

Chayei Sarah (the Life of Sarah)  
Genesis 23:1-25:18  
November 15, 2014

Guided contemplation at Temple Sinai  
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This week's portion is "the life of Sarah", and it begins with her death. This portion is filled with transitions and the liminal states those entail. It lies on that "hair's breadth that separates life from death." [Zornberg, *Genesis*, p. 138, "kime'at shelo"] Sarah dies. Abraham purchases the family burial cave, which, according to the Zohar, also contains Adam and Eve. Abraham remarries, and according to Rashi, he marries Hagar. Rashi's interpretation restores Hagar and Ishmael to place of respect in the lineage.

**Then Abraham's servant, after praying for guidance and the restoration of loving kindness, fetches a bride for Isaac.** Isaac prays in the field, and according to Midrash, Isaac establishes the cycle of our afternoon prayer, at that boundary between day and night. Isaac marries Rebecca. And Abraham dies. This portion holds the cycles of family and life and death, and of prayer.

This contemplation draws from the Torah commentary of the Sefat Emet, and his thoughts about Sarah, the possibilities of the light of each new morning, and the holiness of time. There are the words of Rav Kook, on Isaac in the field in prayer, and Jonathan Omer-Man's thoughts on prayer. These sources become the foundation our contemplation today--the daily possibilities of our spiritual work. So, with taking this direction in the contemplation, we include in our yearning, the earnestness of our own prayer and do so at this, the Isaac time of day. This is our prayer of the liminal, transitional hour. So, now, as we form a contemplative community this next hour, together, we can find what we can only know together, at this precious time, in the Holiness of this moment.

## **Niggun**

### **Part 1 On Time**

From the Sefat Emet:

"Sarah's life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, these were the years of the life of Sarah." [Gen. 23:1] Rashi comments [they are written out this way to show that] all of them were equal in goodness.

It is the way of ordinary people that as you get older your awareness increases and you settle out your ways. The older you get, the more you are able to put aside certain bad

qualities and stop doing some of the bad things you used to do. But in that case, the real

“days of your life” are only the last minute, the time when you are really whole. And only some merit that chance . . . Every day of our lives we are given [the opportunity of] some special thing to set aright. Thus we can ascend, rung after rung.”

Sefat Emet, the Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, translated by Arthur Green, pp. 33-4)

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“The first meaning of *tamim* (perfect) is ‘without blemish’; this refers to perfection or wholeness. It may be applied to time as well. The human being was created in order to realize self-perfection. And since we were created in the world, each of us given but a limited time, perfection applies to time as well.

....Day itself is called after the light it contains, for Scripture says: ‘God called the light day’ [Gen., 1:4]. This means that the blessed Holy One in goodness renews Creation each day. Each and every day God places a point of awakening in each one of Israel, to which they may attach themselves.”

**Commented [JN1]:** This sentence merits time for processing and/or further exploration.

...the tzaddik joins each day to its root. By attaining awareness and spirituality within time, a person shows that time itself has value, so that time, too, is uplifted.”

(Sefat Emet, the Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, translated by Arthur Green, pp. 34-5)

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“The essence of this ‘perfection’ is to be attached to the upper root...Everything below has a root above; when the lower portion is attached to its root, the thing is perfect and whole. This is the purpose of the religious life: to attach ourselves to our upper root...”

(Sefat Emet, the Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, translated by Arthur Green, p. 36, 1:99)

## Chant:

### Yom l'yom yabiya omer, v'laila l'laila y'chaveh da'at

דַּעַת-יְסִדֵּר, וּבִיַּע אֱמֶר וְלַיְלָה לַלַּיְלָה, יוֹם לְיוֹם

Day after day pours forth speech, night after night declares knowledge (Psalm 19:3)

(silence)

## Part 2 On Prayer

“Isaac went out to meditate (lasu’ach) in the field toward evening.” (Gen. 24:63)

The meaning of the word lasu’ach is unclear and the discussion provides layers which increases the understanding. Rashi says it comes from a word meaning speech (sichah). The Rashbam says it comes from a word meaning plant (si’ach). A word associated with both the activity of prayer and to the natural growth of a plant, becomes resonant.

Rav Kook made this observation:

“The soul is always praying. It constantly seeks to fly away to its Beloved.” ...

“What we call prayer is only an external expression of this inner prayer of the soul. In order to truly pray, we must be aware of the constant yearnings of the soul.”

In this word, lasu’ach, we join the activity of prayer to the natural growth of plants and trees. Through prayer, the soul branches out with inner emotions and flowers, the roots spread and go deeper, seeking the source of the depths, of the waters.

(Rav Kook on Chayei Sarah, RavKook Torah.org)

As we sit here, can we begin to feel or hear the yearning within the branches and roots of that always praying soul?

**Chant:**

**Karov Adonai, I’chol korav, I’chol asher yik’rauhu v’emet**

קְרָאִיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאָהּ בְּאֵמֶת-לְכָל, קָרוֹב יְהוָה

The Eternal is near to all who call her in truth (Psalm 145:18)

(silence)

### **Part 3 The Praying Organ of my Soul**

This is a long quote from Jonathan Omer-Man, on the nature of prayer, and our work of refinement. Listen, take in, what is useful to hear and let the rest go. He begins with the obstacles.

It is our task to get in alignment, to get in step with the parade.

“...It is as if we were not one...but ten different selves, and when we start to look at them, we discover that they are in disarray, each marching in his own time, and pulling in a different direction. Before we (that is, the whole of us, all ten in the parade) can get in step with the rest of the world, the various parts have to be brought into inner alliance. The mind must work with the heart, not against it; speech much echo thought; the hand must follow the eye...”

Worlds of Jewish Prayer, The Praying Masters of My Soul p. 23

And we learn to pray.

“At one level we pray with our physicality....Prayers are articulated by the physical organs of speech, and this is entirely proper, for we worship with the totality of our being...but words, the movements, the emotions, the hopes and the petitions that are the external characteristics of prayer are not its content—they are the vehicle in which it is borne.

The essence of prayer is an extremely subtle yet powerful energy by means of which an individual relates to the Divine that is beyond. The source of prayer, that aspect of our being from which it flows, is within the soul itself. Without the vehicles, without the outer forms of prayer, the essence tends to remain chaotic, incoherent; it is like the scattered light that fills a room, and not like a beam of light that traverses space and can pierce the gloom...

This organ, the prayer center of our being, must also learn... It too needs mirrors, of two kinds: the first in order discover and to recognize itself, to know its source and its power, [mirrored in the soul of every living and inanimate being];

and the second, in order that it can be aligned externally, that it may be in step with beings whose essence is praying perfectly...

Souls are veiled. It is said that were they to be revealed, the light would be so intense that we would no longer be able to see the phenomenal, the ‘real’ world. ... our task involves seeing that which is either invisible or is so bright that it would blind or kill us. How is this to be done? ...we can gain a glimpse of them by relating to them through... the commandments.

We do not see them unveiled, but rather, through the veil. Their light is partially revealed to us, and it illuminates and becomes a mirror of our own souls. And then, for an instant, we see the entire creation as myriad shimmering mirrors of God. He is in His heaven, and the world is filled with His glory. The world is His glory. Then we must pray with the angels.

The world shimmered with God's glory this afternoon, and during the Sanctification I did pray with the angels. I did not see them. I could not hear them, but I joined them in singing the music of the spheres. They sang perfectly, and I as usual, was out of tune.

This is the cosmic symphony. I am still out of step, but I am part of the parade."

Worlds of Jewish Prayer, The Praying Masters of My Soul, pp.25-7)

(the right amount of silence)

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The evening service. We can practice praying, learn to know the praying organ of our soul.

Sometimes our prayers, our silence is exalted, and sometimes it is mundane. And even the mundane is important.

Here is a quote from Heschel:

A small town was without a watch maker, so every once in a while, a watch maker would come to town and fix the watches that were there. Whenever he came, people brought him all the watches they had. Some brought watches that weren't functioning well, but the owners wound them every day and let them work. These watches were very easy to repair. However, the watches of people who didn't wind them, those were very difficult to repair."

Rabbi Salman Schacter-Shalomi, Wrapped in a Holy Flame, pp. 74-5

We will wind our watches. We will practice aligning our mouths with our thoughts with our intention and our emotions and our concentration and all our being, finding the mirrors of reflected light, finding the Holiness that is present in this time.

**Chant:**

**Ashray yoshvay vaytecha od y'hal'lucha**

יְהַלְלוּךָ, יוֹשְׁבֵי בֵיתְךָ עוֹד, אֲשֵׁרִי

Happy are they that dwell in Your house, they are ever praising Thee

(silence)

**Kadosh kadosh kadosh**

**Holy holy holy**

(silence)

**Va'anachnu korim, u'mishtachavim, u'modim**

**And we bend our knees, and bow down, and give thanks**

(silence)

This is our holy moment.

This is our continual work of perfection.

This is our movement toward the source and the root of our prayer.

This is our practice.