



5 Ways

in which life goes on

When Sarah dies, the life of Abraham's family goes on. But it is never quite the same. Over a meal, and in the light of our discussion overleaf, invite your family/friends into a creative role play. Assign five table-guests a 'post-Sarah' event (see Genesis stories below) and invite each to tell it through the eyes of Abraham. You might wish to extend your table reflections to thoughts about your own family experiences. After the death of a family member, what are the important events that signify life continuing, yet changed?

1. Abraham buries Sarah.

It's more than a burial. It marks the family's legal foothold in the land promised by God. (23:19-20)

2. Abraham commissions his servant.

His servant is charged with a task that Sarah may well have liked to oversee: finding a spouse for her son! (24:1-9)

3. Enter Rebekah. The presence of in-laws changes the dynamics in a family. How do you think Rebekah's presence will affect Abraham's household? (24:59-67)

4. Abraham remarries.

Once again the family dynamics shift, especially as new babies are born. (25:1-4)

5. Abraham's will.

The ever-resourceful Abraham ensures that after his death Isaac's role in the divine plan will not be threatened by siblings' claims to inheritance. (25:5-6)

Finally, Abraham himself dies. Note the presence of both Isaac and Ishmael at his burial. Who will tell this part of the story? (25:7-11)

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

One of the joys for Christian parishioners who read the Torah (bible) with the help of Jewish sources and methods is that they come to know the intricacies of Scripture like never before. Take this week's Torah portion, for example. We may be familiar with the central stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah. But did you know that after Sarah died Abraham married again? Do you know the name of his new wife, or their six children? They are all there at the beginning of Genesis 25!

It is the cumulative interpretation of small details like these that bring alive the personalities and activities of the bible characters, their hopes and dreams, strengths and faults, joys and struggles... By entering the world of the Jewish sages, their lively sense of the sacred text, the creative storytelling of the midrash, we are opened to fresh spiritual meaning for our own lives.

We learn to approach the bible, not as a history book or rule book, but as an infinite source of spiritual wisdom through which we enter into a two-way conversation with God and God's people.



Genesis 23:1—25:18

Hayei Sarah:
'the life of Sarah'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 23:1–25:18

In the Jewish calendar the Hebrew title given to this week's Torah portion is *Hayei Sarah*, 'the life of Sarah.' Yet in the opening verses we read of her death! Already we are drawn into a fascinating question: how might the biblical stories we read this week, occurring *after* Sarah has died, be revealing of her life? Join us as we enter the conversations of Jewish commentators across the generations.

Tasting Torah

"Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her." (23:1-2)

Although Sarah dies in the opening verses of this Torah portion, her name continues to appear as the narrative proceeds. First, Abraham's land purchase in chapter 23 (his first legal foothold in Canaan) is a burial plot for Sarah. Then, at the end of the lengthy story of how Rebekah and Isaac came to be husband and wife, we are told that Isaac 'brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah' (24:67) and found comfort after the death of his mother. These events signify confirmation of God's promises to Abraham—land and progeny—and Sarah's presence is felt in both.

In what other ways does this Torah portion speak of 'the life of Sarah'?

Touching Torah

One answer in the midrash arises from the observation that Sarah's death occurs just seven verses after the *Akedah* (Gen.22:1-19), the passage known to Jews and Christians respectively as the 'binding' or 'sacrifice' of Isaac. Say the rabbis, the near-death of Isaac is such a traumatic event that, upon learning what her husband almost did to their son, Sarah dies of grief. Does this view shed further light on Abraham's mourning quoted at the top of this page? Ponder this with your *havrutah* partner.

Depthing Torah

Taking up this midrashic insight, contemporary Jewish commentators (especially women) note that it opens the door to fresh insights into Abraham's relationship with God. After Sarah's death, Abraham is never quite the same person again. Previously his faith was characterized by large-scale, public events. In pursuit of his God he travelled to foreign lands, fought wars and mounted a dramatic rescue. He negotiated with kings, argued with God about justice for whole cities, and scaled a mountain to accomplish a horrifying feat for a faith-testing God.

But after the *Akedah* and Sarah's death, his activity changes. It is predominantly domestic: he buries his wife, he arranges a marriage for Isaac, he marries again and attends to the future of his children in such a way as to prioritize Isaac. Perhaps Abraham, through Sarah's death, has heard a different divine voice: not theophany on a mountain top but the transformative power of relationships; heard a truth which, at her moment of death, Sarah understood with terrifying clarity: there is no special holiness to be found gazing at the stars if your own child's life is at stake. Holiness is right here: at home, in the joys and struggles of everyday family life. Ponder this interpretation in *havrutah*.

Doing Torah

From your experience, discuss the tension between 'public' and 'private' expressions of living faith and pursuing God's call. What complexities are involved in discerning the right path?



A quote from the Midrash

When Isaac returned to his mother, she asked him, 'Where have you been, my son?' He answered her...[by telling her of how his father had nearly slaughtered him on Mount Moriah]... On his mother, Sarah, hearing this, she cried out, and before she had time to finish her cry her soul departed, as it is written, 'And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah...' (23:2). From where did he come? He came from Mount Moriah.

Eccles. R 9:7 §1

Bibliography: Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Ecclesiastes* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Goldstein, ed, *The Woman's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2000). Scripture: NJPS.