



## The Power of “And” • Parshat Chayei Sarah

The deaths of Sarah and Abraham bookend *Parshat Chayei Sarah*. Despite the focus on death, the real message of the *parsha* centers on life. The euphemistic word choice to announce the passing of Sarah, “the life of Sarah,” accentuates this point, as does the account of Isaac and Rebecca’s ascendance as the progenitors of their legacy.

In his bestselling book, *The Road to Character*, David Brooks distinguishes between two sets of virtues: resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are those we emphasize in the workplace—the impressive skills you possess that make you successful at your profession and also serve to advance your career. Eulogy virtues are the virtues mentioned by those who will one day eulogize you at your funeral—“the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.” (p. xi). Eulogy virtues are earned when we live a life that embodies these higher character strengths and values.

While we do not know the exact contents of Abraham’s eulogy for Sarah, the narrative, supplemented with classical commentaries, provides us a glimpse into the eulogy Abraham may have offered to encapsulate Sarah’s accomplishments. The opening verse states, “Sarah’s lifetime was one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; the years of Sarah’s life” (Gen. 23:1). Rashi—perceiving the redundancy of “the years of Sarah’s life” at the conclusion of the verse—suggests that this teaches us that all her years were equally good.

Rashi’s comments on Sarah’s good life seem like revisionist history, an overly optimistic spin of what was, in reality, a very difficult life. Sarah experienced years of childlessness, was abducted twice, dealt with extreme family conflict and, at least according to the midrash, had to confront the idea of her husband sacrificing her only son. How can Rashi possibly suggest that all her years were equally good?

Before attempting to provide an answer to this question, let us first pose a parallel question related to Abraham. When mourning the death of his beloved wife Sarah, Abraham finds himself negotiating to purchase land in Israel for her burial. The Sages suggest that this episode was actually one of Abraham’s trials. Even though God promised him the land, Abraham had to struggle to secure a place for Sarah’s burial and had to purchase the land that he should have owned.

Nahmanides, a medieval Spanish commentator, quotes from the Sages that finding a burial plot for Sarah was considered a trial, and also suggests that this story is presented in order to reveal the kindness that God bestowed on Abraham. The people of the land referred to Abraham with great respect, as a man of stature. This is a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that He would make his name great (Gen. 12:2). He was able to purchase land and secure a place for Sarah for eternity.

Oddly enough, Nahmanides quotes both readings without noting the glaring contradiction between them. One looks at this story as a painful test and

the other looks at the story as a reflection of God's beneficence.

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Broide, the former Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chevron who died in the year 2000, in his commentary on Nahmanides, suggests that the two answers are not contradictory, but instead reflect a penetrating insight. Towards the end of his life, after already confronting so many challenges, the hardest test for Abraham was about choosing a mindset. How should Abraham relate to the trials and tribulations that he continually faced? More specifically, would he be able to see the blessings in his life despite the challenges? Despite having had to haggle for land, there was simultaneously a fulfillment of a blessing.

One of the key cognitive components of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is that it is possible to hold two opposing feelings at once. Often, people get stuck in rigid thinking patterns that keep them stuck in negative ruminations. This makes it very difficult to notice or experience any positive thoughts or emotions. DBT teaches the power of "AND." Instead of black-and-white, either-or thinking, we can validate two opposite experiences and emotions at once. We can feel grief AND joy, or pain AND pleasure simultaneously. It can be true that we are going through a very challenging experience, AND we can also see blessings in the situation as well.

According to Rabbi Broide, this was Abraham's test. During a difficult and painful experience, he

was also able to see God's blessings. This reading helps us understand Rashi's reflection. Rashi is indicating that the secret to Sarah's success in life was being able to both experience the challenges AND be able to identify the good in her life. At each age, she was able to both acknowledge the pain AND savor the blessings.

This past Sunday at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, [Dr. Erica Brown interviewed Rabbi Doron Perez](#), who shared his unfathomable challenge of marrying off one of his sons who was injured as a soldier in the war against Hamas, while the other is missing in action. Channeling the traits of Abraham and Sarah, he shared this exact message. He and his family were able to hold these two extremely opposite experiences at once, acknowledging the blessing amidst profound suffering.

This is the legacy of our patriarchs and matriarchs. They, along with Rabbi Perez, his family and so many others living in Israel today, model for us how to live a life of eulogy virtues. The road to character is paved with difficulties and hardships. The ability to confront those challenges while also noticing blessings, is a formidable challenge. As we unfortunately begin the second month of the War in Israel, most of us are experiencing the heaviness of the situation. Abraham and Sarah validate our heartbreaking feelings AND model how to recognize our personal and national blessings.

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**Character Challenge:** Identify a personal challenge that also comes with a blessing and consider how you may shift your mindset with the power of "and."

**Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l:** "Rabbi Soloveitchik says "There are two basic elements that make us what we are. There is Adam 1, "majestic man," the language-speaking, tool-making animal, highest of all life forms, capable of monumental scientific and technological achievement. But there is also Adam 2, the "covenantal" personality defined by our relationships with other people and with God. Majestic man has the résumé virtues, but Torah – the life of the covenant – is about the eulogy virtues: humility, gratitude, integrity, joy, the willingness to serve and make sacrifices in the name of high ideals. It is about "charity, love and redemption." (Cultivating the Inner Self, Rosh Hashanah message 5776)