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By
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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hayyei Sarah
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“And Isaac brought her [Rebecca] into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebeccah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted for his mother (Bereishith 24:67).”

The great medieval Bible commentator, Rabbi David Kimhi (known popularly as Radak), noted: “Although three years had passed between Sarah’s death and Isaac’s marriage to Rebeccah, yet he was mourning her [Sarah], and was comforted in that [Rebeccah] was good as his mother was.”

It appears, then, that Isaac mourned his mother inconsolably for three years. But once Rebeccah entered his life, “he was comforted for his mother.” Rebeccah had those qualities and virtues which characterized Sarah, and Isaac finally found consolation from the loss of his mother.

What is consolation?

Let us first state what consolation does not accomplish: it does not bring back the dead. It does not change reality. The beloved person has died and cannot be replaced.

Consolation does not deny reality. Rather, it attempts to cope with death by providing hope for the future. Death is a fact of human existence. It is distressing to lose a loved one. It is possible to sink into a deep depression when grieving. Consolation attempts to redirect mourning into a positive, future-oriented direction. Yes, a loved one has died; yes, the pain is real. No, the deceased loved one cannot be brought back to life.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in a lecture in memory of his father, stated: “…It seems to me as if my father were yet alive, although four years have come and gone since his death. It is in a qualitative sense that I experience his nearness and spirit tonight…Our sages have said…the righteous are exalted in death more than in life. If time be measured qualitatively, we may understand how their influence lingers on after their death and why the past is eternally bound with the present.”

With the passage of time, the mourner comes to experience the presence of the deceased loved one with a “qualitative time-awareness.” The focus is shifted from daily interactions that used to take place with the deceased. Instead, the mourner gains a deeper sense of the qualities and virtues of the deceased. With the passage of time, the mourning mellows into a calmer, wiser appreciation of the life of the one who has passed on. The bitter pain of mourning is softened. Consolation sets in.

Apparently, Isaac was so distraught at the passing of his mother that he had trouble developing this “qualitative time-awareness.” Her death traumatized him, and he could not shake off his feelings of grief.

Let us remember the nature of the relationship between Sarah and her son, Isaac. She gave birth to him when she was already quite elderly. To her, Isaac was a miraculous gift from God. She must surely have doted over him and enjoyed every moment with him. When she perceived that Ishmael was taking advantage of Isaac, she compelled Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the household. Only Isaac was to be Abraham’s true heir and successor.

Sarah loved Isaac with a total love. Indeed, Isaac could not fail to realize that the only person in the world he could fully trust was his mother Sarah. Hagar and Ishmael were certainly not to be relied upon. After the Akeidah, Isaac must surely have had misgivings about trusting his father Abraham, who had raised a knife to his throat.

When Sarah died, Isaac felt very alone in the universe. There was no one who loved him with an unqualified love. There was no one who understood him fully. There was no one to whom he could turn for genuine consolation. So he mourned for three years. He felt lost and abandoned.

But even more painful than being unloved by anyone, Isaac had no one whom he himself loved with a full love. A loveless life is a tragic life, a life of perpetual mourning.

And then Rebeccah enters the scene. “And Rebeccah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she alighted from the camel…and she took her veil and covered herself (24:65).” Abraham’s servant explained to Isaac that Rebeccah had been chosen to become Isaac’s wife.

Instead of hesitating nervously, Isaac suddenly came to life. He was immediately impressed with Rebeccah’s modest and respectful behavior. This was a dramatic instance of love at first sight. Lonely Isaac now had love in his life again. Lonely

Rebeccah—and she must have been lonely coming to a new land to start a new life among people she did not know—saw in Isaac a meditative, sensitive man—a man worthy of her love.

Isaac was consoled on the loss of his mother. He saw in Rebeccah those special qualities that had characterized Sarah. More than that, he found in Rebeccah the love which had been absent from his life since Sarah's death. He was now able to deal with Sarah's death because he now had a future with Rebeccah. He could redirect his thoughts to moving his life forward instead of grieving for an irretrievable past.

I have often told mourners: You never get over the death of a loved one; but you learn to get through it. The deceased loved ones remain with us "qualitatively" as long as we live. We treasure our memories of their lives, and we carry those memories with us as we forge our ways into the future. We find consolation not by forgetting them, but by bringing them along with us every day of our lives.

We find consolation through the power of love, the blessing of loving and being loved.

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