

Shabbat 07 November – Chayei Sarah

Consider the name of this week's Sedra; Chayei Sarah, which literally means the "Life of Sarah". When something or somebody is called by a widely used name, this reveals the quintessence of what that name is all about. How much more, in this case when we are talking about the name of a Sedra that has been used by our Sages for over a thousand years, does the name reveal the essential spirit of the Sedra.

Read the Sedra and you will notice that it doesn't speak about Sarah's life at all. Indeed, it speaks primarily about her death and the events that took place after her demise: the acquisition of the Cave of Machpelah by Abraham in order to bury Sarah, and the story of how Eliezar, the servant of Abraham, was sent out to find a wife for Isaac. These events could only take place after the death of Sarah. So the question is why call the Sedra "The life of Sarah" when in reality it's all about her death and the events that occur thereafter?

Contemplate the words from Kohelet (Ecclesiastes); "A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth endures forever. The sun rises and the sun sets- then to its place it rushes; there it rises again."

The Midrash comments that before the "sun" of one righteous person sets, the Almighty causes the "sun" of another righteous person to rise up. The Midrash then gives examples: on the day Rabbi Akiva died, Rabbi Judah the Prince was born. Before Moses died, G-d guaranteed that there was another leader, Joshua to take his place.

In other words G-d implants in Jewish life, in history, the inherent potential for Jewish continuity and survival.

In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain, a tragedy of epic proportions. Literally hundreds of thousands of Jews were left homeless, and nobody in a predominantly Christian Europe would harbour them. Many Jews were filled with despair. But help came from an unexpected source, from the Turkish Ottoman Empire which gladly opened up its doors to the Jewish community.

Likewise after the decimation of the holocaust, a Jewish life of freedom was available in America, England and then in Israel. The seeds of survival were sown even before the holocaust had occurred.

Towards the end of our Sedra it recounts how Rebecca marries Isaac:

“And Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother.”

Our sages comment that her being brought into Sarah’s tent was not just in a physical sense but also in a spiritual sense. The blessings that were in the tent during Sarah’s lifetime now returned with more vigour and strength when Rebecca entered the tent. So now we understand why the entire Sedra is called Chayei Sarah because her life took on new meaning when Rebecca replaced her. Sarah lived on in the fact that her values and what she stood for attained permanence through her daughter in law.

“A generation comes and a generation goes...”

Enjoy your Shabbat!