Blessings for Life: Thoughts for Parashat Hayei Sara

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“And Abraham was old, well stricken in age, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.” (Bereishith 24:1)

This is a remarkable statement: God had blessed Abraham “bakol,” in all things. Yet, in his old age, it would seem that Abraham had hit a nadir in his life, that almost everything had gone wrong for him.

Yes, Abraham had been blessed with material wellbeing. But in so many other ways, he was surely not blessed “in all things.” He had just buried his beloved wife Sara and was a grieving widower. He had to purchase a burial place for her at an exorbitant price. Even though the people of the area had spoken with him in respectful terms, he realized that he could not depend on them for kindness or real friendship. Old Abraham remembered that he had exiled his beloved son Ishmael together with Hagar. He also realized that he only had one son in his household, Isaac, and Isaac was not married. Old Abraham had no grandchildren.

Why, then, does the Torah describe Abraham as having been blessed “bakol,” in all things?

Various rabbinic interpretations have been offered as to the meaning of “bakol.” Rashi notes that the numerical valued of “bakol” is the same as the word “ben”—son. So this was a reminder to Abraham that he had a son for whom a wife needed to be found. A midrashic statement has it that the word “bakol” was actually a name i.e. that Abraham had a daughter named “Bakol.” These interpretations are not very satisfying.

Perhaps we can better understand the meaning of this verse if we approach it in another way.

At this late stage in his life, Abraham would have been despondent. In spite of his material wealth, he must have felt alone, unloved and unfulfilled. He might well have brooded in self-pity. He was an old man with one bachelor son; the future

looked bleak. It was time to give up.

At this point, God blesses Abraham “bakol.” He reminds Abraham of the various times when God had used this word when speaking to Abraham. “And through you, all (kol) the families of the earth will be blessed” (12:3). “For all (kol) the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever” (13:15). “This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every (kol) male among you shall be circumcised” (17:10). In these, and other statements to Abraham (e.g. 17:8, 18:18, 21:12, 22:18), God had given Abraham a destiny, a covenant, a land, an assurance that his seed would be numerous and would be a blessing to the nations of the world.

When Abraham was old and despondent, God blessed Abraham by reminding him of God’s own promises to him. It was as if God told Abraham: your life is not over, you are not a failure, you have a future. Remember: I (God) promised that you will have numerous descendants who will be a blessing to the world. Remember: I (God) promised you and your descendants a special land. Remember: I (God) made a covenant with you. Remember the word “kol,” remember what it signifies. Shake out of your despair and lethargy. You have much work ahead of you. Your story is not over. On the contrary, now is the time to take heart and take action.

After the Torah informs us that Abraham was blessed “bakol,” it immediately reports that he devised a plan to find a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham was re-energized and realized that his life mission was not over, that he still had much to accomplish. The Torah goes on to inform us that Abraham remarried and had more children. Although Isaac was his “designated heir,” Abraham surely was involved in raising and teaching his other children.

When Abraham died, the Torah states: “And Abraham died in a good old age, an old man, full of years (25:8). The phrase “full of years” in Hebrew is “savei-ah,” which can also be translated as: satisfied, full of contentment. Abraham, in recalling the blessings that God had given him with the word “kol,” had regained his purpose in life, had lived his life in full all the way to the end.

In the book of Koheleth, we read: “The wise man, his eyes are in his head” (2:14). If our “eyes are in our head,” we are looking forward. What’s past is done and gone, there’s little point in brooding over past failures and disappointments. If we are to live wisely, we must be looking forward. What is our next challenge? What are our new goals? This is the blessing, then: to remember the promises and aspirations of our youth, and to keep looking ahead and renewing ourselves as

long as the Almighty grants us life.

Angel for Shabbat