

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parshat Chayei Sarah (5769)

Following so quickly after the story of the binding of Isaac (last week's reading), the rabbis derived the fact of Sara's death from the intense fear stemming from that incident. That is to say, when Sara found out how close she came to losing her son, the son of her advanced old age, the son for whom she had prayed for most of her adult life, she had a heart attack and died.

At the time of her death, Sara and Abraham were not living together according to the Torah. As a result, Abraham had to travel to where Sara died in order to bury her. He buried her, as we all know, in Hebron, in the Cave of Machpela. What is instructive here is that Abraham buried his wife. He gave her the ultimate kavod (honor) and fulfilled a heartbreaking mitzvah- that of Jewish burial.

Other traditions have sanitized death. At the wake of a Christian who died, we are confronted with a cosmetized, properly dressed corpse. All of the ugliness of death is hidden behind the skillful art of the mortician and the cosmetologist. We Jews, however, do not sanitize death. We lovingly prepare our dead for burial in a special ritualized manner. At the cemetery, our Jewish heritage comes into full view as we do the burial ourselves. The rabbis taught that leaving burial in the hands of strangers was a bad thing. Just as Abraham buried Sara, we bury our loved ones.

Perhaps kvurah (proper burial) is the hardest mitzvah to fulfill, but at the same time it is an amazing expression of love. More than that, it also forces us to confront reality, as unpleasant as that reality may be.

Abraham and Sara may not have been together at the time of her death, but Abraham still fulfilled his obligations to her in a most exemplary manner.

We like to complain about how hard it is to fulfill some of the mitzvot. Yet, sometimes the hardest mitzvot to fulfill are those that will most impress themselves upon us.

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