

# In Search of Kindness

Matthew Rascoff ('96) | BronfmanTorah | Chayei Sarah 2015

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Big life moments often come in unexpected pairings—a death and a birth; a relationship collapses and a new one forms in its wake. We are forced to confront seemingly contradictory emotions unprepared. Chayei Sarah introduces this idea into our tradition, announcing the contradiction with its very name: Chayei Sarah means “the Life of Sarah,” but it is in fact the story of her death (in the very first verse) followed soon after by her son Isaac’s marriage to Rebecca.

The story allots one verse for Abraham to mourn Sarah and immediately confronts him with the banal headache of purchasing a burial site for his wife—16 verses of bazaar-style negotiation with the local Hittites to secure the cave of Machpela as her grave. Immediately after burying Sarah, Abraham sends his servant Eliezer on a mission to find a wife for his son Isaac, making Eliezer promise to pick a bride from the land of Abraham’s birth, not from Canaan. Eliezer succeeds in this task and brings Rebecca home. The parsha closes with the deaths of Abraham and Ishmael.

The dialectical emotional pulls these events exert is a central theme of the parsha. And they are threaded by one word: *hesed*.

The Hebrew root *hesed* חסד (kindness or compassion) occurs four times in chapter 24, the story of Eliezer's journey and the central plot of Chayei Sarah. This is the only chapter in the Bible in which the word *hesed* appears so frequently. At the beginning of his journey, Eliezer prays to God to help him find the right match for Isaac:

“Lord, God of my master Abraham, pray, grant me good speed this day  
and do kindness [*hesed*] with my master Abraham.”  
(Genesis 24:12, all translations by Robert Alter.)

ויאמר: ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתָי, הַקָּרֶה-נָא לְפָנַי הַיּוֹם; וַעֲשֵׂה-חֶסֶד, עִם אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרְתָּם. בְּרֵאשִׁית כֹּד:יב)

Eliezer develops a heuristic to identify the right girl: if he asks for water for himself, and the girl at the well offers water for him and for his camels, he will know “*You have done kindness [hesed] with my master*”. When he realizes in 24:27 Rebecca is the one he has been seeking Eliezer gives thanks: “*Blessed be the Lord, God of my master Abraham, Who has not left off His steadfast kindness [hasdo] toward my master....*” Finally, in 24:49, when negotiating the terms of Rebecca’s betrothal to Isaac, Eliezer tells her family, “*And so, if you are going to ask with steadfast*

*kindness [hesed] toward my master, tell me, and if not, tell me, that I may turn elsewhere.*”

What is the importance of *hesed* to this story? Why is the word used four times by Eliezer? Eliezer recognizes that only *hesed* can repair the ruptures in the house of Abraham.

For Abraham the Akeda, the binding of Isaac, threatens God's covenant that his descendants will be like the stars of the sky. Then the need to purchase the grave site from the Hittites makes a mockery of God's promise of the land to him (Meir Sternberg cited by Robert Alter). These two promises were the heart of the covenant. Eliezer recognizes that the idea that Isaac might not find a wife, and might not help fulfill the covenant, would be simply too much for Abraham to bear. He begs for *hesed* on behalf of his master that the covenant with God not be undermined again.

For Isaac the rupture is more personal and familial than covenantal. His father just attempted to murder him in a ritualistic human sacrifice of precisely the type the God of Abraham supposedly rejected. And he has also just lost his mother. Rashi, drawing on midrash, connects the Akeda to Sarah's death, which was "a result of the news of the Akeda—that her son had been fated for slaughter and had been all-but-slaughtered. Her soul flew away and she died." A tradition cited by Rashi says Isaac's "ashes remained piled on the altar". Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that "what happened at the Akeda cannot be neutralized, though the sacrifice is not literally consummated. The burden of the 'all but' condition is assumed by Sarah, who consummates its meaning in her howls and her death." Of course Sarah's death silences the howls the midrash places in her mouth. For Isaac, they continue and are only amplified by the loss of his mother.

If finding Isaac a wife from the right place and fulfilling the covenant was Eliezer's expression of *hesed* for Abraham, finding the right wife was the *hesed* Isaac needed. What made Rebecca right for Isaac was her own *hesed*—as expressed by her giving water to the camels as well as the people. Eliezer constructs his camel-watering test because he recognizes that only *hesed* will console Isaac. As Zornberg writes, "His main criterion for the rightness of Rebecca's election is that he will sense in her the *hesed* that, since the Akeda, has been lacking from his master's experience." Eliezer was right. Verse 24:67 tells us:

"Isaac brought Rebecca into the tent of Sarah his mother Sarah and took Rebecca as a wife. And he loved her, and Isaac was consoled after his mother's death."

וַיְבִיאֵהָ יִצְחָק, הָאֵתְלָה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רֵבְקָה וּמְתִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה, וַיִּנְחָמֶהָ; וַיִּנְחָמֶם יִצְחָק, אַחֲרֵי אִמּוֹ  
(בראשית כד:67)

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Chayei Sarah holds special meaning for me. It was my bar mitzvah parsha 23 years ago. Having experienced the loss of my father last year, and the birth of a son, Jasper, just 11 weeks ago, I identify with Isaac's sense of loss and Abraham's need for continuity. These dialectical emotions are bound together in our souls and reveal themselves at critical moments in our lives. For me, the simple acts of changing Jasper's diapers and soothing him when he cries conjure images of what my father must have done for me decades ago. Those images are comforting, because they give me a window into the love he must have felt for me, even as they are painful. Those contradictory feelings are brought together in this parsha, and, as Eliezer shows, are linked through the common strand of *hesed*.

Shabbat shalom.

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