Stages of Life: Thoughts for Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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Angel for Shabbat—Parashat Hayyei Sarah

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When the Torah records the death of Sarah, it states that she was then aged “a hundred years and twenty years and seven years.” Since the Torah repeats “years” each time (instead of simply stating one hundred twenty seven years), a rabbinic interpretation was given: “She was as beautiful at one hundred as at the age of twenty; and as sinless at twenty as at seven.” (See commentary of Rabbi Joseph Hertz.)

But perhaps the Torah is alluding to something else. We might gain insight by looking at our own photo albums.

Take a look at a picture of yourself when you were a child. Then look at another photo when you were in your twenties. And then look at a recent photo of yourself, or just look in the mirror. You are the same person in each of these images; and yet you also seem to be a different person at each stage.

When we were children, we lived day to day under the protection and guidance of our parents. We had little or no idea of how our lives would unfold—where we would live, who we would marry, or what career we would choose in the years ahead. In a sense, life was uncomplicated.

When we entered adulthood, we took on responsibilities. We decided on education, marriage, career, place to live and raise children etc. Life was no longer simple. We were not little children. We made decisions on our own.

When we grew older, we were entering a new stage in life. Our current photos may show us with grown children and grandchildren. The older we grow, the more of our lives are in the past rather than in the future. We are not children; we may no longer be at the peak of our active years; we can look back from the mountain of time at what we did—and did not—accomplish in our lives.

When the Torah records Sarah’s death, it is actually reviewing stages in her life. As a child of seven, she was being raised in a pagan family in Ur Kasdim. In her innocence, she could not possibly have imagined how her life would be transformed when she grew older. As she matured, she married Abraham and joined him in a remarkable mission that changed human history. They left the land of their births and started a new life in Canaan—a Promised Land. The childless couple taught others to worship the One God and to live righteous, compassionate lives. The Midrash states that Abraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.

In old age, Sarah remarkably gave birth to a son, Isaac, who was to become heir to Abraham's teachings and blessings. She could now look back at the mission of her life and sense fulfillment in her work with Abraham. She could also take satisfaction in her son who would go on to make his own mark in history.

Although Sarah was the same person from childhood to old age, she was very different at the various stages of life. She died when she was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years—each of the "years" signifying a new stage in life. Don't we all go through various stages in life? Aren't we all the "same person" throughout our lifetimes; but aren't we also different?