



Dear Friends,

On the face of it, Parashat Chayei Sarah deals with death. It begins with Sarah's death and ends with Avraham's. Even so, the name of the Parasha - The Life of Sarah - is very accurate, because it actually deals with continuity and life.

The riddle of life's continuity is perhaps the central theme of the entire book of Bereishit. Not the continuity of physical life, but rather of our inner life and identity.

Until Avraham and Sarah make their appearance, we hear in great detail who begot whom, but, to be honest, who cares? What does it matter?

When I first arrived in Zichron Yaakov, the question I was asked most often by the old-timers was "Whose are you?" In other words, "who gave birth to you?" I remember being extremely irritated by it.

As the stories of Creation come to an end and the stories of the forefathers and mothers begin, the Torah comes to an abrupt and painful halt, indicating a recalculation of the "real" journey; the journey that matters. This happens right at the end of Parashat Noah, and it changes the entire story that follows.

(Bereshit 11, 25-30) **After the birth of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and begot sons and daughters. When Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.**

Can you hear the sound of squealing brakes at the end of the quote?

Not only was Sarah barren. So was Rivka (in the next parasha), and so was Rachel (in two weeks' time).

The central theme of the stories of our forefathers and mothers is anxiety regarding continuity, because their continuity is constantly in question.

Infertility is the biggest challenge to human continuity, but our parasha features a new challenge to it: finding a mate.

In nature the male of a species sniffs around and finds the female's odor of fertility, but more than this and more than the odor of a female in heat and the momentary act of mating, he smells the scent of the continuity of the species. It is said that this is the case for humans too; that deep within our non-politically correct subconscious, we choose partners based on parameters of fertility. At the end of the day, we, too, are animals.

In our parasha, Parashat Chayei Sarah, Avraham buries Sarah in the Machpela Cave in Hebron. He then addresses the issue of the family's continuity. He sends his servant - the most loyal member of his household - to find a match for Yitzchak.

Yitzchak is a very tragic figure. The tragedy of his life centers on his parents' quest for continuity. He arrives in the world at a very late stage in their lives, and when he does, his only brother, Yishmael, is banished, so that he does not threaten Yitzchak's place in the chain of continuity. And then he experiences the terror of death in the Akeida. Yitzchak is the only one who does not go out to look for a mate. He is the blind one, and therefore in issues of continuity, he cannot be depended on. Avraham is also not to be relied on - what does he know about continuity? He almost sacrificed his only seed!

The name of the Parasha "Chayei Sarah" - The Life of Sarah - hints that the story of continuity we are dealing with is too serious a business to leave to men alone.

Throughout Bereshit continuity is the inner story, and not the outer drama of the patriarchs. Lot's daughters guarantee their continuity - and though the story is horrific, they are rewarded and glorified. Then it was Sarah who sends Hagar to Avraham's bed, and she is the one to expel Hagar and Yishmael when Yitschak is born. Hagar marries off Yishmael to an Egyptian woman like herself. And it will be Rivka who will express aversion to the local women that Eisav is hanging out with. Wanting to please her, he will marry his cousin, the daughter of Yishmael. Rivka, and not Yitzchak, is the one to send Yaakov off to Haran to find a wife for himself from her family and clan.

This week, though, the real agent of change is the servant! He is the hidden force that takes the story forward. The servant - "Avraham's faithful" - represents the deep, inner guide within us, that drives our mating impulses. He never acts alone. He is radically connected to the Divine. After all, he is only a servant! He works for the God of continuity.

The stories of the patriarchs are only the outer layer. The deeper thread is told by the Matriarchs. And even deeper yet is the story of the faithful servant, for he is the unseen force operating in the world.

I don't want to fall in to a PC trap. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the overarching story of Bereshit is not the discovery of Monotheism. Rather, it is the secret of fostering identity, a sense of belonging, and continuity. These are feminine qualities. Although they are associated with women, they are shared by men and women alike.

Identity, belonging, and continuity, are fostered primarily by love and by relationships. Not by the brain, not by moral values, and not by knowledge.

It is important to study Judaism - at home, in the synagogue, at Sunday school, at university - but study alone does not foster identity, belonging, and continuity.

Love, connection, deep empathy, and relationships create identity in the deepest sense of the word. And again, while these are feminine qualities, they are shared by both men and women, and are fostered by both mothers and fathers.

Avraham and Sarah knew this, and so did Yitzchak and Rivka.

The servant - the hidden agent of continuity - did well. He succeeded in taking our story forward:

(Bereshit 24, 62-67) **So the servant took Rebekah and went his way. Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb. And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man walking in the field toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself. The servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.**

On the surface, the Torah relates the story of men: from Adam, through Noach, Shen, Ham, and Japheth, to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. But that's just the outer layer. The inner story takes place deep inside: inside the tents of the Matriarchs.

To this very day, Judaism is passed to the next generation through the mother.

Put in a more PC and inclusive language - identity, belonging, and continuity, are fostered through love. Genes are important, but love is much more so. Values are important, but love so much more. Knowledge is important, but love that much more.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha