have not only left us a legacy of the land, they have also left a legacy of their love. Shabbat shalom.