



Shabbat Table Talk Page



Overview

- **Chayei Sarah (חַיֵּי שָׂרָה, "the life of Sarah")**
- **Chapters: Gen. 23:1-25:18**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Vayera) recounted how the LORD proved faithful to Abraham and Sarah by miraculously giving them a son (Isaac) in their old age. Nonetheless, Abraham faced his greatest test of all by being asked to offer up his promised child as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, the place of the future Temple. On account of Abraham's willingness to obey, the LORD promised that He would multiply his offspring as the stars of heaven and that in his seed (singular) all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

This week's portion, Chayei Sarah - the "life of Sarah"- begins (paradoxically) with the account of Sarah's *death*, and retells how the first great matriarch of the Jewish people was buried in the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, a burial site which Abraham had legally purchased from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver.

After Sarah was buried, Abraham's servant, Eliezer of Damascus (whom Abraham had originally thought would be his heir), made a solemn promise to Abraham to help find his son Isaac a wife from among his relatives living in Mesopotamia - and not from among the Canaanites. Eliezer (אֵלִי + עֶזֶר) then set out on the 550 mile journey to Haran (also called the City of Nahor and the place where Abraham's father died), taking ten camels laden with gifts in search of a bride.

At a village well near the City of Nahor, Eliezer made the camels kneel down and asked the LORD for a sign: when the maidens would come to the well, he would ask some for water to drink, but the woman who offered to also draw water for his camels as well would be the one chosen by the LORD for Abraham's son.

Before Eliezer had finished praying, Rebekah - Abraham's nephew's daughter - appeared with a water jar on her shoulder. Eliezer ran to her and asked her for a drink, and after she gave him some water, generously offered to draw water for all ten of his camels as well. After she "passed the test," Eliezer gave her expensive rings and bracelets and inquired of her family status. When he then realized that the LORD had led him directly to Abraham's close kinsmen (Rebekah was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nachor), he was overjoyed and thanked the LORD for guidance and success.

(continued on next page...)



Meanwhile Rebekah ran back home to tell her family what happened at the village well, and her brother Laban went out to invite Eliezer to come under their hospitality. Eliezer agreed but refused to eat with them until he had clearly communicated the purpose of his mission and thereby fulfilled his promise to Abraham.

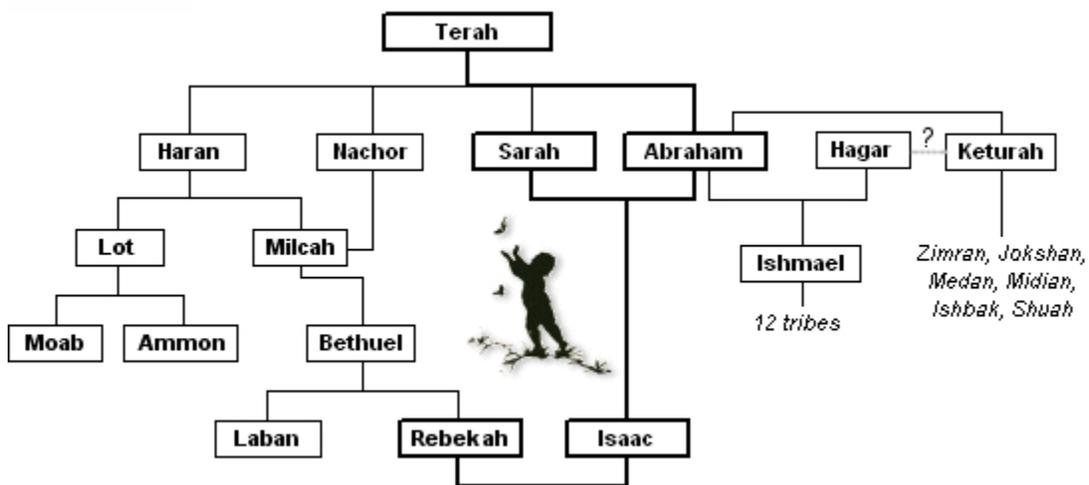
Eliezer then retold the entire story of his journey from Abraham in Canaan, including his prayer to the LORD for the sign of a wife for Abraham’s son, and how Rebekah had passed the divine test. He then asked Rebekah’s family whether they would show kindness to their relative Abraham by agreeing to give Rebekah as Isaac’s wife, so that Eliezer would know whether to “turn to the right hand or to the left.”

Both Bethuel and Laban agreed that the LORD had indeed chosen Rebekah to be Abraham’s son’s wife and did not object to the match. Upon hearing this, Eliezer gave Rebekah more gifts and also gave gifts to the rest of the family. They then ate a meal together and spent the night.

The following morning, Eliezer wanted to immediately leave for Canaan with Rebekah, but her parents wanted her to stay another ten days. To resolve this disagreement, the parents then asked her what she wanted to do, and Rebekah said she was ready to leave for Canaan without delay. Eliezer then led Rebekah (and her maidservants) back to the land of Canaan, where she met and married Isaac. Isaac loved her and was comforted over the loss of his mother Sarah.

We are then told that after the death of Sarah Abraham remarried a woman named Keturah (some claim that she was actually Hagar) who bore him six more sons. Abraham gave gifts to these children as a legacy, but left everything else he owned to Isaac, the appointed heir.

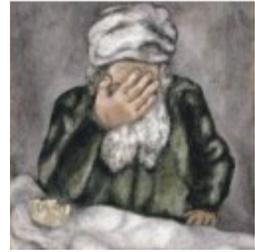
The portion ends with Abraham’s death (at age 175), and how his two sons (Isaac and Ishmael) buried him in the Cave of Machpelah beside his wife Sarah. As a postscript, we are also told of the descendants of Ishmael and of his death (at age 137):





Parashah Questions

1. What does *chayei Sarah* (חַיֵּי שָׂרָה) mean? (Gen. 23:1) ¹
2. How old was Sarah when she died? (23:1) ²
3. Where did Sarah die? (23:2) ³
4. According to Jewish tradition, *why* did Sarah die? ⁴
5. Why is it important to use the “good eye” when considering others? ⁵
6. Why do Jews consider it important to mourn the dead? ⁶
7. Where was Sarah buried? (Gen. 23:3-20) ⁷
8. Who were the Hittites (בְּנֵי-חֵת)? ⁸



¹ The life of Sarah, lit. the “lives of Sarah” (חַיֵּי is the plural “construct” of חַי). This is analogous to the idea of *panim* (פְּנִיּוֹת), “face,” which likewise is plural to indicate multifaceted existence.

² Sarah was 127 years old when she died, literally “one hundred years and twenty years and seven years” (Gen.23:1). At the age of one hundred she was like twenty in beauty, and at twenty she was like seven in piety. In Hebrew, larger numbers are described in the singular (שָׁנָה), whereas smaller numbers are described in the plural (שָׁנִים), which suggests that what is small in this world will be regarded as great in the world to come, and what is great in this world will be regarded as small there (Mark 9:35).

³ She died in Hebron (חֶבְרוֹן) in the land of Canaan, initially called *Kiryat Arba* (“city of the four”).

⁴ Sarah died immediately after the Akedah (i.e., the sacrifice of Isaac). A midrash says that Satan disguised himself as an old man and told Sarah that Abraham had killed her son, which caused her profound grief and horror. Shortly after this, Satan appeared to her in another guise and told her that he had just seen Isaac, who was alive and well. Sarah was so elated over this news that she went into a state of shock and died soon afterward. The sages say that this was “payback” for Sarah’s earlier sin of laughing when she heard she would have a son and then denying that she had done so. Yet another midrash explains that Sarah died early because she demanded Abraham cast away Hagar and insisted that “God judge between me and you” in the matter (Gen. 16:5). Still another states that Sarah was angry that Abraham did not tell her about God’s commandment and this led to her untimely death. In any event, it is noteworthy that the only death connected with the Akedah was *Sarah’s*...

⁵ It is said that if a person prays for another and needs the same thing, he is answered *first*... Likewise, if someone blesses another, he himself will be blessed. The opposite is also true: if a person seeks divine justice and retribution against another, he will be judged and punished before the one whom he has accused... “If one has the audacity to ask God to judge another, the record of his deeds is carefully examined, and all his sins are recalled.”

⁶ When a person sheds a tear for the death of another, God stores it in His bottle and the person is rewarded for it. If someone neglects to attend the funeral of a Jew, one’s own life may be shortened in repayment. This is especially the case regarding a virtuous soul, since that person brought good to the world and now is gone. Even if she had not been his wife, Abraham would have mourned for the loss of Sarah, since she was a prophetess. In the Torah scroll, the word “and to weep for her” is written with a small Kaf (כ), suggesting that Abraham was humble at heart and regarded himself as partly responsible for the death of Sarah.

⁷ She was buried in the Cave of Machpelah (מְקַבְּלָהּ), east of Hebron in the land of Canaan. It was called Machpelah because it had two levels (*kaphal*) - a cave within a cave.

⁸ The Hittites (sons of “Heth”) were descendants of Canaan that lived in the fertile crescent during the 2nd millennium BC. The land occupied by the Hittites was promised by God to Abraham (Gen. 15:8); later Moses instructed Israel and Joshua to utterly annihilate the Hittites from the promised land (Deut. 20:17; Josh. 24:11).



9. What did Abraham mean when he said he was a “sojourner and stranger” (23:4) ⁹
10. What is the Jewish view of funeral services? ¹⁰
11. Who was Ephron son of Zohar? (Gen. 23:8-11) ¹¹
12. Who else was later buried in the Cave of Machpelah? ¹²
13. How old were both Abraham and Isaac when Sarah died? (24:1) ¹³
14. Who was the chief servant that helped Abraham find a wife for Isaac? (24:2-4) ¹⁴
15. Why did Eliezer “place his hand under Abraham’s thigh”? (24:2,9) ¹⁵
16. Why didn’t Abraham want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman? (24:3) ¹⁶
17. Why didn’t Abraham want Isaac to leave the promised land? (24:6) ¹⁷
18. Where did Eliezer go to find a wife for Isaac? (24:10) ¹⁸



⁹ This is a paradoxical phrase, since a *ger* (גֵּר) is a “stranger” in the sense of being a foreigner in this world (i.e., one “just passing through”), whereas a *toshav* (תּוֹשָׁב) is a “settler” or “resident” in the land. God’s people are “strangers” in this world. They are literally estranged and live as “resident aliens” -- here, yet not here. Thus Abraham said to the sons of Chet: “I am a ‘stranger and sojourner’ (גֵּר וְתוֹשָׁב) among you; sell me a burial site...” (Gen. 23:4), and King David likewise confessed: “For we are strangers with You, mere transients like our fathers; our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope” (1 Chron. 29:15). It is significant that the first “deeded land” given to the Jewish people was a *burial* site...

¹⁰ It is considered a positive commandment (i.e., obligation) to attend a funeral and escort the dead on its way to the cemetery. “Whoever sees the bier must accompany it a few steps.” Burial of the body should be done quickly and the person should not be buried among the wicked or those who denied the Torah.

¹¹ Ephron was a high-ranking member of the Hittite people (i.e., he “sat in the midst of the children of Heth”) who sold Abraham the Cave of Machpelah and its surrounding field for 400 shekels of silver. In 23:16, the name “Ephron” is spelled “defectively” (עֶפְרָיִם), which has the same gematria as “Ayin Ra” (עַיִן רַע), “evil eye.”

¹² The “Tomb of the Patriarchs,” or the Cave of Machpelah, is regarded as the second most sacred site in the world, after the Temple Mount. The following *zugot* (couples) were buried there: Adam/Eve; Abraham/Sarah; Isaac/Rebekah; Jacob/Leah (Rachel died near Bethlehem).

¹³ Sarah died at age 127; Abraham was ten years older than Sarah, and therefore Abraham was 137 years old. Isaac would have been 37 years old when his mother died, since she was 90 when she bore him.

¹⁴ Jewish tradition identifies him as Eliezer of Damascus (see Gen. 15:2).

¹⁵ There is speculation about what this means. One view is this was a customary gesture to indicate solemnity in times of making a vow; another view is that the servant held Abraham’s “circumcision” as the object of his oath!

¹⁶ The descendants of Canaan (כְּנַעַן) were cursed (Gen. 9:25) and the various “Canaanite nations,” including the Hittites, were descended from him (1 Chron. 1:13). In addition, Abraham did not want others to think that his descendants inherited the land of Canaan through *intermarriage* with the Canaanites.

¹⁷ From the time he was bound to the altar Isaac became an offering to God and therefore he was never to leave the holy land... Isaac, the first Jew circumcised on the 8th day was born, sacrificed, and died in the promised land.

¹⁸ He went to back to Abram’s homeland – the place where Terach died, called Aram Naharayim (lit., “Aram of the two rivers,” i.e., Tigris and Euphrates) otherwise called the City of Nachor (i.e., Nachor was the name of Abraham’s brother living in Mesopotamia). The journey from Hebron to Aram was roughly 550 miles...



19. How do we know that Eliezer traveled with other servants to Aram? ¹⁹
20. What sign did Eliezer ask of God so he could know His choice of a bride for Isaac? ²⁰
21. What does it mean that “no man knew” Rebekah? (24:16) ²¹
22. How much water did Rebekah serve the camels? (24:20) ²²
23. *When* did Eliezer give Rebekah the ring & bracelets? (24:22-23) ²³
24. How old was Rebekah at this time? ²⁴
25. Who was Bethuel (בְּתוּאֵל)? ²⁵
26. Who was Laban (לָבָן)? ²⁶
27. What was the biological relationship between Rebekah and Isaac? ²⁷
28. After Eliezer recounted his mission on behalf of Abraham and the sign he received from God regarding Rebekah, what did Laban and Bethuel say? (25:50-51) ²⁸



¹⁹ First, he was driving a caravan of ten camels (24:10); second, he asked Rebekah if her father’s house could accommodate *them* for the night (24:23), third, when Laban showed him the barn for the camels, he also provided water for the men who were with the servant to wash their feet (24:32); finally, after the match was made, it is written that “he and the men who were with him ate and drank” (25:54).

²⁰ Eliezer asked that when he asked for water, the girl would offer to bring him water for his ten camels, too. In other words, if the prospective woman showed *chesed* (חֶסֶד) – lovingkindness – to a complete stranger, then he would take it as a sign that she was God’s chosen bride. Note that this test concerned the *inward* character of the woman, not her status or beauty or other worldly factors. Rebekah (i.e., Rivkah: רִבְקָה) passed this test and later was willing to leave her family - all that she knew - based on an “otherworldly” promise.

²¹ Beyond the statement that she was a virgin, Rebekah was unknown and unrecognized among her neighbors...

²² If a camel would drink about 14 gallons of water, and there were ten camels, then she would have drawn up 140 gallons of water from the well – a significant amount of labor done out of kindness for the stranger...

²³ It appears here that he gave them to her before he asked for her identity, though later (24:47) the servant said that he gave them to her after he asked for her identity... Rebekah herself said the same thing (24:28).

²⁴ There are some problems understanding her age, but *only* if we accept the traditional view that 1) she was born on the same day Isaac was sacrificed at Moriah *and* 2) Isaac was 37 years old at the time (in which case she would be three years old (!), since Isaac was 40 when they met: 25:20); if we reject this (and we certainly should), then Rebekah’s age is simply *undefined*, though she is described using the Hebrew word to refer to a young woman or girl (הַיְנָעָרָה), and she moreover had a childhood nurse accompany her (Gen. 24:59).

²⁵ He was Abraham’s nephew, the son of his brother Nahor... Bethuel was also the father of Rebekah (and Laban) though we do not know the name of his wife (i.e., the mother of Rebekah).

²⁶ Laban was Abraham’s “grandnephew” and therefore the paternal *cousin of Isaac*. The sages note that Laban’s name means “white,” which suggests that his wickedness was obvious to everyone. The first thing written about Laban was that he “saw the ring and the bracelets on his sisters arms” and then ran to meet Eliezer. Jewish tradition states that he was running so that he could murder him and steal his possessions. Because of his later persecution of Jacob, Laban is regarded as Israel’s first enemy. He was a practitioner of the occult whose grandson was none other than the wicked sorcerer Balaam who recommended that Pharaoh enslave the Jews.

²⁷ Rebekah was daughter of Isaac’s cousin, Bethuel, making her a cousin “once removed” on their father’s side.

²⁸ They agreed it was a divine omen and that Rebekah should be married to Isaac.



29. What did Rebekah have to say about the proposed match? (Gen. 24:58)²⁹
30. What is unusual about the blessing given to Rebekah by her family? (24:60)³⁰
31. Who accompanied Rebekah on her journey to the promised land? (24:61)³¹
32. Why did Isaac return from *Be'er lachai ro'i* (בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי) at this time? (24:62)³²
33. What happened when Rebekah first saw Isaac? (24:64-65)³³
34. What was the biological relationship between Sarah and Rebekah?³⁴
35. Why did Isaac take Rebekah into his mother's tent? (24:67)³⁵
36. Why does the Torah not mention that Isaac mourned for his mother until *after* he was married to Rebekah? (24:67)³⁶
37. Who was Keturah? (Gen. 25:1)³⁷
38. Whom did Abraham designate as his only heir? (25:5-6)³⁸



²⁹ When she was asked if she would go with Eliezer, she agreed of her own accord.

³⁰ The blessing, “may you become myriads and your offspring inherit the gate of his enemies” is nearly identical to the blessing God gave to Abraham immediately following the offering of his son Isaac (Gen. 22:17).

³¹ Rebekah’s nurse (24:59) as well as some unnamed other young women. They rode on the camels and followed Eliezer’s lead camel on the way to meet Isaac.

³² This was the place where Hagar had encountered the Angel of the LORD (Gen. 16:14), and later, after Hagar was run out of the family, she settled in this area. Isaac seemed to return to this area, perhaps to establish some sort of relationship with this “half brother” Ishmael or with Hagar herself...

³³ When she saw Isaac praying with deep concentration and witnessed an angel standing beside him, she bowed deeply and then fell off from her camel (תָּפַל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל). She then asked Eliezer who the man was and immediately covered her face when she learned that it was Isaac.

³⁴ Rebekah was the “grand niece” of Sarah who was said to strongly resemble Sarah in many ways, so much so that people could not tell them apart.

³⁵ A midrash states that after the death of Sarah, the Shekhinah Cloud left from above her tent, the Sabbath lamp would no longer remain miraculously lit from one Sabbath to the next, and the scent of bread that she baked for the Sabbath faded away. All these were restored when Rebekah came to live in her tent.

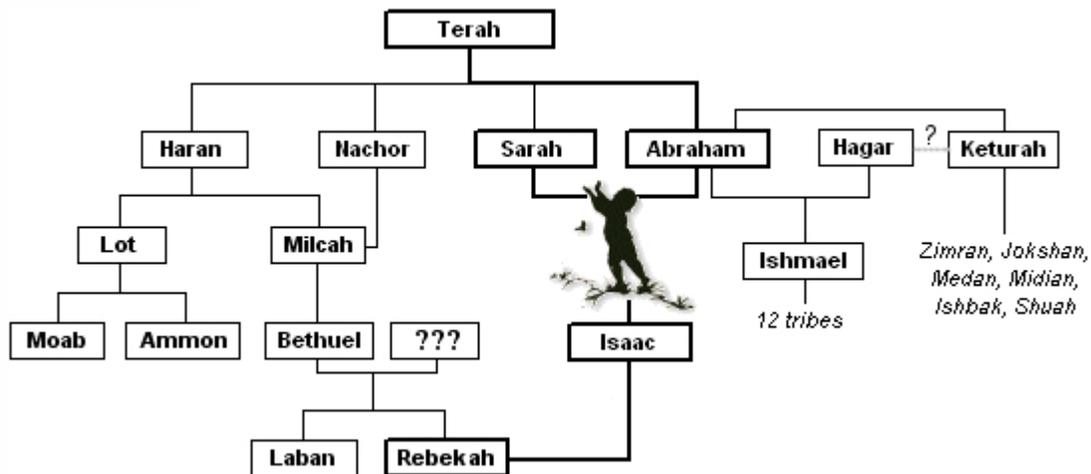
³⁶ The midrash says that Isaac was not aware of his mother’s death since he had remained in Moriah to study with Shem for three years after the Akedah incident. Only after this did he return to the Negev and married Rebekah.

³⁷ Keturah was most likely a Canaanite woman who bore Abraham six more children after the death of Sarah. The name Keturah (קֵטֻרָה) means “fragrant,” and is related to the word for incense (i.e., ketoret: קֶטֶרֶת). Among her six sons was Midian, of whom the Midianites would descend (Moses lived with the Jethro and the Midianites for 40 years). There is some question whether she should be regarded as a concubine or a wife (cp. 25:1 with 1 Chron. 1:32), though some Jewish commentators claim she was actually Hagar, who had remained faithful to Abraham even after she left the family.

³⁸ Abraham gave all he had to Isaac, though he gave “gifts” to his children from Hagar and Keturah.



39. How old was Abraham when he died? (25:7-8) ³⁹
40. Who buried Abraham, and where was he buried? (25:9-10) ⁴⁰
41. After Abraham died, what did God do to Isaac? (25:11) ⁴¹
42. Why does the Torah list the generations of Ishmael? (25:12-16) ⁴²
43. How old was Ishmael when he died? (25:17) ⁴³
44. Is it ever acceptable to ask God for a “sign,” and if so, what criteria do you use? ⁴⁴
45. Why didn't Abraham simply instruct Isaac not to marry a Canaanite woman? Why did he need to go through the services of Eliezer? ⁴⁵
46. How is Eliezer (אֱלִיעֶזֶר) a picture of the Holy Spirit (רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ)?



For Next Week:

- Read parashat **Toldot** (i.e., Genesis 25:19-28:9)
- Read the Haftarah (Malachi 1:1-2:7)
- Read the New Testament (Romans 9:1-31)

³⁹ Abraham was 175 years old when he died. This means he lived 38 years after Sarah died...

⁴⁰ He was buried in the Cave of Machpelah by his sons Isaac and Ishmael.

⁴¹ God (Himself) blessed Isaac since apparently Abraham failed to formally bless him before he died.

⁴² To demonstrate God's promise to Abraham that Ishmael would father twelve princes was fulfilled (21:13).

⁴³ Ishmael died at age 137.

⁴⁴ This is a discussion question...

⁴⁵ This is another discussion question. Perhaps Abraham was afraid that Eliezer would convince Isaac to marry a Canaanite girl after Abraham died, and therefore Abraham had him take a solemn oath not to allow this to occur.