

Sermon Parashat Chaye Sarah 5767
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"Learning to Say Good Bye to Those We Love: Dealing with Loss in Our Lives."

When I was about eight years old I was going to visit my grandmother in Hartford CT. We had talked about it for a long time and I was very excited. Both of our grandmothers lived in Hartford so two of us would go to visit my paternal grandmother and two would go to our maternal grandmother. I always went to my Dad's mother because I was named after her husband and we had a special connection. I loved the raisinettes sitting in the green bowl when we arrived. I loved swimming in the pool and playing shuffleboard with her. I loved sleeping in the cot next to her bed. So this next adventure was going great but there was one difference this time - my parents weren't dropping us off, this time they were putting us on a bus. The four of us were supposed to get on the bus and meet our grandmothers at the other end. The ride would only take one hour and fifteen minutes and then we would be there. My older brother was to watch out for us until we got there.

It was a great plan, but as the days grew closer to our trip I started getting a little nervous. I imagined all the things that could go wrong and knowing how inept my older brother was, I thought we simply weren't safe enough in this scenario. As the trip grew closer, I became a little more nervous and finally the moment of truth came when I was supposed to board the bus. My nervousness turned into a full-blown anxiety attack. I started to sweat and I could feel my face start to contort. I knew I could no longer hold back the tears and I started to cry.

We had talked about going on the bus. We talked about where we would sit, we talked about how long the bus ride was and what I could do while I was sitting there. I had a book to read and activities to keep me busy and I thought I was ready. We had spoken about how my grandmother would be there to meet us on the other end and how she would take me back to her apartment. I thought I was ready, but I wasn't, and as it turned out, I was never going to be ready.

Separation is always hard and the longer you're going to be apart the harder it is. What we believe to be eternal separation or death is the hardest.

Avraham Avinu, Abraham, our father, teaches us. He teaches us about life and he teaches us about life after losing a loved one. What we never see is his inner anxiety of losing Sarah, his beloved co-traveler. We never see this coming because he never sees it coming. He just can't imagine a world without her. Abraham is introduced to us when Sarah is already at his side. There isn't a single biblical story in Abraham's life before her. Abraham is born and then he marries Sarah and so the story begins.

Life for Abraham begins in two places. First, when he begins to breathe and second, when he marries Sarah. It seems that there is no living without Sarah. This week's story begins with Sarah's death and it is clear that upon her death, Abraham too, begins to die. It appears that for Abraham there is little life before or after Sarah. He tries, but as the text points out, for the first time Avraham Zaken ba bayamim. Abraham is now old. Her death has aged him like no other challenge has aged him.

Lesson one: When we lose a loved one the pain is real and profound and we are diminished. Usually we just want to hide and retract from the world. So, Abraham buys a cave. Obviously, it is for her burial.

He teaches the lesson that while the dead are before us there is no moving on, and therefore, he must find a resting place for her. He must do so with care and concern, finding the perfect burial place for her remains. It turns out to be a cave and we can't help but think that Abraham would also prefer to crawl inside the cave. That is why we need shiva. We need the seclusion our tradition demands.

The second lesson to learn is that we need time to mourn outside the public eye, in the safety of our own homes. Clearly the cave is for her burial, but it is also a place safe from the elements. In the vulnerable moment of losing a loved one, Abraham teaches a second lesson, we need to withdraw from the harsh elements of the world in which we live and we need to be surrounded by those we love. We need to think about those we love who are still with us and that is why they are required to come to our side and care for us. In the moment of loss we need those we love to be foremost in our minds. Otherwise, the isolation caused by death would be unbearable.

It is in this exact moment Abraham teaches another significant lesson. When Sarah dies and Abraham is looking for a burial site, he tries to make settlement on this purchase. Abraham offers to pay top price but the Hitite responds, "Abraham, bury your dead. None will withhold this burial place from you for burying your dead." After settling on the cost, he accepts. Abraham teaches us the third lesson and that is we must be willing to accept the help of those around us. We cannot and must not expect to be able to go it alone. At times of loss there is no pride in saying, "I can handle this alone, even though that may be our impulse."

Abraham teaches us a fourth lesson when he tells his servant Elizer to find a wife for Isaac. In the depths of sadness and in the realization of our own mortality, we begin to think about what will be after we are gone. In the midst of losing a loved one we can't help but think that we too must some day pass on. So Abraham begins to get his affairs in order. The most primary is his son. Only amidst the sadness of losing a loved one does Abraham realize that Isaac has yet to find his life partner. Losing Sarah, his life partner, he understands that Isaac hasn't even found his yet. Abraham instinctually teaches us the fourth lesson and that is the critical role our surviving loved ones play in our life, even after a loved one has died. Isaac has said nothing. Isaac has done nothing, but he is alive and therefore by just being there he challenges his father not to be consumed by the devastating loss. Just by his existence Isaac helps. Just being there is healing.

Finally, and probably the most provocative in this context, is Abraham's ability to move on. Abraham, in the final chapters of this week's reading, remarries. However, this is not something we may want and it might not be something we condone, but it is instructive. It is not our choice. I remember a conversation I had with my Bubbie. She never remarried after her husband passed away decades earlier and she explained she wasn't interested. I couldn't understand this, but everyone is different. Some will remarry and some will not. Some will remarry and move on while some will remarry and never move on. Abraham teaches yet another lesson and that is we all handle grief and its manifestations differently. In fact, the last lesson Abraham teaches us is there are no rules.

Some days we will feel better and some days we won't. Some days we will feel like we are moving on and some days we will feel as though we are back to square one - and no one can stand in judgment. Some will be ready to leave their homes and venture forth into the world again while some will not. Some will be able to get on with it and some will not but no matter what the others say and no matter how capable they may be, it is okay if we are unable to do so. My brothers were able to get on that bus and, although I had become the object of much ridicule

because I couldn't get on the bus, it doesn't matter. I'm okay and you're okay because we all grow at different speeds and in different depths.

At the opening of this week's reading, we have one of the most excruciating verses in the entire Torah. When the text says, "Abraham came to bury Sarah and mourn her." VaYavo Avraham lispod Sar v'Livkotah. But the "Kaf" in the word livkotah to cry for her is small. The actual letter in the text is a miniature letter, and even though the Ba'al HaTurim says shelo bacha elah miat, the Kaf is small because Abraham didn't really cry that much. Some feel it was because of his age, but I disagree. I think the real reason is in crying he is unable to articulate the depth of his pain. He has lost his Sarah. Abraham, like most of us, is unable to explain how he is feeling and cannot find the words to adequately express himself - but we understand. Today I have tried to find the right words so that in the moment we will better understand what is going on.

So, here are five quick lessons:

1. When a loved one dies we need time to ourselves.
2. When a loved one dies we need to be surrounded by people who love us.
3. When a loved one dies we must be willing to accept the help of those around us.
4. When a loved one dies we realize our own mortality, we begin to think about what will be after we are gone.
5. When a love one dies we all move on, or not, at different speeds and that's okay.

For those of us who have lost loved ones we wonder how we will get along without them. We know nothing we do will ever adequately prepare us for the moment a loved one leaves. Hopefully, today you will leave with a little understanding, a little consolation, a little healing.

One last insight - if it hurts when a loved one dies the good news is you are still alive. Your heart is still working properly. Abraham got older, but he didn't die and neither will you. The really great news is you are here with us and we are going to take care of you. Shabbat Shalom.