

The Days of Our Lives
Parashat Chayyei Sarah;
November 17, 2006

Today is my son Daniel's birthday. He is nine years old. Benjamin is ten, Talia is five, and I remember... I remember the five years before Benjamin was born, our struggles with infertility, our hopes and our dreams, the bitter and the sad, the days filled with emotion, the cycle of time ever on our mind.

And Wednesday... two days ago was my mother's birthday. This first birthday without her. She would have been 73.

And so birth and death, absence and presence, the passage of time and the marking of years is much on my mind this Shabbat, as we come now to the portion called *Chayyei Sarah*, the life of Sarah.

The words we heard earlier tonight were the beginning of the famous tale of Rebecca at the well, the journey of Abraham's servant, sent back to Iraq on a tour of duty with a mandate and a mission: to find a bride for Isaac.

But the portion begins slightly earlier, with the report... of the death of Sarah. Strange, perhaps, that the portion which tells of the *death* of Sarah... opens with the words "the *life*" of Sarah. Strange, but an inspiration throughout the ages, and for the aged – that our lives are *not* over until they are over, that the story of our journey is never complete, until our actual departure from this world. For all those whose lives have taken an unexpected turn, a new direction, for all who have

found new love, or launched second careers, for all who started business enterprises in their 60's, or warily sat down at a computer for the first time, only to become cyber-wizards in their early 80's, for all of us this is a message of hope, a promise and a possibility. Our lives go on as long as we are alive. Our story has a shining conclusion which is yet to unfold.

But the next words in the portion are strange as well, not just the title "life of Sarah," but how her age is reported. Now, some would say that this is a circumspect matter, that one never should come right out and reveal a woman's age. I am not sure what the original reason for the strange wording was, but I do know that a lot has been made of the way the words are arranged throughout the history of Jewish commentary on these verses.

Here is what the Hebrew says: "*Vayih'yu chayyei Sarah meah shanah, v'es'rim shanah, v'shevah shanim; sh'nai chayyei Sarah.*" The Torah is telling us that Sarah is 127 years old at the time of her death, but what it literally says is: "And this was the life of Sarah: one hundred year, and twenty year, and seven years; the years of Sarah's life."

Rabbi Gunther Plaut, in his commentary on the Torah, notes that the number 127 is an idealized figure, and not an actual one, that it is a combination of two Biblical cultural ideas: the "ideal life span" of 120, and the sacred number seven.

That may teach us something about the total time. But it does not account for the strange wording. And if, according to tradition, these are divine words, then there is deep meaning hidden in the corner; strange wording, in other words, must be significant. It is a red flag, or, as we learned in Israel about archeology, when something is sticking out of the ground it is basically saying to Biblical archeologists: “come hither!” Strange wording comes to teach us *something*.

And so Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, the greatest Biblical commentator of them all, teaches, in typical brevity: “the word ‘years’ is repeated, and without number, to indicate that they were all equally good.”

But the commentary requires a commentary. They were all equally good? Did not Sarah struggle? Did she not laugh at Abraham but also lash out at Hagar? Did she, too, not struggle for children, and know that aching, that yearning, that wondering what life was for or all about?

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, the Gerrer Rebbe, widely known by the name of his most important work, the *S’fat Emet*, notes that “there must be differences: variations and changes during the years of a person’s lifetime. There are special times during a person’s youth, and special times during a person’s old age. But the ones who are truly righteous,” the *Sfat Emet* concludes, “find fulfillment in all their days. Now, certainly, since things are not naturally this way, it must be a gift from God. And this is the meaning at the words at the beginning of the

next chapter” – the one we read tonight – “And Adonai had blessed Abraham in all ways’ means: with fulfillment, wholeness, completion, that it be found in every place and at every time. Thus we read in Rashi: ‘They were all equally good.’”

What a profound challenge! This is either a sacred opportunity, or a simplistic hoax! For who can find fulfillment at every moment? Who can feel whole when our bodies are broken? Who can feel complete when our careers careen off out of our control, our relationships leave us lonely or disappointed, our need to love and be loved goes unanswered and we hear back only the empty echoes of our own inner voice?

A reading, from *Kabbalah: A Love Story*, the new novel written by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner:

A befuddled rabbi, having dinner with a beautiful astronomer. The rabbi, trying to explain Jewish mysticism:

“Excellent. If you’re a mystic, saying you believe in God means that you have an abiding suspicion that everything is a manifestation of God, and no matter how horrific it might be, it is still, somehow, filled with holiness. You may not be able to see it, but the meaning is there: the filaments of eternity are not only interwoven and interdependent, but they all have a singular source.’

But now, instead of shining with the brightness of comprehension, Isabel's eyes reddened. She coughed, excused herself, and went to the ladies' room. Kalman froze. Uh-oh, I have said something wrong, he thought. But what? People do not get this upset over theology...

When she returned, Kalman rose, and helped her with her chair. 'It was something I said, wasn't it?'

'There was no way you could have known.' Isabel blew her nose, took a drink of water. 'They never even told me how it happened.'

Kalman listened intently.

'I suppose I can't really blame them. I was only eight. Everyone just said that my thirty-six year old mother died of a heart attack... Well, even as a little girl, the story didn't quite hang together. But I didn't have the words to say I didn't buy it. So I never told anyone. It wasn't until I was in high school that I finally went down to the public library and looked up the newspaper account for myself... My spiritual, religious mother was struck and killed by a taxi on twenty-fifth street. It was so random, so meaningless. The article said that the cabbie was drunk...'

The pages go on, and the rabbi eventually responds, with a Hasidic story: "There was once a man who went to his rebbe, his spiritual master, because his life was filled with suffering. After describing in detail his many woes, the rabbi sighed in sympathy. 'Oh, my friend, I cannot possibly help someone who has so much grief. You should seek out the advice of Reb Zusya. His life also has been strewn with tragedy.'

The man thanked his rebbe, and set out in search of this new teacher. But when he recounted his misfortunes, Zusya only looked at him in puzzlement. ‘Why have you come to me?’ he said. “I don’t understand. I have never experienced suffering...”

There are so many variations on the theme it is impossible to count. It’s all in the attitude! All in how we look at the world. Or: I cried because I had no shoes, until I saw a man who had no feet. Soothing to some, perhaps, or, better: bracing, like being slapped on the cheek by a stinging splash of perspective. But not always. Not always. It all seems so pat and superficial, so forced and artificial. Like one of the friends of Job, cold comfort in the face of existential loneliness.

Harder, still, than the advice to “chill out, buck up, roll with the punches” is the notion that there is a meaning inherent in the experience of pain itself.

One of the most interesting times of my life was the week I spent in a convent. There I was, a scholar-in-residence, as it were, for 150 Benedictine nuns. We studied, we prayed, we broke bread and shared from the heart. I was touched by what I learned that week, and deeply moved.

But there are arguments we had, for the sake of heaven, that remain with me still. One was about capital punishment. The other was about forgiveness and suffering. “Jews should forgive the Nazis already,”

some of the nuns argued, “for the sake of our own souls.” “Move on,” they suggested, or, more to the point: “Find meaning in the depths. Everything happens for a reason. God caused this, too.”

As a Jew, I don’t know what to do with this notion of the sanctification of suffering. I *do* believe that God is all around us, that God is there in every aspect of every experience of our lives, if only we open our eyes. At the same time, I do *not* believe that there is inherent meaning and purpose and transformative power in pain and suffering and agony.

And so neither answer, neither “its all about attitude” or “suffering is good for the soul” do much for me. I don’t know how to square the circle in my mind. Sometimes I’m not sure how to be among the truly righteous, “who find fulfillment in all their days.”

It’s hard. As our president once said, “it’s hard work!”

And yet, and yet... There *are* those among us who are always smiling – and whose smiles are not just plastic, pasted on for external effect, but which come from a place deep inside. You know them, and I know them. There are people who make us feel better, just being around them.

It’s not that their lives are filled with less laundry to do, less trouble with their children, fewer deadlines or ethical dilemmas. It is not a question of less pain – and it is not, I believe, a question of more

character. God forbid I should imply that the person who seems sad is just not coping well enough!

I don't know the cause, and I can't replicate this radiance of inner peace at will. I wish I could. But I do know it is possible. I do know we can taste what it is like. I believe, I know, I have felt... those moments of fulfillment, of wholeness, even in the presence of pain.

My friends, a lot rides... on those few moments. Much will be possible, in our spiritual lives...when we can make meaning, when we can feel complete in ourselves no matter what is happening around us. When we are in-dependent, not driven by external events. When, as I said on Rosh Hashanah, we can, indeed, look around, and find a blessing in all that happens.

But let us remember that this is one of the most difficult tasks in our lives. Let us not judge ourselves or others too harshly. In the face of birth and death, on special occasions and everyday, let us simply try to be there, for each other, with our presence, and with love.

Through that love, I believe, we can find, the goodness of our years, and the days of our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.