

THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

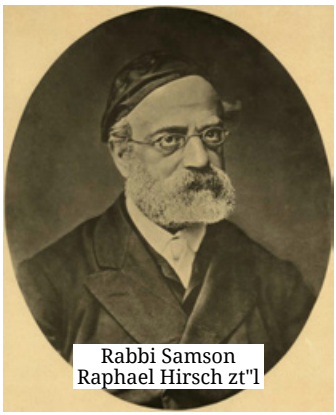
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"Yes, Sarah Is in the Parsha"

The opening verses in this week's Torah portion (Genesis 23:1-25:18) inform us of the death of Sarah:

"The span of Sarah's life came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. She died in Kiryat Arba—now Chevron—in the land of Canaan; and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep for her." (Verses 1 and 2)

A bit later we are told "... And then Avraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Chevron—in the land of Canaan." (Verse 19)



Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch zt"l

After that, there is no mention of Sarah in the entire *parsha*! How can I possibly dedicate my weekly column, which I have entitled "Person in the Parsha," to a woman whose name appears only after her death, and who plays no active role in this week's narrative?

But wait! She is indeed mentioned much later in the story, when her son Isaac takes a bride, Rebecca. There we learn, "... Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death." (Chapter 24, verse 67)

Nevertheless, how can I justify choosing Sarah as a "person in the *parsha*" when she plays no "living" role in the entire episode? Yes, she is mentioned in a praiseworthy manner, but does she remain a heroine after her death?

I insist that she does, but to prove it, I will have to return to the opening verses above, where we learn of her grief-stricken husband's *hesped* and *bechi*, "eulogy" and "weeping".

To demonstrate the "presence" of the deceased person even after that person's death, I must first define the terms "eulogy"/*hesped* and "shedding tears"/*bechi* and then distinguish between them. For this purpose, I will share with you three comments upon the opening verses of our *parsha* by three great mid-nineteenth century commentators, all three contemporaries with each other but with three different approaches to the text. They are Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, and Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, *zecher tzaddikim l'vracha*, of blessed memory.

Let me begin with Rav Hirsch, Rabbi of Frankfurt, Germany, who wrote his commentary on the Pentateuch/*Chumash* in German, but which I study in a Hebrew translation.

Rav Hirsch is often very creative in his

interpretations, sometimes daringly so.

He comments on the phrase "and Avraham came to eulogize and weep." "Came from where?", he asks.

This is a question that many much earlier commentators ask as well, and they generally answer that Avraham had come from Beersheba to Chevron, since, as we read in the final chapter of last week's *parsha*, he had returned to Beersheba directly from the *akedah*, from the "binding of Isaac." It was in Beersheba that he learned of Sarah's demise in Chevron, and so he "came" there to bury her.

Rav Hirsch strongly rejects this approach. He insists, as was his wont, that the word *vayavo*/"and he came" often means "he withdrew", or "he secluded himself". Thus, Avraham withdrew from the public that sought to comfort him so that he refused to address an audience. Instead, his "eulogy" was his own inner response to his personal tragedy, and he secluded himself in a place where he could tearfully and emotionally grieve for his life-partner. The "eulogy" was not a performance before an audience. Rather, it was his self-expression of torment. His "tears" were shed in the presence of the One Above alone. Only in his own private space could he "shed tears" and "eulogize" his beloved, and only afterwards could he "go public" and negotiate for a proper burial place for Sarah.

Rav Mecklenburg takes an entirely different approach. He reports that in his experience, the mourner first "sheds tears" and only afterwards presents a "eulogy". First, there is a deeply emotional and wholly personal reaction, tears of pain and heartful grief. Then, the mourner composes himself somewhat and formulates a verbal description of the person he lost so that others can know who the deceased was in his or her lifetime.

But Avraham reverses the sequence: first, the relatively calm public assessment of his wife's life of great account, and only then, the bitter tears of personal loss and bereavement. "Why this reversal?", asks the author of *HaKsav V'HaKabbalah*, the rabbi of the town of Koenigsburg.

His answer is a profoundly religious one. Avraham, he correctly assumes, faithfully believed that "the righteous in their death are greater than in their lifetimes." (*Chulin* 7b) His priority was to convey Sarah's life of piety, compassion, and achievement to a wide audience. That was and remains the purpose of a eulogy in Jewish tradition. It is an assertion of the valuable life that the deceased lived and not primarily an expression of grief.

Only after the eulogy accomplished its mission did Avraham allow himself a tear or two, and perhaps, suggests Rav Mecklenburg, that is why the letter "kaf" in the word "to weep for her"/*v'livkosa* is reduced in size in the Torah scroll.

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Dean of Volozhin, the "mother of all *yeshivos*", and author of *Haamek Davar*, has yet another approach to our concern. He sees the "tears" as the mourner's expression of his or her own reaction to the loss of a loved one, and the "eulogy" as a kind of biography of the deceased for the benefit of those who did not know much about the

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person who just died.

Avraham did not "lose" Sarah when she passed away. She left behind a son, a heritage, a model of a way of life. His tears were thus secondary to the educational message that he felt he needed to convey and that he knew that Sarah would have wanted him to continue to propagate.

Sarah, although no longer among the living, is nevertheless a "person in this *parsha*". She plays a vital role even after her demise. She is still "present" for Avraham, for his very wide and diverse audience, and for her beloved son Isaac, who attributes the joy he experiences with his new wife to the fact that she reminds him of his mother! ■

רפואה שלמה
Peleg Shabtai ben Chaviva Leah



