



# THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

# IN THE PARSHA

## To Eulogize and To Weep

Kindergarten children are delightfully oblivious to the distinction between what adults call reality and the imaginary world. For these young children, there is no difference between the people in their actual lives and the people they learn about in the stories they hear.

For most adults, the heroes of the Bible stories are historical figures, and although they exist in our imagination, we know that they are long gone. These heroes and heroines, however, are as real to kindergartners as their parents and siblings are.

This hit home with me many years ago when my oldest daughter was a kindergarten student. She is now herself a grandmother, so that tells you just how long ago this was.

As all children in a Jewish religious

kindergarten, by this time of year she had heard many stories about Sarah. She knew about Sarah's journey to the Promised Land, of her trials and tribulations in Egypt, of the fact that she was barren, and of the joy she experienced with the birth of Isaac.

On the Friday before the Shabbat of this week's Torah portion, *Chaye Sarah*, she came home from school distraught, with tears flowing down her little cheeks. "Mommy, daddy," she cried. "Did you hear? Sarah died, Sarah died!" She was in the grips of a sadness very close to real grief; for Sarah had become a living figure for her, much to the credit of the teacher who told her Sarah's story. Few of us adults will exhibit emotion this week as we read of Sarah's demise. But I wager there are numerous kindergarten age boys and girls in Jewish schools who will shed tears.

For those of us who study the Torah portion weekly, death and dying are not unfamiliar. From the first human being who died, ironically through murder, until



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the near death of Isaac of which we read last week, the Bible has reported dozens of deaths to us.

But there is something especially poignant and moving about Sarah's death, even to us jaded adults. This is partly because, for the first time in the Bible, we have the report of another person's reaction to the death of a loved one. We read of a bereaved Abraham, a loving husband who comes "to eulogize Sarah and to cry for her." (*Genesis 23:2*)

For the first time, we learn of the human capacity to express emotions through eulogy.

The Talmud has a fascinating discussion over the nature of eulogy, of *hesped*. "Is a eulogy designed to benefit the dead?" asks the Talmud. "Or is it for the benefit of the living survivors, the mourners?"

The Talmud has its own conclusion, but there can be no doubt that from a psychological perspective the eulogy does both. It honors the dead, and it provides the mourner with the opportunity to give vent to his grief and to achieve a degree of catharsis.

Perhaps this is why Abraham both "eulogizes" Sarah and "cries for her". In his "eulogy" he honors her person, her character, her achievements in life. By "crying for her," he gives voice to his profound sense of the loss of his life's partner.

I can never forget the powerful experience I had long ago in a workshop led by the famed psychologist, Virginia Satir. She asked us to each retreat to a private corner

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of the large room and to devote a quiet hour to meditate upon, and if we wished, to record in writing, the eulogy that we imagine would be written for us when we died. I remember silently adding to those instructions the words "...after 120 years."

This exercise forced us to look deeply within ourselves and to determine what was permanent and worthy in our lives, and how we wished to be remembered by others. After a few moments into the exercise, the initial silence was broken by sobs, by sighs, by weeping. After that hour, the group gathered and many shared extremely moving feelings, and reported much self-discovery and self-revelation.

I don't recommend this experience to you, dear reader, unless you can do so in the presence of a trusted friend, preferably a person trained in coping with the feelings that can possibly emerge from such an exercise. But I do draw upon the experience I had that day to understand what others go through in the inevitable process of grief and mourning. I do continually go back in my memory to that day to understand myself and to evaluate my own life and its successes and failures, accomplishments and frustrations.

And I do rely upon the reactions I witnessed and personally underwent that day to understand our patriarch Abraham and his need to both "eulogize Sarah, AND to cry for her." ■



**Mazal Tov to**  
**Arlene Saslow and family**  
on the engagement of her grandson  
**Davidi Wimpfheimer to Ashira Baumol**  
daughter of Rabbi Avi & Hadley Baumol

