

Sarah Lived

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ל"ה

Parshat Hayyei Sarah

Hayyei Sarah; Sarah lived. That is the name of this week's *parshah*, and that is how the reading begins. Sarah lived. How interesting. Sarah lived.

But neither word in the *parshah's* name tells of the story it contains. Sarah is present only briefly at the beginning. She is mentioned by name three times in the first two verses of chapter 23 and once more – a reference, not an actual appearance – at the end of chapter 24. And Sarah's appearance at the beginning of the *parshah* is not about her life, but about her death. But Sarah lived.

Of the fifty-four *parshayot* in the Torah, this is the only one which bears a woman's name in its title. And, while it bears a woman's name, this *parshah* tells the story of the only time in Jewish history – from the moment when Abram and Sarai became aware of G*d, from the moment when Abram and Sarai became the first Jews – when there was no Jewish woman in the world, for the story encompasses the period from the death of Sarah (who was the only Jewish woman of her generation) to the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (when Rebecca became the only Jewish woman of her generation). How strange. How interesting. And Sarah lived.

But it just doesn't seem reasonable that the one *parshah* which bears a woman's name should also be the one *parshah* without a Jewish woman in it. Somehow, some way, someone, our intuition tells us, must be the woman of the story. And indeed, if we allow ourselves to enter the perspective of those who transcribed the tale in the first place, we will find that there is someone – someone Jewish – who takes the role of the woman. And Sarah lived.

How does the tradition view women? What does the tradition view as "feminine" characteristics? How does the Torah portray women? And who in this *parshah* personifies those characteristics? For Sarah lived.

In the view of the *p'shat*, the plain-text meaning, of the Torah, the woman's role was a passive one. Oh, yes; we re-interpret, we trans-value, we impose our modern

consciousness and sensibilities upon the text and read it in our terms rather than its own. But Sarah lived.

In the view of those who initially transcribed the text – I report; I do not endorse; please do not shoot the messenger – the woman’s role was a passive one. She exerted her influence, if at all, from “behind the scenes,” quietly, subtly, even secretly. And she was chosen as a mate; she did not choose her own mate. For the moment, then, let us look at the text in its ancient terms. For Sarah lived.

In this *parshah*, there is one character who fills the role which the plain text typically assigns to women. He is a man – based on his description, little more than a boy, although of adult years – and it is he who marries in this *parshah*. But whom does he marry? Not a woman whom he chooses, but a woman chosen for him by his father’s servant. Yet Sarah lived.

Throughout Isaac’s lifetime, he is passive. The things which he does, the actions which he undertakes, are either pale echoes of his father Abraham’s actions or equally pale anticipations of what his son Jacob/Israel will do far more strongly – a Georgia autumn, portrayed in pale and gentle pastels, sandwiched between two vibrant oil-painted New England autumns. Still, Sarah lived.

And, while Isaac is the primary subject of this Torah reading – it is he for whom a bride is being chosen – he is the star of the show in his absence, just as women so often in the Torah exert their influence in their own absence. Thus, Sarah lived.

And then, in perhaps the only one of Isaac’s actions which is fully his own, we read near the end of the *parshah* (24:67) that **Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife, and he loved her, and then was Isaac comforted after his mother’s death.** He loved her! This is the first time that the Torah tells us explicitly that someone loved someone. Yes; Abraham is told by G*d to take his son Isaac, whom he loved, but, even there, the text only refers to Isaac as **the one whom thou lovest**; it does not say explicitly, “Abraham loved Isaac,” as it now says about Rebecca, **Isaac . . . loved her.** For the first time, we read the words that someone loved someone. And then, truly, Sarah lived.

Shabbat Shalom.

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