

# Jewish Graves in Hebron and Monticello

Parashat Chayei Sarah, Genesis, Chapters 23-25 | October 28, 2021

In Charlottesville, Virginia, sits Monticello—the home of Thomas Jefferson, its white dome looming in the distance. The founding father’s grave is a short stroll from the house, but even closer to the home there is another grave whose stone melds the months and years of the Jewish calendar with secular dates. It reads:

To the memory of Rachel Phillips Levy, born  
1769, married 1787, died 7th of Iyar, 5591

The tale of this grave is a uniquely American one, but it also captures so much about what we might call the first Jewish death: that of our matriarch Sarah.

The tale of the *Akeida* is followed with matter-of-fact prose that reveals profound pathos. Genesis, chapter 23:

*And the life of Sarah was a hundred and twenty seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.*

*And Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah, and to weep for her.*  
(Genesis 23:1-2)

Our forefather lost his wife, and Abraham, we are informed, eulogized her and wept. That the Bible describes Abraham’s emotions tells us that his reaction to loss—his weeping—is important. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote:

Why did the Torah tell us that Abraham wept? Apparently, it is befitting for a great man to cry like a child. To be insensitive, emotionally immovable, always cold, neutral and irresponsible is not always the sign of greatness.

To put it another way: Abraham here offers a response to the cold perspective put forth by Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother, to her son. Married to her late husband’s brother only a month after her spouse’s passing, Gertrude is utterly insensitive to the fact that her son, Hamlet, still mourns for his father. Death, Gertrude tells Hamlet, is natural, and to her that makes mourning incomprehensible.

She says:

Do not for ever with thy vailed lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust:

Thou know’st ‘tis common; all that  
lives must die,

Passing through nature to eternity.

Hamlet: Aye, Madam, it is common.

Gertrude: If it be, Why seems it so  
particular with thee?

But of course, we know why Hamlet mourns for his father—because it was *his* father, or, as he might have put it to Gertrude, it is particular to *me* because *he* was particular to me. Sarah was *particular* to Abraham. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s point is that in Judaism, mourning our loved ones is a *mitzvah*, an obligation, and it is also essential to our Jewishness and to our humanity.

Yet if crying is a natural response to loss, then another exegetical issue presents itself. Note the precise description of Abraham’s reaction: in Hebrew, “*Vayavo Avraham lispod leSara velivkota*,” “*He arrived to eulogize Sarah, and to weep for her.*” The order, as commentators note, is striking. Usually when a loved one is lost, the

first reaction is to weep, and only afterwards can one collect oneself and eulogize, and put one's weeping into words. Here, however, Abraham engages first in spiritual tribute, and only afterwards in heartbroken bewailing. This is because, as Rabbi Soloveichik writes,

...Sarah was not only Abraham's mate but his comrade as well. She was a part of Abraham, not only as wife but as disciple and teacher.

Rabbi Soloveichik adds that Sarah was his collaborator and co-participant in all his great plans, hopes, and visions. Together they discovered God; together they discovered a new morality; together they joined the covenant. As Rabbi Soloveichik puts it, "Sarah and Abraham started the *mesorah*," the Jewish tradition.

This is why, for Rabbi Soloveichik, upon Sarah's death, eulogy precedes weeping. In eulogizing Sarah, Abraham was explaining to others all that she believed, all that she lived for. His love for her was founded upon this shared commitment, and he therefore owed it to their shared faith to eulogize first, to pay tribute to what she believed, before weeping for love lost. In Rabbi Soloveichik's words.

The Torah tells us that Abraham first mourned the death of the mother of the *mesorah*, and then the death of a lovely wife.

Abraham's reaction to Sarah's death thus tells us everything about their life together, and it inspires us to ask: what does a Jewish marriage mean? For Judaism, marriage is not only about attraction—though that is of course necessary—it is also, and indeed first and foremost, about a larger spiritual commitment. For us, Abraham and Sarah are models for Jewish marriage because they shared not only romance but also a destiny, a shared commitment to perpetuation of the covenant of God. And the way in which Abraham and Sarah lived impacts how they dealt with death: with a focus on covenantal continuity.

One of the fascinating paintings in London's National Portrait Gallery is of Lady Venetia Digby, a beautiful

woman who died young in 1633, and her heartbroken husband. Sir Kenelm Digby called for Anthony Van Dyck to capture her beauty on her deathbed. But if you study the portrait, we see that though she was no longer alive when the portrait was made, she does not look dead. Rather, as Simon Schama puts it, Van Dyck understood that "Kenelm wanted the illusion that Venetia was very much alive." Sarah, the Bible informs us, was beautiful, but Abraham sought not to preserve the memory of her beauty but rather to tell all who would listen of her covenantal commitments: why she was and would be a biblical matriarch for all eternity.

It is due to these commitments that Abraham then seeks a separate burial place for his wife and himself, and for their children and children's children, set apart from the peoples of the land, and where, when the time came, their descendants would join them.

*And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke unto the children of Heth, saying,*

*I am a stranger and a neighbor with you; give me a possession of a burying place among you, that I may bury my dead from before me.*  
(Genesis 23:3-4)

Abraham introduces himself in Hebrew as "*ger vetoashav anochi imachem*," "I am a stranger and a neighbor among you." The phrase's words seem to contradict each other: a stranger and a neighbor are very different things. To be a Jew in the world, Rabbi Soloveichik argued, is to seek to be a neighbor: to seek to be fully part of society, to join others in contributing to society. But at the same time Jews are still strangers in that we are still set apart by our covenantal calling. Of course, for much of Jewish history the world did not allow us to be both, insisting that only if we abandoned our unique identity as strangers could we be accepted as neighbors. But *America* offered us the opportunity to truly be both.

My favorite example of "stranger and neighbor" is in a letter written by an American Jew named Jonas Phillips, who served in the American Revolution and later wrote to the Constitutional Convention and to its president George Washington, when it was meeting

in Philadelphia in 1787. Philips wrote to complain that only Christians and not Jews were allowed at the time to serve in the state legislature, and this, he argued, was a violation of the equality for which American Jews had fought. The letter is a classic argument for religious liberty, but strikingly, when you look at how Philips dated the correspondence, he wrote the Hebrew date first:

Philadelphia 24th Ellul 5547 or Sepr 7th 1787

It is astonishing. Philips is composing correspondence to George Washington and the entire Constitutional Convention, with nary a Jew among them. Why is he adding Jewish dates? The point, it appears, is that Phillips is writing as a Jew and as an American, stressing that he seeks to be both and be accepted as both.

This is what Abraham is explaining to those around him: I am a neighbor, dedicated to working with you on behalf of society, but also a stranger, set apart by my destiny. That is why I need a separate place to bury my wife, who is not only my wife; she is a partner in my covenant. But Abraham's neighbors do not understand. Perhaps in the hope that Abraham will ultimately assimilate among them, they embrace Abraham, and offer him to bury his dead among them, for free. It takes several more exchanges for Abraham to make clear his ultimate intentions, which he seeks to communicate to a landowner named Efron:

*That he may give me the cave of Machpehlah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in the midst of you for a possession of a burying place.*  
(Genesis 23:9)

Abraham emphasizes here that he needs a site that is separate, “*beketzeh sadeihu*,” “on the edge of the field,” and that he wants to pay a great deal for it. What he seeks is not merely a temporary possession, but what he calls in Hebrew an “*achuzat kaver*.” The word *achuzat*, as the commentators note, is not merely a plot of land that is owned, but is a *familial* plot of land, one that links generations, one that resides not only in physical soil

but also in the hearts and minds of one's descendants. In so doing Abraham ensured that for generations, Jews would be buried apart, a sign that even as we spread around the Earth, we are one people, one faith, bound by Abraham's covenant, seeking eternally to be engaged in the world, yet simultaneously also set apart by our covenantal calling. Thus, the ultimate twist: in choosing how Sarah would be buried, and how he would be buried, their immortality is thereby assured.

The story of the death of Abraham's spouse teaches us about life; and the cemetery Abraham arranged for his wife teaches us that as Jews, what we seek in our spouses is a covenantal partner in faith, in perpetuation. This will be a theme that is emphasized again and again in the stories that follow. In marriage, love is essential; but as Jews, we seek spouses loyal to the legacy of Abraham and Sarah, and indeed, we wish to found our love on that shared commitment.

This is perhaps the meaning of one of the most famous symbols of Jewish marriage. In the very same year that he wrote to the convention, Jonas Phillips invited Benjamin Rush, a prominent physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, to the wedding of his daughter. Rush, a devout Christian, recounted to his wife his experience of having attended this Jewish wedding, and he notes that the ceremony began with “the erection of a beautiful canopy composed of white and red silk in the middle of the floor.” This airy structure, of course, is the *chuppah*, under which Jewish brides and grooms have been married for centuries. (Rush then goes on to confirm that all Jewish homes are the same by reporting to his wife that when he went after the wedding to bid farewell to the mother of the bride, she “put a large piece of cake into my pocket for you, which she begged I would present to you with her best compliments.”)

It is fascinating that a Jew felt comfortable inviting a famous Christian to his daughter's wedding in 1787, something that would not likely have happened in Europe during this time. But the story also provides a Jewish lesson. The *chuppah* is the embodiment of the home that the Jewish husband and wife intend to build lovingly in the future, and yet facially, it appears to be an odd sort of home to build. There are no boundaries between public and private, and it is open to the breeze

on all four sides. Yet the *chuppah* perhaps makes sense when perceived, as is often suggested, as an echo of Abraham and Sarah, whose desert tent, according to Talmudic tradition, had open doors on all four sides. Under the *chuppah*, then, standing in the metaphorical shadow of Abraham and Sarah's tent, a Jewish husband and wife likewise commit themselves to the Abrahamic mission. Judaism, the new couple is affirming, guides and obligates them wherever they may be, or go, unto the four corners of the Earth. They are open to the world, seeking to engage it, but they will bear their faith with them. They will be strangers and neighbors.

We are now able to see the segue between the only two tales in these several chapters, why Sarah's death is immediately followed by the tale of Abraham ordering his servant to seek a spouse for Sarah's son. Abraham makes one thing crystal clear: the servant cannot select anyone from the pagan land in which they live. He must journey to the Abrahamic homeland to seek someone of appropriate virtue. Arriving there, the servant selects a sign to identify such a spouse:

*Behold I stand by the well of water, and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water;*

*So let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher I pray thee that I may drink, and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also; let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant for Isaac... (Genesis 24:13-14)*

One woman fulfills this condition: Rebecca, Isaac's cousin, who, as is often stated, is set aside by her capacity for kindness, and therefore a worthy heir of the Abrahamic ethical commitment. It is often commented that with Sarah passing from the scene, a matriarchal replacement is sought, and this of course is true. But more than that must be said: it is in the very way that Abraham mourns for his wife that we learn what marriage truly is. Only with the death of the first Jewish wife do we learn fully about the first Jewish married life. Biblical marriage is founded on covenantal commitment, and this is the meaning of Isaac's marriage:

*And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent and took Rebecca and she became his wife, and he loved her... (Genesis 24:67)*

In recreating the matriarch's tent, in their shared covenantal commitment, love flourishes.

Sarah's grave teaches us about Jewish life. This, in turn, brings us to another Jewish grave which sits apart in Monticello. It is the grave of the daughter of Jonas Phillips, the bride whose wedding Benjamin Rush attended. Her name was Rachel Phillips Levy, and her own son, Uriah Phillips Levy, who revered the equality embodied in the Declaration, bought Monticello, saved it from ruin, and buried his mother there. Ultimately, the family transferred the property to the American people.

I once journeyed with my community to Monticello to recite memorial prayers at the Jewish grave that is there, and as I stood there at a Jewish grave in the home of the author of the Declaration, I heard an echo of Abraham's words: *"I am a stranger and a neighbor with you; give me a possession of a burying place among you."* It reminded me of how America offered us the opportunity to live fully as Jews, and as Americans, and also of the extraordinary responsibility that comes with this opportunity. Strikingly, the story of Sarah's death is referred to in standard Jewish parlance as *"Chayei Sarah,"* "The Life of Sarah." I had come to Virginia to visit a site of death; but as I stood there, I felt profoundly that Sarah still lived, and I understood how we as Jews were called to live as well.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. Rabbi Soloveichik emphasizes how in dealing with Sarah's death, Abraham seeks to honor and embody how she lived her life. What can this teach us about the Jewish attitude toward life, death, and mortality?
  2. Abraham does not wish Isaac to marry a woman from the pagan Canaanite society in which he lives, so he sends his servant to find a wife from his homeland in Mesopotamia. But is Mesopotamian society not also pagan? Why might Abraham think that his birthplace would be a promising location to find an ethically worthy spouse for his son and covenantal heir?
  3. Rabbi Soloveichik writes about how the United States, uniquely in the Diaspora, has allowed Jews the opportunity to be "strangers" and "neighbors"—to live as both fully observant Jews and committed American citizens. What dangers might this uniquely American attitude toward citizenship and religious liberty face today?
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