

Chayei Sarah The Life of Sarah Love at First Sight
Torah: Genesis 23:1-25:18
Haftarah: I Kings 1:1-31
Brit Chadashah: Matthew 1:1-17

In this passage, we learn that Isaac was 37 years old when his mother died (23:1). This portion deals with three main themes: Abraham's burial of Sarah, his servant going to get Rebekah, and his marriage to Keturah when he was 137 years old.

Two things before we launch ourselves into the contents of the portion. Narratives in the Bible are full of time gaps and we are not usually told how long they lasted. However, when people's ages are given, we can determine how old they were when major events happened in their lives. Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born. He was 137 when Sarah died, so Isaac was 37 years old when he lost his mom. Abraham married Keturah when he was 137 years old (at least) and lived for another 38 years with Keturah.

Isaac was 75 when his father died and Ishmael was 85. Neither Keturah's age or her sons ages are given, because they were not part of the main narrative. Isaac and Ishmael buried their father beside Sarah, so there was no hostility between them. We are not told when Hagar died or where she was buried and we are only given a brief description of both the descendants of Keturah and of Ishmael. Ishmael was 85 when his father died and lived for another 52 years. He died at the age of 137. Isaac was 127 years when his half brother died.

Once Sarah died, Abraham had to secure a place to bury her. He was a nomadic shepherd farmer and did not really own any land in Canaan. At this time, the region was under Hittite control, so Abraham had to negotiate with them in order to purchase a burial plot. He approached the Hittite elders who were sitting at the gates of Hebron.

They were trying to establish a kinship bond with Abraham when they told him he could bury his wife anywhere on Hittite land (23:6). Abraham did not want this kinship bond and asked them to speak to Ephron so he could buy the cave of Machpelah along with the grove that surrounded it (23:17). Ephron tried to give the cave and the grove to Abraham and thus establish a kinship bond with him. When Abraham declines and wants to buy it (no kinship bond), Ephron is insulted and sets a fairly high price for the land (23:15).

When he says what is 400 shekels between you and me, he is expressing anger, but Abraham does not back down. He buries his wife without having to establish a kinship bond with the Hittites. Their control of the region as overlords was in decline and they were likely looking for powerful allies.

Next comes one of the longest narrative stories in the Bible and it contains some customs we are no longer used to. Abraham instructs his servant to go to Charan and get a wife for Isaac. He is told not to let Isaac marry a Canaanite or leave the region to get a wife on his own. Arranged marriages were common at this time, so a large entourage was to accompany the servant to Charan. In order for the servant to swear and oath there was a ritual which we thankfully no longer practice. He was told to put his hand under Abraham's thigh (24:2, 9).

Now the Bible never minces words but it uses traditional euphemisms to describe what otherwise might be considered rude. In modern lingo, he was asked to grab Abraham's crotch as he swore the oath. If he is unable to find a wife, he is released from the oath (24:8).

He loads up the considerable presents and heads for Charan, which is also called the city of Nachor. He arrives and lets the camels rest near the community well. He prays that YHVH will cause the woman who offers him a drink and gives water to the camels, to be the future wife of Isaac (24:12-15). Rebekah shows up and waters the camels. There were obviously watering troughs near the well.

He waits to speak until she has finished and then asks to be lodged in her home. We are told that she is beautiful and also is a virgin—it specifies that she has not had sexual relations with any man (24:16). She goes home to announce to her brother Laban that Abraham's servant has come (looking for a wife for Isaac). Her father was likely already dead.

The servant retells the story of his encounter with Rebekah and we learn that he put a ring in her nose and golden bracelets on her wrists. He is asking for permission to take Rebekah to marry Isaac, which is what the expression turning to the right or the left means. Laban gives his permission for Rebekah to wed Isaac and the servant gives rich presents to Rebekah, her mother and her brother.

Laban wants the entourage to stay awhile, probably in the hopes of getting more presents, but the servant wants to leave right away. He is allowed to leave, once Rebekah agrees. Her family blesses her and she travels to Canaan with Abraham's servant. She and Isaac are wed (which is what taking her into his mother's tent means) and Isaac loves her and is consoled about the loss of his mother.

Now he has settled Isaac, Abraham takes another wife and she gives him six more sons. Abraham lives for another 38 years and we are not told what happened to Keturah or to her sons. Isaac and Ishmael have their own camps and they come together once more to bury their father.

A brief genealogy is given for Ishmael. There is no indication, either in the Bible or in history that Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs. Ishmael lives for another 47 years after the death of his father and dies at the age of 137.

Many of their customs appear strange to us and we are not given much detail about the story of Abraham's servant and his quest for Rebekah. A knowledge of the history and customs of the time can help us fill in some of the gaps. We can also get a broader picture of what was going on when we figure out how old some of the people were when the events occurred.

This portion is one of the only love stories in the Bible and as we look at the life of Isaac, we learn that he was the only one of the three patriarchs who was monogamous. He lived a peaceful life and did not have any of the dangerous adventures that Abraham and Jacob had. You do not have to live a perpetual soap opera in order to walk with YHVH. You just have to face what comes your way with both faith and obedience. Walking with YHVH is the most exciting adventure that anyone can have as we travel through this life as pilgrims and strangers, on our way home to our Father's House. Those who lead quiet lives are just as spiritual as those who seem to live on a perpetual roller coaster.

Sermon: First Winter Series: Taking Time to Heal.

Passage:” ***Follow straight paths with your feet, in order that what makes you limp, is made better and not worse.***” (Hebrews 12:13)

It is not always an easy thing to walk with the Messiah and sometimes, along the way, we may be wounded. Sometimes the old wounds we came to faith with will also cause us to stumble. But it is how we react to the happenstances of our life that will determine both our spiritual strength and the enduring joy YHVH wants to bring into our lives.

I came to faith 52 years ago and I have quite the dramatic, Hollywood style testimony. While I have been delivered from the darkness of my former life, as a young believer, I was warned that I would find strength in my weaknesses (2 Corin. 12:8-10), meaning that not all of them would go away. When Paul came to faith and YHVH gave him his sight back, he had poor vision, which was the thorn in his flesh. It was something that annoyed him and slowed him down, but he was always able to soldier on. He repeatedly asked YHVH to heal him, but even though he could see, his vision remained weak for the rest of his life. He dictated all of his epistles (Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; Philemon 19).

The Galatians even wanted to offer him their eyes, if it were possible (Gal. 4:15). Most likely, Paul dictated his letters to Silas. All of our problems and weaknesses do not have to go away in order for us to walk in faith and obedience with our Messiah. Paul encountered considerable spiritual resistance, but he never let his problems and struggles define how he walked with YHVH.

It is our job to set straight paths for our feet, even if we have little or no control over what comes crashing through our lives. We also may have to compensate for that which causes us to stumble. Paul did not see well enough to write his letters, so he found someone reliable whom he could dictate to. My perfume allergy really cramps my style and I usually wear a filtered mask and I have both a furnace hepa filter and one that is portable which I usually use in the living room.

I realize that it is my job to take precautions. I also understand that people who wear scent are not really trying to kill me. My allergy reactions are getting less intense and now I am taking CBD oil and it is helping my reactions to settle down. I will never be comfortable around scent, but I want to minimize its impact on my life and ministry. The doctors say they do not know what caused my massive blood clot or my two episodes of heart failure, but these can be triggered by allergic reactions, so I live a virtually scent free existence, often in the safe exile of my home. I will tell people when their scent triggers a reaction, but shots of adrenaline keep the reaction at bay until the stinky ones are no longer in my house.

I know that at shul, I will always get perfumed, but I am grateful to all of you for making an effort to come to shul perfume free. Stinky laundry soap counts as perfume, as do scented hair products and stinky underarm. I am so glad that my reactions no longer last three days and are usually over within several hours.

G-d has not healed my scent allergy, but He has given me enough wisdom to make adequate compensations, so that I can still carry on building the shul until it reaches critical mass which will allow me to become emeritus, cause I ain't getting any younger.

Well, what do straight or righteous paths look like? It means that our calling is to be salt and light as we fill our lives with the fruit of the Spirit and weed out all the works of the flesh, whenever they rear their ugly heads. Under the Nazis and in the former communist bloc, believers were frequently jailed for their faith and too many of them lost their lives because they refused to abandon their faith.

The Bible says that there is a time and a purpose to everything which happens under the heavens (Eccl. 3:1-8). Our biblical faith can adapt to anything which tries to block our walk with YHVH and no matter what He allows into our lives, He will always equip even the most excruciating struggles with a way of escape, so we can bear it. He can do so much for those who are struggling with drugs or alcohol (I Cor. 6:9-11), even if they remain an alcoholic or an addict for the rest of their lives. There is also hope for prostitutes and for victims of any kind of abuse, sexual, physical or otherwise.

YHVH will help us to stop indulging our woundedness as we learn to make healthy choices and are no longer completely defeated by our wounding. This also applies to people who have mental health issues and who need meds to function. Depression can be a soul killer and they say PTSD never really goes away. After suffering in the trenches of WWI, some young soldiers never really got over what they had experienced and had to deal with flashbacks for the rest of their lives.

Our holocaust survivors will not be with us for much longer and many of them struggle with nightmares and often find it emotionally exhausting to talk about their experiences. When Patti and I still lived in Calgary, she had a favourite aunt who we would visit with. Aunt Lillian lost her husband too early and when we came to visit, she would often talk about him and weep because she missed him so much. We didn't mind and she knew it. All of her stories were interesting and telling them drained most of the poison and pain from these memories.

Getting things off our chest and even going for counselling can be part of the healing process G-d wants us to follow. Said another way, sometimes we need to talk about painful things until they no longer cause us pain. The Psalms are full of this kind of positive self talk and it should be a major element in our prayers as we talk things over with the Saviour.

The power of forgiveness can help us not be pulled back in anger and resentment and a major part of forgiveness is learning how to forgive ourselves. We may stumble because we are wounded and sometimes some of the pain will always be with us, but it is how we remember and talk about the wounds that will bring us strength and healing.

Healing should both be considered a total release from an injury or an illness and as a means to limit the negative impact which these unwanted guests have on our lives. When G-d does not release us from the pain and the injury, He will always help us to deal with it redemptively, so that even in these weaknesses we can be strong. How are your reactions doing? Are you letting the Messiah make you strong in your weaknesses? Paul found a way and lived a very productive life and had a very successful ministry.

We need to learn to hear from the L-rd, so that we do not keep whining at Him to heal us, when He intends to use our weaknesses to make us stronger. He wants our lives to be all about Him and His Word – and the coming Kingdom. Focusing on anything else is just a colossal waste of time and energy. What are you focused on?

Now sometimes people are not ready to let go of their addictions and their woundings and have to roll around for quite some time in the mud of their self pity and anger. I have known people who have remained angry for most of their lives and they are so full of bitterness and anger, that they do not have any room left to heal and actually become healthy. I have heard of a young man who was in a wheel chair and instead of learning to handle this unwanted disability, he yelled and screamed and threw things at everybody. I think he has been removed from more than one group home because of his violent behaviour.

When we are wounded, we should be careful not to allow our behaviour make our situation worse. I have met severely handicapped people who are a joy to spend time with. Even though my brother-in-law is battling cancer, he remains positive for the most part and is so grateful for everyone's prayers on his behalf. I am not saying that we should always see the silver lining on every cloud that barges into our lives and I am not talking to you about the power of positive thinking. We do not praise G-d as a means to get Him to deliver us from our troubles. What we focus on and how we respond, will have a greater impact on our lives than any cross we are given to bear.

I do not enjoy being sick and recovering from a meter long blood clot and a severed tendon has not been an endless party full of fun and laughter. If G-d would heal me from my perfume allergy, I would be ecstatic, but I do not have to wait for anything to happen before I can become ecstatic in the Messiah.

We possess eternal life in our Messiah. His kingdom is coming. Our lives are full of His protection and His provision. He helps us to heal to the point that the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune no longer trouble our daily walk with the resurrected King. We will rarely have much control over what stumbles into our lives or over the horrible things that are happening around the world. We need to keep praying for our Ukrainian friends as winter approaches. We also need to pray that the war will soon be over. The global supply of food is suffering because of droughts, floods and wars. There will almost certainly be new and toxic pandemics just around the corner. If we relate to all of this from a position of faith and obedience then our lives will not be sunk before it is our turn to rest with the ancestors.

In his advice to the young Timothy Paul said that you should never put someone (anoint someone) as a leader before they are ready. He also said we should not participate in the sins of others. It is our job to keep our own spiritual noses clean (I Tim. 5:22). Even severely wounded or traumatized people can set straight (righteous) paths for their feet and receive grace to help in our times of need.

I am not saying that we should wear our emotional or physical scars like medals. We should recognize and adopt G-d's healing and coping strategies because there is no other safe place to live. In Yeshua, we do not want to go from bad to worse. We want to walk in the light and be salty, even when the strait and narrow path gets very bumpy. Solomon says that a wise man sees trouble coming and hides while fools pass on and are punished (Prov. 22:3).

If you know you are going to have a bad day or one where the pain is going to intensify, do what you need to do so that you are not dragged down by the enemy of your souls. Sometimes hiding out is just as wise as facing things head on. When I have had enough or when I am recovering from another one of my bad days (even Rabbis have them), I take a few steps back and allow myself to recover and to refuel. How about you?

Spiritual success in the Messiah is not measured by where you walk or even by what you are walking through. It is only measured by how you walk. Setting straight paths for our feet is a choice we need to keep on making if we want to keep on avoiding those carnal rabbit trails that our flesh and our wounding want to lead us down. We are not called to ask for lives free from all danger and suffering. Our call is to ask for a life that sticks to the straight and narrow, no matter where our lives take us.

I want to get strong spiritually and I want to recover spiritual strength when I am wounded or made lame by some of the horrors of life that our planet is starting to fill up with – again. I hate being perfumed, but I love spending time with people and I love all of our children. It is a small price to pay, if I take care of myself and take time to recover when I have an allergic reaction.

Once when the Messiah and the disciples went through a pretty intense time of ministry, He took them up into the hills to rest and to recover. This is also why observing the Sabbath is so important because we all need at least one day of rest. My sleep in, lazy day is Sunday. My day to dig into the Word and join in on prayer and worship is Saturday. We all need sleep in lazy days if we want to regain our strength and not come apart at the seams.

Sometimes we do not know how to set straight paths for our feet and that usually means it is time to sit down and rest. The Bible is a spiritual workbook for holiness and how we walk will determine the quality of our holiness and also determine its longevity. I have seen too many people come to faith, only to crash and burn in times of trial or temptation. Sometimes we will all go through stressful times of great duress, like those who survived the war and the prison camps. They were often beaten, starved and subject to great worry for their loved ones who became soldiers.

As an older person, I realize that I have slowed down, but I will never just sit down and quit making straight paths for my feet. I want to serve the Messiah, either until He takes me home or returns to set up His New Kingdom on a new earth and under a new heavens. Good folk will come into our lives, along with those we could do without. I never want to let other people tell me how to set straight paths for my feet when I am up to my neck in alligators, trying to make it through the swamp.

I have been severely wounded by too many people, but that is par for the course if you want to have an effective ministry. It was not easy keeping 56 troubled young people in our home as we also raised our own two children. I have been misunderstood and maligned, but I will always keep my feet walking on straight paths. I am not out for revenge and I do not want to harbour anger or resentment towards anyone. I may have to do some serious soul maintenance to keep this from happening and I may limp and be wounded for longer than I want to be.

Straight paths are our calling. So is learning to be strong in our weaknesses. I do not ever want to wound anyone or cause them to stumble off the straight and narrow. But sometimes we just have to pull back, keep our own nose clean and not be pulled into some else's nightmare where they are letting their woundedness generate great hate and bitter resentment, because somebody did them wrong. Even when I am wounded or on recovery mode, as long as I am setting straight paths for my wounded feet, I can still participate in Tikkun Olam (the healing of the world). May you all be blessed with great peace and rest as you set straight paths for your feet. Shabbat Shalom and Shavua Tov, campers.