The Two Lives of Sarah: Thoughts for Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hayyei Sarah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah (*shenei hayyei Sarah*)” (*Bereishith* 23:1).

After stating that Sarah was 127 years old when she died, the Torah repeats “these were the years of the life of Sarah.” Instead of seeing this as a redundancy, perhaps the Torah is alluding to something other than Sarah’s age.

The words *shenei Hayyei Sarah* could be translated “the two lives of Sarah” (*shenei* meaning two, rather than years of). The Torah is pointing to two aspects of Sarah’s life: Sarah as she was seen by others, and Sarah as she was within herself.

The Torah doesn’t tell us too much about Sarah’s life. She generally is described as a tag along with Abraham, who is the real hero. In almost all stories, Sarah is passive, even when Abraham twice tells her to pose as his sister rather than his wife thereby endangering herself to save him. She grows into a childless elderly woman, with her handmaid Hagar giving birth to a son—Ishmael—for Abraham.

But when conflict arises between Ishmael and Isaac, Sarah is no longer a passive bystander. She demands that Abraham banish Hagar and son, something Abraham very much did not want to do. God told Abraham: whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice. Sarah is vindicated. Her son Isaac will be Abraham’s one and only spiritual heir. We hear no more about Sarah until her death.

To the outside world, Sarah might have seemed timid, passive, entirely subservient to Abraham. But she harbored a dramatic inner strength unsuspected by others, even by Abraham. When it came to her beloved son, Isaac, Sarah was a lioness. This was not merely a reflection of motherly love, but a commitment to the future of her people. Abraham would have been happy with Ishmael as his successor but Sarah knew better: Isaac was the worthy heir. Abraham had to hear it directly from God:

listen to Sarah. If she tells you to banish Hagar and Ishmael, then do so. It is Isaac who is your true heir and successor.

When Sarah died, the Torah reports that Abraham came to eulogize and mourn for her (*lispod leSarah velivkota*) (23:2). Who came to the funeral? Who heard Abraham's words of eulogy? Abraham and Sarah were basically strangers in the land. They had one unmarried son, Isaac. Their nephew Lot disappeared from the scene long before. What words of eulogy would be relevant in the situation?

Answer: Abraham's eulogy was essentially given to himself. With Sarah's passing, he finally realized that Sarah wasn't simply a subservient participant in his life: she was in fact the vital force for his family's future. If Abraham was going to become a forefather of a great nation as God had promised, it was only through Sarah that this would come to pass. Abraham finally saw the "two lives" of Sarah—the compliant wife, and the princess (Sarah means princess) of his people. Without her, Abraham himself would have been an empty and forgotten old man.

Thank you Sarah.