



Two Funerals and a Marriage: Symbolism and Meaning in Life Cycle Ceremonies

Parashat Hayei Sarah, Genesis 23:1-25:18 | By Mark Greenspan

“The Jewish Life Cycle” by Carl Astor (pp. 239) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

If we set aside the chronological years attributed to Abraham in the Torah, we find that his life can be divided into three periods built around the three *parshiot* that tell his story. *Lekh L'kha* (chapters 12-17) is Abraham's youth (even though the Torah says that he was 75 when he left for Canaan). Our forefather is called by God leave his childhood home, to set out on a journey of discovery, and to carve out a place for himself in a new home. *Va-yeira* (chapters 18-22) tells the story of his middle years as a father and a leader. Abraham develops a more mature, if not more complicated, relationship with God both testing and being tested by God. Finally, in this week's *Torah* portion we see Abraham in the final years of his life. *Parashat Hayei Sarah* begins and ends with death. Our forefather thinks about his legacy for the future, purchasing his first piece of property in Canaan and seeing to his son's marriage. With these two acts, he becomes a partner in the fulfillment of God's promise of land and people.

Parshat Hayei Sarah is about the life cycle; it contains two funerals and a marriage. It is about the transition from generation to generation. Our forefather looks back and sees that he has been “blessed with everything,” despite trials and tribulations. What can he leave to his descendants? Life cycle events, or rites of passage as anthropologists call them, are moments of transition and change in our life. They challenge to think about who we are and what type of legacy we wish to create for the future. It is not surprising, then, that we find a number of Jewish customs and practices relating to life cycle events in this *parashah*. In a larger sense, however, these events should challenge us to think about purpose, meaning and identity. They should be more than just an excuse for a big meal and a family gathering.

Carl Astor's discussion of the Jewish life cycle covers a wide array of different topics, from the womb to the tomb. In this week's Torah Table Talk, I have chosen two Jewish practices that we still observe that find their roots in this *parashah*.

Sarah died in Kiryat-arba, now Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn (lispod) for Sarah and to bewail her (livkota). Then Abraham rose from his dead and spoke to the Hittites, saying: “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”

- Genesis 23:2-4

Sources and Resources

- a) *The scholars asked: Is the funeral oration in honor of the living or of the dead? What is the practical difference? If the deceased said, ‘Pronounce no funeral oration over me;’ or again in respect of collecting the cost from the heirs!*

Come and hear! “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.” (Genesis 23:2) Now, should you maintain that it is for the honor of the living; in that case it was for Abraham's honor that he delayed Sarah's burial! There, Sarah herself was pleased that Abraham should attain honor through her.

Come and hear! “And all Israel shall make lamentation for him and they shall bury him;” (I Kings 14:13) suggests that the oration was for the living. If you say that the oration is for the living, were King Abijah's relatives worthy of honor? It is pleasing to the righteous that people should be honored through them.

Come and bear! "They shall not be lamented neither shall they be buried!" (Jeremiah 16:4 suggests that the oration is for dead) The righteous do not wish to be honored through evil-doers.

Come and bear! "They shall die in peace, and with the burnings of thy fathers, the former kings that were before thee, so shall they make a burning for thee, and they shall lament thee, saying Ab! Lord." (Jeremiah 34:5 suggests that the oration was for the living.) Now if you maintain that the oration is for the living, of what consequence was this to him? He spoke this to him: Israel will be honored through you, as they were honored through your parents.

- BT *Sanhedrin* 46B

- b)** *It is a great mitzvah to eulogize the dead person appropriately. And the mitzvah is to raise one's voice to say over [the departed] things that break the heart, so that there will be much crying; and also one should mention the deceased's good deeds [lit. praises].*

- Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yorah Deah* 344:1

Reflections

Parshat Hayyei Sarah opens by telling us that our forefather 'mourned' and 'bewailed' for Sarah following her death. The word for 'to mourn', *lispod*, is the root of the word *hesped*, eulogy. It was natural for the sages to connect the practice of eulogizing the dead with Abraham. Elsewhere, we learn that the purpose of a eulogy is twofold: to honor the dead and inspire tears on the part of the survivors.

But who is the eulogy really for? In the discussion in *Sanhedrin*, the sages debate whether the purpose of the eulogy is to honor the dead or the survivors. This question has practical implications. If the eulogy is primarily to accord honor to the dead, then the dead should have the right to stipulate that no eulogy be given and, similarly, the survivors have no right to object to paying for a proper eulogy to be given. If, on the other hand, it is to honor the living, then survivors have the right to forgo the eulogy. In the Talmudic discussion, the sages search for a biblical citation to support these two points of view. In the case of Abraham, they argue, since Abraham delayed Sarah's burial to negotiate a family burial site, the funeral and oration must be primarily to honor the living. The sages reject this argument by suggesting that in arranging for a burial site, Abraham was in fact carrying out Sarah's wishes.

The question of who should give a eulogy and what its content should be is a question that often comes up when arranging a funeral. Astor, in *The Observant Life*, points out that while it has become common place for members of the family to eulogize their loved ones, the content of such eulogies is not always appropriate or fitting for the occasion. Astor argues that Rabbis are better equipped to give eulogies. In a sense, this is part of the continuing discussion we find in the Talmud: who is the eulogy for? I would argue that while it can be tremendously meaningful to eulogize loved ones, survivors need to be more mindful of the content and dignity of the deceased.

Raising her eyes Rebecca saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man in the field walking toward us?" And the servant said, "That is my master." So she took her veil and covered herself.

- Genesis 24:64-65

Sources and Resources

- a.** ***Her Veil:*** *The incident of Sarah in Egypt, as described in Genesis 12:14 shows that Israelite women normally were not veiled. Tamar put on a veil only to disguise herself before Judah. In the Middle Assyrian law the veil is a mark of distinction and the prerogative of a free woman, but this is exceptional in the Near East, where wives generally went about unveiled. There is evidence, however, that the veiled bride was part of the wedding ceremony. In Akkadian, the*

bride on her wedding day is called *kallatu ketumtu*, “the veiled bride.” *Pussumtu*, “the veiled one,” is another term for *kallatu*, “bride.” The Middle Assyrian laws make the raising of a concubine to the status of a wife contingent upon her being veiled in the presence of the court. In light of all this, Rebekah’s veiling herself has both symbolic and socio-legal significance. It is the unspoken signal to Isaac that she is his bride.

- Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis

- b. **Mishnah:** *If a woman was widowed or divorced (and then sought to remarry) and she says, "When you married me I was a virgin," and he says, "Not so I married you as a widow" (and therefore her ketubah would have been half the value). If there are witnesses that she went out with a himmona, and her head uncovered, her ketubah is 200 זוז (the amount guaranteed to a virgin). Rabbi Johanan ben Berokah says: Also if roasted ears of corn were distributed at the wedding this is evidence that she was a virgin at the time of the wedding.*

G'mara: ... “If there are witnesses that she went out with a himmona.” What is a himmona? *Surbab ben Papa* said in the name of *Ze'iri*: It is a myrtle-canopy. *Rabbi Johanan* said: It is a veil under which the bride sometimes slumbers. *Rabbi Johanan ben Berokah* says: It was taught: This is proof of virginity in Judea; what is the proof in Babylonia? *Rab* said: The dripping of oil on the heads of the scholars. *Rav Papa* said to *Abaye*: “Does the master speak of oil used for cleaning the head?” *Abaye* said to him: “Fool, did not your mother do the dripping of the oil on the heads of the scholars at the time of your wedding?” It is similar to the time when one of the scholars was occupied with the wedding of his son in the house of *Rabbah ben Ulla*. Some say *Rabbah ben Ulla* was occupied with the wedding of his son in the house of one of the houses of the scholars and he dripped oil on the heads of the scholars at the time of the event.

- BT *Ketubot* 17b

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *Birth: The much discussed goal of achieving a kind of universal Zero Population Growth in the world is simply not an option if Jews hope to survive as a people.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- b. *Circumcision is a mitzvah of the Torah, but dereliction in its regard does not deprive the uncircumcised individual of his Jewish any more than would dereliction with respect to any other commandment.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- c. *Many families wish to have more elaborate naming ceremonies for their daughters... These are known by the names Simchat Bat, Zevad HaBat, or occasionally Brit Banot. Even when a Simchat Bat is planned for a later date at home, it should not replace the traditional naming that takes place at the synagogue before the open scroll of the Torah.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- d. *Originally, Jewish children received only traditional Jewish names. In the wake of large-scale immigration... it became customary to give children two names: a secular one for use in the outside world and a Jewish one to use at home... In a world free of overt cultural or religious discrimination, the whole concept of "inside" and "outside" names feels grounded in the kind of cultural nervousness unbecoming of the proud citizens of multicultural democracies.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- e. *Pidyon Ha-ben: “the Biblical mandated practice of pidyon ha-ben is restricted to male firstborn children only, and should not be expanded to include first born female children. However, all gatherings which serve the purpose of enhancing the sense of blessing and specialness associated with the firstborn female children are to be encouraged.”*
- *CJLS Responsa 1991-2000*, pp. 163-165
- f. *Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Although it is regular to celebrate a child's coming of age with a celebratory party, every effort should be made to underscore the fact that the party is a celebration of a child's first aliyah to the Torah, not to suggest that the aliyah is a prelude to the party.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239

- g. *For a family that is not strict in its level of observance to make a party that conforms to the standards of their synagogue signals the seriousness with which they take the entire bar or bat mitzvah celebration.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- b. *Conversion: As per the CJLS decision of 1998 by Rabbi Joel Rembaum, converts to Judaism may observe all mourning rituals for their non-Jewish relatives, both during the shiva week and during the s'loshim month, or the year long secondary mourning periods that follow.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- i. *Weddings: Kohanim are barred by traditional halachah from marrying divorced woman and women who have converted to Judaism. Modern Conservative practice, however, permits such marriages on the grounds that the priestly status of kohanim today has no real halachic validity and the epidemic levels of intermarriage make it intensely counterproductive to discourage Jewish endogamy...*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- j. *Death: A man is buried in his tallit... Women who wore a tallit while alive may also wish to be buried wearing a tallit.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239
- k. *Rabbi Debra Reed Blank, in a responsum concerning miscarriage approved by the CJLS in 1991, wrote that although the halachah does not responding to such a loss with the traditional rituals of mourning, we should instead consider the grieving couple to be stricken and respond in the same way tradition we respond to sick individuals. Rabbi Amy Eilberg, in a dissenting opinion, rejected the notion that a couple... and instead suggested that the rituals of mourning be modified and applied to help them through the grief.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 239

Questions to Ponder

1. What surprised you in Astor's discussion of the Jewish life cycle? What did you find yourself agreeing and disagreeing with?
2. How do we balance personal expression with traditional practices when marking these special occasions in our lives? To what extent should tradition take precedence over personal prerogative?
3. Are eulogies a matter of honoring the deceased or honoring the family of the deceased? What type of information and insights should be included in a eulogy? To what extent should the eulogy be "Jewish?"
4. The traditional Jewish wedding is androcentric (male-oriented). It is the man who is 'acquiring' a wife. Despite changes in the tradition such as the practice of the woman presenting a ring to the man, this male-centrism is still quite apparent. Should the Jewish wedding ceremony be changed to make it more egalitarian?
5. Is it authentic and honest to respond to a troubling ritual by giving it an interpretation that is completely at odds with its original meaning and purpose?

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan