

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Chayei Sarah

GENESIS 23:1–25:18

Study Guide written by Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein

Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Dr. Lisa D. Grant, and Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, Ph.D., editors


Rabbi Hara E. Person, series editor

Parashat Chayei Sarah Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Aftermath of Sarah's Death—Land and Mourning


Theme 2: Ensuring the Continuity of the Covenant—Finding the Right Wife for Isaac

INTRODUCTION



In *parashat Chayei Sarah*, Abraham begins to secure God's promises of offspring and land. The central events in *parashat Chayei Sarah*—the death of one matriarch and the introduction of another—emphasize how profoundly the fulfillment of these promises is connected to women. To secure a burial place for Sarah, whose death opens the parashah, Abraham purchases land that provides a legitimate foothold in Canaan, one recognized by the inhabitants of the land. As other family members die and are buried there, this burial site will become a concrete fulfillment of God's pledge to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. The search for a suitable wife for Abraham's son Isaac—culminating in the betrothal of Rebekah—demonstrates Abraham's desire to ensure the continuity of the covenant through progeny. Both Abraham's careful negotiations with the Hittites for the burial plot and his desire that Isaac's wife come from family in a distant land draw attention to Abraham's position as an outsider in the Promised Land. These two narratives highlight the tension throughout the biblical text between separation from other nations and openness to the stranger.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 111–12 and/or survey the outline on page 112. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine

the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: THE AFTERMATH OF SARAH'S DEATH—LAND AND MOURNING



The Torah's lengthy and detailed description of Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah stands in contrast to the absence of such depictions in the majority of the biblical text. Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites for the burial site coincide with his mourning for Sarah, thus highlighting the importance to him of acquiring a concrete foothold in the Promised Land. He does not simply need a place to bury Sarah; rather, it is a necessity to him to bury her in that place. Abraham's position is delicate and complicated: he is an outsider who needs to secure a holding in the land God has already promised him, an acquisition intimately connected with God's promise of progeny that Abraham has yet to realize.

1. Read Genesis 23:1–2, which describes the death of Sarah, Abraham's wife.
 - a. What do we learn about Sarah in these verses? In your view, what is the impact of learning about Sarah's life before we learn of her death?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary on verse 1, how can we understand the symbolic significance of Sarah's age as reported in the text?
 - c. The last prior mention of Abraham occurs at the end of the story of the binding of Isaac, when the text tells us that he is in Beersheba (22:19). This is a good distance from where Sarah dies. What questions does this raise for you?
 - d. How does the portrayal of Abraham's mourning for Sarah in 23:2 compare with the description of Jacob after Rachel's death in Genesis 35:19–20? Why do you think the biblical text records Abraham's actions but not Jacob's? Since 23:2 is the only place in the Torah that discusses the details of mourning in connection with the death of a woman, what does this verse suggest about Abraham's feelings for Sarah?
2. Read Genesis 23:3–9, which describes Abraham's desire to purchase a burial place for Sarah.
 - a. How does Abraham present himself to the Hittites in verse 4? What does this reflect about Abraham's position? Why do you think Abraham asks to buy land to "bury my dead," rather than asking to purchase a gravesite just for his wife?
 - b. How would you characterize the type of language the Hittites use in verse 6 in response to Abraham's request? How does this compare with the tone of the negotiations when Abraham states his request in verses 7–9?
 - c. What specific requests does Abraham make regarding the burial place in verses 7–9? In your view, why does Abraham want an "inalienable gravesite"?

3. Read Genesis 23:10–18, which describes the terms under which Abraham wants to buy the burial site.
 - a. According to verse 10, the negotiations regarding the burial site take place “in the hearing of all the Hittites and all the town leaders” (literally, “those who entered the gate of the city”). What is the significance of where and before whom these negotiations take place?
 - b. In verse 11 Ephron offers the cave to Abraham as a gift. How does Abraham respond to this offer in verses 12–13? Why do you think Abraham is so insistent on paying?
 - c. Verses 16–18 describe Abraham’s payment for the land—an exorbitant sum. In your view, why does Abraham agree to pay this amount?

4. Read Genesis 23:19–20, which describes Sarah’s burial.
 - a. What do we learn about Sarah’s burial in these verses? Why do you think the text devotes so little attention to Sarah’s burial in comparison with the discussion of her burial site? How do these two verses connect back to verses 1–2?
 - b. Both verse 20 and verses 17–18 describe the precise location of the burial site. Why are these details included twice? What is the significance of the land Abraham purchases, beyond its use as a burial site?

5. Read Post-biblical Interpretations (“Abraham was old . . .”) by Judith R. Baskin on page 128.
 - a. According to the Rabbis, why was Abraham so affected by Sarah’s death?
 - b. If you were to craft your own midrash, how would you account for Abraham’s actions and emotions after Sarah’s death?

6. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Maera Shreiber (pp. 129–30).
 - a. According to Shreiber in the second paragraph on page 129, what role did women play in rites of grief in the ancient world? How does this differ from how the biblical text presents mourning in this parashah? What do you think accounts for these differences?
 - b. In your view, how can we balance Abraham’s desire to secure a permanent foothold in the Promised Land with his mourning for Sarah? Can you describe the complex and perhaps conflicting actions and emotions you experienced after the death of a loved one?
 - c. To what extent do you think there is a gender difference in today’s mourning rituals? Can you think of a time when you experienced men and women expressing their sense of loss differently?

7. Read “Undo It, Take it Back” by Nessa Rapoport, in *Voices* (p. 131).
 - a. How does the poet use time to describe her feelings of loss?

- b. In what ways does the poet imagine she can put the “day of loss” in the future?
- c. How does the poet’s description of her feelings compare with what the biblical text tells us about Abraham’s reaction to Sarah’s death?
- d. To what extent does the poem reflect your own experiences dealing with the death of a loved one?

THEME 2: ENSURING THE CONTINUITY OF THE COVENANT—FINDING THE RIGHT WIFE FOR ISAAC



In addition to securing a permanent holding in the Promised Land, Abraham must obtain a suitable wife for Isaac, the heir who will fulfill the divine promise of producing the progeny and inherit the land. Abraham’s instructions to the trusted servant who will find a wife for Isaac reflect Abraham’s concerns about establishing blood ties with the Canaanites who live in the Promised Land. The servant must find a non-Canaanite wife for Isaac, one from Abraham’s birthplace. Abraham takes seriously his responsibility for realizing God’s promise of progeny, making his servant promise that even if he finds the most suitable wife for his son, Isaac will not return to his father’s birthplace. Although human beings facilitate Rebekah’s betrothal to Isaac, divine providence and God’s covert intervention emphasize that the choice of a mate for Isaac cannot be left to human agency alone.

1. Read Genesis 24:1–9, which describes how Abraham commissions his servant to find a wife for Isaac.
 - a. What do we learn about Abraham in verse 1? In your view, what is the purpose of presenting this information about Abraham? How does this verse serve as an introduction for the following seven verses?
 - b. Abraham instructs his servant to “put your hand under my thigh” (v. 2), and in verse 9 we read that the slave “placed his hand under his master Abraham’s thigh.” According to the Central Commentary, what does the thigh represent, and why do you think this action is a significant part of the narrative at this point in time?
 - c. What does Abraham instruct his servant to do in verses 3, 6, and 8? What do you think are the reasons for these instructions?
 - d. The word *ishah* (wife, woman) occurs four times in these verses. What does this repetition emphasize about Abraham’s concerns?
 - e. Why do you think Abraham instructs the servant to “go to my land, my birthplace” (v. 4) in order to find a wife for Isaac?
 - f. What do we learn from verses 5 and 8 about a woman’s role in accepting an offer of marriage?
 - g. What is the relationship between Abraham’s family and “this land” (v. 7)? How does the description of the land in this verse contrast with

Abraham's words about the land in verse 4? What, in your view, accounts for this difference? What is the significance of the relationship between Abraham's family and the land?

2. Read Genesis 24:10–20, which describes the meeting between Abraham's servant and Rebekah at the well.
 - a. What does the servant's prayer in verses 12–14 tell us about the characteristics he is looking for in a wife for Isaac? What does the prayer suggest about God's role in the events about to unfold?
 - b. According to verse 16, what qualities does Rebekah possess that make her an attractive potential wife for Isaac? According to the Central Commentary, the word *b'tulah* (translated here as "marriageable age") is often translated as "virgin." What is the broader meaning of this word, and what additional understanding does this give you about Rebekah and about Isaac? In addition to calling Rebekah a *b'tulah*, verse 16 tells us that she is a girl "whom no man had yet known." To what does the word translated here as "known" often refer in the Bible? In your view, why does the text tell us both that Rebekah is a *b'tulah* and that "no man had yet known" her?
 - c. What do we learn about Rebekah's character from her actions in verses 18–20? According to the Central Commentary, how does this compare with the expectations for women that become customary later in the Middle East?
3. The servant learns that Rebekah is the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor and goes with her to meet her brother Laban and her father Bethuel. After the servant explains the purpose of his mission, Laban and his father consent to the marriage, which they believe is in accordance with divine will. After giving gifts to Rebekah and her family, the servant accepts the family's hospitality for a night and then asks to be on his way with Rebekah. Read Genesis 24:52–58, which describes Rebekah's agreement to go with Abraham's servant.
 - a. According to verses 53 and 55, who conducts the negotiations regarding the marriage approved by Rebekah's father and brother in verses 50–51?
 - b. What are the similarities between Rebekah's decision to leave her family (v. 58) and Abraham's decision in 12:1?
 - c. According to the Central Commentary, how does Rebekah's decision to go with the servant show one of the ways in which women contribute to the fulfillment of national destiny in the biblical text?
4. Read Genesis 24:59–61, which describes Rebekah's departure from her family.
 - a. How do verses 59–60 describe the way in which Rebekah's family sends her off? What do the words of the blessing Rebekah's family gives her in verse 60 tell us about what they wish for her?

- b. According to the Central Commentary on verse 60, how is the first part of the blessing Rebekah's family gives her ("may you become thousands of myriads") used as part of the *bedeken* ceremony that takes place before a Jewish wedding?
 - c. Compare the second part of the blessing Rebekah's family gives her in verse 60 ("may your descendants . . .") with the blessing that Abraham receives from God's messenger in 22:17. What is similar about these two blessings, and what is different? What does this connection suggest about Rebekah's role in the fulfillment of the covenant?

5. Read Genesis 24:62–67, which describes how Rebekah moves into Sarah's tent.
 - a. How does the text describe the first time Isaac and Rebekah see each other (vv. 63–65)? What do we learn from this description about the connection between them?
 - b. What does verse 67 tell us about Isaac's emotional ties to both his mother and his wife? This is the first time that the biblical text mentions a man's love for a woman. According to the Central Commentary on this verse, what does the use of the verb "love" imply about the nature of the relationship between Rebekah and Isaac?
 - c. How does this verse, coupled with Abraham's purchase of the field of Machpelah as a burial site after Sarah's death, emphasize the ongoing fulfillment of divine promises to the line of Abraham? What do the events in this parashah suggest about the role women play in the covenant with God?

6. Read *Another View* by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi (p. 127).
 - a. According to Eskenazi, how do arranged marriages serve the purpose of preserving both tangible and intangible family possessions?
 - b. How do the marriage procedures described in Genesis 24 parallel those from ancient Mesopotamian texts?
 - c. How does the story of Rebekah and Isaac portray a situation in which the woman is assertive and the man compliant in marriage negotiations? How does this set the stage for Rebekah's prominence in subsequent episodes?

7. Read *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Judith R. Baskin (pp. 127–28).
 - a. How do Midrash *HaGadol* and *B'reishit Rabbah* 60.12 interpret Rebekah's willingness to leave her family in order to become Isaac's wife (Genesis 24:58)? What legal ruling comes from this narrative?
 - b. How do the rabbinic sources use Genesis 24:67 to make connections between Rebekah and Sarah? What similarities and differences do you see between Sarah and Rebekah?

8. Read “Rebecca” by Amy Blank, in *Voices* (p. 131).
- a. How does the poet describe Rebecca’s feelings about leaving home? What metaphor does she use in the first stanza to illustrate Rebecca’s readiness to leave?
 - b. How do the poet’s descriptions of Rebecca’s behavior and appearance in the first two lines of the second stanza reflect what we know about Rebecca’s age from the biblical text (Genesis 24:16)?
 - c. How do Rebecca’s questions at the end of the poem help you to see Rebecca—as the biblical text describes her—as having recently entered puberty?
 - d. Rebecca does not wonder about the man to whom she is betrothed until halfway through the poem. How do you think the poet might have drawn from the text to account for this?
 - e. Can you think of a time in your own life when your youth or inexperience played a role in a relationship? What questions did you have as the relationship began? In what ways did you see this new relationship as an adventure?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. Can you think of a time in your own life when, like Abraham, you had to take care of practical matters at the same time you were grieving the loss of a loved one? To what practical matters did you have to attend? What impact did seeing to these things have on mourning for your loved one?
2. Although Abraham's role in the selection of a wife for Isaac reflects the world of the ancient Near East, parents continue to have concerns about the mates their children choose. In your view, what are the reasons for these concerns? If you are a parent, what ideas do you have about a suitable romantic partner for your child? How have your ideas been challenged by the relationships your child has chosen to be in? If you are or have been married, what hopes did your parents have for your future mate? How did your parents react to your choice of a mate? What influence, if any, do you feel parents should have on the choice of a child's relationship or mate?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea R. Weiss, editors

New York: WRJ and CCAR Press, 2008

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