

Hayyei-Sarah

חיי שרה

“Sarah’s life”

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion records the deaths of both Abraham and Sarah. It also records Abraham’s purchase of the family burial site, the first of several property transactions recorded in the Bible. The centerpiece of the portion, however, is the story of how Rebecca is chosen as Isaac’s wife. A tender story on its own, it also contains insights into God’s character and His plan for mankind.

1. The Death of Sarah - 23:1-20

a) How old was Sarah when she died? How old was her son Isaac when she died? Where was she when she died?

Sarah died at 127 making Isaac 37 at the time of her death. She died in Kiriath-Arba or Hebron.

b) How did Abraham obtain a burial site for Sarah? Where and how was this business transacted? From whom were the Hittites descended?

Abraham bought a field with a cave at the end of it (the cave of Machpelah) from Ephron the Hittite. The field was near Hebron and he bought it in the standard method of the day, by conducting the business at the gates of the city in front of all the city elders. The Hittites were sons of Heth, a descendant of Canaan (see Genesis 10:15).

c) Why do you suppose the Hittites offered to give Abraham the land he wanted? Why do you suppose that Abraham insisted on paying for it?

Abraham was well-respected in the community. The Hittites probably offered to give him the land out of reverence and maybe a little fear. Abraham humbled himself to the men, showing his character. He probably wanted to pay for the land so that there would be no question as to its legal ownership.



The Cave at Machpelah

This plot of land is located in the city of Hebron and even today is the source of much controversy between Jews and Muslims, both of whom claim it as a holy site. In the time of *Yeshua*, Herod the Great built a large structure over the tomb which still stands. It is amazing to realize that this burial site is still preserved after almost 4000 years.

Cultural Politeness

In the culture of this time, being hospitable and polite was highly valued. As such, it was not surprising that Ephron the Hittite offered to give the land to Abraham. However, it was also very appropriate that Abraham refuse the gift and insist on paying for the land. Also at this time, 400 shekels of silver would have been an exorbitant price for the land. However, it appears that Abraham wanted the land and was in no mood to haggle over the price. No one could later say that Abraham did not obtain the land fairly.

Hand under the Thigh?

It appears that the act of placing one's hand under the thigh of another in preparation for taking a solemn oath was a custom of the time. While not much is known about this custom, speculation is quite varied. A similar scriptural reference can be found in **Genesis 47:29** in which Joseph takes an oath to act on Jacob's behalf. In both cases you have a younger man promising to do something on behalf of an older, esteemed father figure.

d) What do you find interesting about the negotiation process? Do you think 400 shekels of silver was a fair price? How was the deed to the property "recorded?"

Ephron the Hittite offered to give the land to Abraham on the basis of their "friendship" but more probably out of reverence and fear. After Abraham again insisted on paying for it, Ephron said, "It's worth 400 shekels, but what's that between friends." The price was exorbitant but Abraham paid it anyway. By witnessing the transaction in front of the city's elders, the deed was publicly recorded and the land was legally his. (For an idea of the value of 400 shekels, note that Joseph was sold as a young, healthy slave for 20 shekels in Genesis chapter 37.)

e) What do you know of the history of this piece of property? What is its status today?

This is one of 3 places the purchase of which is recorded in scripture. (The other 2 are Joseph's tomb near Shechem and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.) Today, the cave of Machpelah is a shrine in Hebron. It, along with the entire city, is under the rule of the Palestinian Authority. The cave is no longer owned by the Israelites.

2. Isaac and Rebecca - 24:1-67

a) Who was Abraham's chief servant, in charge of all he had? What do you remember about him?

The servant was most likely Eliezar of Damascus (Genesis 15:2). Tradition has it that Abraham acquired Eliezar between Ur and Canaan, perhaps in Haran.

b) Abraham made his servant swear an oath. How was this done? What things did he make him swear to do? What kind of help did Abraham tell his servant that he would have with his task? What does this oath reveal about Abraham's faith in God?

Eliezar placed his hand under Abraham's thigh to swear the oath, evidently a custom of the time. Abraham did not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite. He made Eliezar swear to get a wife for Isaac from Abraham's brother's family. Abraham also did not want Isaac to leave Canaan. (Abraham wanted both he and Isaac to live in the land God had promised them.) If the woman wouldn't return with Eliezer, he was released from his oath to Abraham. Abraham told Eliezar that an angel of God would go with him to assure him of success.

c) What things did the servant take with him on the journey? What was his purpose in taking these items? What was his destination and why was it chosen?

Eliezar took 10 camels and plenty of gold jewelry and other gifts as a dowry for the bride (still a custom followed in the middle east today). He left for Haran, an area in NW Mesopotamia south of Damascus, where Abraham's brother Nahor had settled.

d) Analyze the servant's prayer in verses 12-14. What did his request show about his relationship to God? What qualities would the woman have who answered his prayer?

Although Eliezar obviously believed in God, he addressed him as the God of Abraham, showing honor and submission. Eliezar was asking for a sign. Although it may have been unusual for a strange woman to offer to water his camels, it was not outside the realm of reason. Further, a woman who would do this would be hospitable, industrious, humble, not spoiled; all admirable qualities in a wife.

e) What did Rebecca do that answered the servant's prayer? Do you think just any woman would have done this? How was the servant sure he'd found the right woman? What was his response to his success? What did Rebecca do?

Rebecca not only offered Eliezar water but offered to water his camels, not a small task by any means. Further, she offered the hospitality of her household. When Eliezar discovered that she was the granddaughter of Nahor, he realized that God had granted him success and he praised God. Rebecca ran to inform her household of the news.

f) How were Rebecca and her family related to Abraham? Why do you think Rebecca's brother, Laban, "hurried" to meet the servant?

Rebecca and her brother, Laban, are Isaac's second cousins, the children of Abraham's nephew Bethuel. From future events, we know that Laban was somewhat greedy. He was probably very interested in the visitor because of the gold nose ring and bracelets he had given Rebecca.

g) After arriving at Rebecca's household, the servant refused to share a meal before he had explained the purpose of his business. What does this tell you about his character?

Eliezar was committed to seeing his task through to completion. Before he could comfortably enjoy a meal, he needed to be assured that Rebecca's family would release her to be Isaac's wife. He took his oath very seriously.

The Dowry

It was the custom of the times to "purchase" a bride from her family with a dowry or "bride price." The lavishness of the gifts that Abraham sent with Eliezar show that he wanted the best bride possible for his son Isaac and that "price was no object."

Watering 10 Camels

Known as "ships of the desert," camels are known for going great distances with little or no water. A single thirsty camel can drink as much as 30 gallons of water. In this case, one can assume that after coming a great distance, these camels would be thirsty. To draw water for 10 such camels is no small task!

A Man on a Mission

Notice that Eliezer was quick to explain the reason for his visit to Haran. Also, he would not even consent to eat until he had conducted his business. He obviously wanted to quickly reach an agreement concerning Rebecca before anything else. Eliezer's singleness of purpose testifies to the importance he attached to the success of his mission.

Hidden Motives

In later portions, we will discover that Laban is a somewhat greedy man who is not above using deception to improve his wealth. With this in mind, can you think of any reason he might have had for suggesting that Eliezer return alone and that Rebecca would follow at some later time? Again, it seems that Eliezer was focused on the successful accomplishment of his mission.

h) Carefully study the servant's telling of his story. What details did he emphasize that supported his purpose? What was the servant asking for in verse 49?

In his telling of the story, Eliezer emphasized God's role in his life and in the life of Abraham. He also pointed out Abraham's wealth and that Isaac would inherit all of it. In verse 49, Eliezer moved to close the issue by asking for an answer: would the family let Rebecca return with him to Isaac?

i) Who responded to the servant and what was their answer? What did the servant do when he heard their answer? How do you think the servant felt at that moment?

Both Laban and Bethuel responded saying, "It is of God - who could say no?" Eliezer must have been relieved and ready to celebrate.

j) The next morning, the servant wanted to be on his way. If possible, read verse 55 in several different versions of the Bible. What is your interpretation of this exchange? How was the impasse resolved? What does this show about Rebecca's feelings?

It seems that Laban wanted Eliezer to return and Rebecca to follow later. In this way it might be possible to extract even more wealth from Abraham for his son's bride. Eliezer didn't want to return to Abraham without Isaac's bride. They agreed to let Rebecca herself make the decision. She courageously chose to leave her family and go with Eliezer to be the wife of a man she had never met.

k) Describe the first meeting of Isaac and Rebecca. How do you think they felt about each other?

Isaac was in the desert praying and meditating when he saw Eliezer's caravan. As he and Rebecca saw each other, it seemed to be "love at first sight." She covered herself with her veil as a sign of modesty.

l) Carefully analyze verse 67. What do you think is meant by "brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah"? Do you think Isaac was having difficulty dealing with his mother's death?

Isaac brought her into his mother's tent indicating that she became the mistress of the household. Based on the last phrase of verse 67, it appears that Rebecca helped Isaac get over the loss of his mother Sarah.

"Thus was Isaac comforted for the loss of his mother."

Genesis 24:67

3. The Death of Abraham - 25:1-18

a) Who did Abraham marry after Sarah's death? How many children did they have? Do you know anything about any of these descendants?

After Sarah's death, Abraham married Keturah. (Although nothing is known of her, some believe that she was actually Hagar.) They had 6 sons. Midian became the father of the Midianites. Moses' father-in-law and wife were Midianites. Both Sheba and Dedan were known areas in the Arabian peninsula. It seems that all of these sons settled east and south of the land of Israel.

b) Did any of these sons share in Isaac's inheritance? What did Abraham do to help assure that Isaac's inheritance was uncontested?

None of these sons shared in Isaac's inheritance. In fact, Abraham gave them gifts and sent them eastward to settle so that they did not later claim any part in Isaac's heritage.

c) At what age did Abraham die? Where was he buried? Who buried Abraham? Where did Isaac live after Abraham's death?

Abraham died "at a good old age, full of years," at 175. Isaac and Ishmael buried Abraham with Sarah at the tomb he had purchased at Machpelah near Hebron. Isaac then lived near Beer Lahai-Roi, the spring where the angel of God had appeared to Hagar (Genesis 16:14).

d) How many sons did Ishmael have? How old was he when he died? Where did all of his descendants settle? Did they enjoy peace and prosperity?

Ishmael had 12 sons (like Jacob) before he died at the age of 137. His sons settled between Havilah and Shur which is near the eastern border of Egypt. It is recorded that they lived in hostility toward all their brothers.

Who was Keturah?

Jewish sages over the years have been in disagreement about Keturah. Some believe that Keturah was really Hagar, who Abraham sought out after Sarah died, although there is no indication of this in the Bible. Others believe her to be someone else entirely. The descendants of Abraham and Keturah settled in the Arabian peninsula. Moses' father-in-law and wife, for example, were Midianites.

Types and Shadows

As we saw last week, many of the stories in the *Torah* can be seen as pictures of God's plan for our future. (Remember how Abraham's sacrificial offering of Isaac foreshadowed God's sacrificial offering of *Yeshua*?) As you consider the story in this portion, imagine Abraham as a picture of God and Rebecca as a picture of God's children. Who then would Eliezer and Isaac represent?

Digging deeper

1. Carefully analyze the story of Rebecca and Isaac, putting yourself in the shoes of Eliezar, Rebecca, Abraham, and Isaac. Does this give you any insight into the faith these people must have had? With which character do you identify most? Do you find any symbolism in this story?

Eliezar must have been under great pressure to fulfill his vow to his lifetime master. The fact that he was not in control of the outcome of his efforts probably caused him to rely heavily on God which increased his faith. Rebecca had to have great courage and faith to choose to leave her family to go to a foreign land, marry a stranger, and live the rest of her life there. It's very revealing that Isaac's marriage to Rebecca comforted him after his mother's death. One possible symbolic meaning of this story is God (Abraham) sending his Holy Spirit (Eliezar) to prepare a church (bride Rebecca) for his son Yeshua (Isaac).

2. This is the end of our study of Abraham and Sarah. Reflecting back on the events of their lives, what do you find most note-worthy about them? What can you learn from them?

It is interesting that Abraham's faith in God grew slowly over his entire lifetime. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac was his "final exam" and he passed. It seems obvious that the man who decided to "help God" by having a son by Hagar is not the same man who would willingly sacrifice his son. Also, the love Abraham and Sarah had for one another was very strong and lasted a lifetime. This a good model for any marriage.

For further study, see

Haftarah : 1 Kings 1:1-31

Brit Hadashah : Matthew 8:19-22; 27:3-10; Luke 9:57-62