



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Chayei Sarah 5772

By Rabbi Wendi Geffen

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Following on the heels of the *Akeidah*,¹ the near-sacrifice of Isaac, *Parshat Chayei Sarah* (“Sarah’s Life”), opens by immediately announcing her death. Although a connection to the previous narrative is not explicit, many commentators link Sarah’s sudden passing to the *Akeidah*, imagining that the emotional shock of hearing the news literally kills her.² Rashi expands on this in dramatic language, commenting: “The death of Sarah follows the binding of Isaac, because through the announcement of the binding—that her son had been made ready for slaughter and had almost been slaughtered—her soul flew from her, and she died.”³

Abraham, the commentaries infer from the text, responds to the event very differently. After he leaves the site of the *Akeidah*, Abraham learns that his brother, Nahor, has had children and grandchildren. While the text treats these as two separate storylines, Rashi connects them, imagining that:

When he returned from Mt. Moriah, Abraham pondered: ‘If my son had really been slain, he would have died without children! I must marry him to one of the daughters of Aner or Eshcol or Mamre.’ The Holy Blessed One therefore had the announcement made to him that Rebecca, the one fit to be Isaac’s partner, had been born.⁴

Based on Rashi’s interpretation, it appears that rather than responding to the *Akeidah* emotionally, as Sarah did, Abraham reacts rationally, through directed concern about unfinished covenantal business.⁵

Assuming that this indicates his inability or unwillingness to process the emotional heft of the *Akeidah*, many might label Abraham cold-hearted or emotionally stunted, desiring simply “to turn the page” and move on. We may criticize ourselves for the same behavior when we respond to news of calamity in our world today by changing the channel, seeking to anesthetize ourselves as a defense against the perceived emotional destruction that might come from allowing suffering into our consciousness, no less our hearts.

On closer examination, however, Abraham’s unemotional response may not be an avoidance of trauma, but rather, a practical coping mechanism enabling action. Whereas Sarah becomes so emotionally overwhelmed that she is paralyzed, Abraham uses the horror he experienced to ensure the fulfillment of the covenant with God through his descendants.

¹ The *Akeidah* appears in *Parshat Vayera*, the portion immediately preceding *Chayei Sarah*.

² See *Breishit Rabbah* 58:5, *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2 and *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 32. Louis Ginzberg, “The Death and Burial of Sarah,” *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961) 286-291. Avivah Zornberg offers a contemporary lens.

³ Rashi on *Breishit* 23:2.

⁴ Rashi on *Breishit* 22:20.

⁵ Abraham demonstrates this same forward momentum in his reaction to Sarah’s death as well. Abraham is not devoid entirely of emotional response, as the text includes that he mourns her death. But we learn that as soon as the mourning concludes, Abraham “arose before his dead” to seek out a burial plot for Sarah. Once acquired, Abraham is back on task to find a wife for Isaac throughout *Breishit* 24, and then moves on in his own life, remarrying in *Breishit* 25.

Abraham's reaction might prove an ideal model for handling global trauma today if we want to make a difference. Rather than chastising ourselves for not being more emotionally moved—like Sarah—by the horrors in our world, perhaps we should learn to use our emotional distance—like Abraham—as a catalyst toward action.

In last's month's *New York Times* article, "Becoming Compassionately Numb," Benedict Carey explores how too much compassion can hinder our ability to help others. Carey refers to a measurement called the "pain empathy response"—the reactions individuals experience watching others suffer. Those able to inhibit their emotional reaction to people in pain (e.g., physicians regularly exposed to individuals' suffering) were able to free up cognitive resources and, as a result, better address the task at hand. Called "psychic numbing," this reaction mobilizes rather than paralyzes. Those with a pre-conceived mission and regular exposure to suffering use the natural antibodies of psychic numbing to protect themselves against blunt force emotional trauma. They are thus not crushed under the devastating emotional weight of tragedy, like Sarah, but rather, like Abraham, they are catalyzed toward action.⁶

As activists for global social justice, we can use this phenomenon to our advantage. Our tendency to emotionally withdraw because of over-exposure to suffering need not render us powerless; rather, it can be an opportunity to engage in rational activism. We too can "free up cognitive resources"—remembering that, like Abraham, we have a mission to complete, even in the aftermath of trauma. Our charge is to bring *tzedek* into the world, and our ability to act decisively and rationally in the face of injustice may be our greatest asset in seeking change.



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⁶ Benedict Carey, "Becoming Compassionately Numb," *New York Times* 1 October 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/02/sunday-review/compassion-fatigue.html?pagewanted=all>

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