

Torah Weekly

November 8-14, 2020
21-27 Cheshvan, 5781

Torah reading:
Chayei Sarah: Genesis 23:1 - 25:18
Haftarah: Kings I 1:1-31

PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

Life Is a Double-Decker Cave

Two people went exploring and reached a swamp. The first was a man of means; he radioed for a helicopter, and five minutes later was on the other side, the crease in the pants of his safari suit intact. He even took some photographs while he was flying over (he was a man with an avid interest in the sciences), which made a modest but significant contribution to the field of swamp study. The second person struggled across on foot. He got stuck. He got lost. He fended off poisonous snakes and other creatures too vile to mention. Twenty years later he emerged, calloused, begrimed, with a pronounced limp and the stink of the swamp in his skin. He went on to write the two national bestsellers, *Surviving in a Swamp Environment* and *The Unknown Treasures of the Swamp*. He directed both of the movie adaptations, and became the world's foremost consultant for environmentalist groups and road-building companies. He established an international corporation which mined swamps for high-grade diamonds, whose presence was indicated by a certain type of slime on the surface—a technique he perfected based on his experiences.

One of the most famous pieces of real estate on earth is the Cave of Machpelah (also known as the "Cave of the Patriarchs") in Hebron. As recounted in chapter 23 of Genesis, Abraham purchased the cave and surrounding field as a burial place for his wife, Sarah, making it the

first plot of land in the Holy Land to become the legal possession of the Jewish people. *Machpelah* means "doubled" in Hebrew, and two reasons are given for this name. One reason is that four prestigious couples are buried there: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah. The second reason given by the commentaries is that it had two chambers one above the other, "like a house with a loft above it."

Paradoxically, the Torah section (Parshah) that opens with the account of Sarah's death and burial is called Chayei Sarah, "The Life of Sarah." Indeed, the Kabbalistic work *Midrash Hane'elam* interprets the very verse describing Sarah's passing—*And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan* (Genesis 23:2)—as an allusion to the soul's journey through physical life. (*In this approach, Sarah ("Princess") alludes to the soul; Kiryat Arba ("Town of Four") are the four elements comprising the physical body; Hebron ("attachment") is the fusion of matter and spirit that is life; Canaan ("commerce") refers to the soul's "investment" into physical life for the sake of gleaning spiritual "profit" from the experience.*) And the chassidic masters explain that life is a double-decker cave—"a house with a loft above it."

Some arrive at the journey endowed with resources: a lofty soul, a refined character, a genius mind. These are

the *tzaddikim* (perfectly righteous), who take the helicopter ride over the swamp of life. They do much good, enriching our knowledge and inspiring us with their bird's-eye view of reality.

Then there are the sorry slobs who get stuck, who get lost, who get begrimed and beslimed in their journey through the swamp. These are the *baalei teshuvah* (masters of return), who emerge from their decades of wandering and misadventure with knowledge, skills and profits that far exceed those of their loftier brethren.

Life is a double-decker cave. If you ended up on the upper story, consider yourself lucky. If you find yourself on the lower level, consider yourself luckier. By Rabbi Yanki Tauber

Remaining Focused

Isaac was forbidden to leave the Holy Land, because he was consecrated to G-d when Abraham offered him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. Abraham, however, wasn't willing to consider a Canaanite girl for Isaac, so he sent his faithful servant Eliezer to his own hometown of Aram Naharaim (modern-day northern Syria) to find a suitable girl for Isaac. Eliezer successfully discharged this mission and returned to Canaan with Rebecca.

The Torah relates the entire account of Eliezer's mission in great detail, repeating entire segments of the story several times. Generally speaking, the Torah is "stingy" with words; many laws of the Torah are derived from a seemingly

superfluous word, or even an extra letter. The Midrash therefore concludes that “beautiful are the words of the servants of the Patriarchs more than the Torah of their children.”

What is so special about the “words of the servants of the Patriarchs”? What is the lesson the Torah wants us to derive from Eliezer’s mission?

One characteristic of Eliezer’s mission which is quite blatant is his tremendous focus. When he arrived in Aram Naharaim, he didn’t first go around town to see the local attractions. In fact, he didn’t even check in to the local Hilton to rest from his journey. Instead, he went straight to work, immediately

starting the search for Isaac’s future wife. Even after he found Rebecca and deemed her worthy for his master’s son, he still didn’t allow himself to relax. When he was invited to Rebecca’s home, and the entire family sat down to eat, he proclaimed, “I will not eat until I have spoken my words . . . I am Abraham’s servant . . .”

Because he was so focused on his duty, constantly aware that he was merely an envoy of Abraham, he realized that he had all of Abraham’s miraculous powers at his disposal. Therefore, instead of hiring a private investigator to find the best and most virtuous girl in town, he went to the well and beseeched G-d for a sign from heaven which would identify the right maiden. And he succeeded. When Rebecca’s family requested that she be given several months to prepare herself for marriage—a seemingly reasonable demand—Eliezer responded: “Do not delay me . . . Send me away, and I will go to my master.” And he got his way. He didn’t feel compelled to comply with societal norms or standards; he knew that his mission would succeed even if he were asking for the impossible.

We, too, are emissaries. We were sent to this world by the Almighty to create a marriage, to bring together two opposites—Creator and creation. We can and will accomplish this task, because we go not with our own powers, but with the G-dly powers which G-d invested within us in order to accomplish this feat. We can transform ourselves, our families and acquaintances, and indeed all of creation into spiritual entities, suitable to be G-d’s bride. We must, however, always remain focused on the mission. We must always have proper priorities, always remembering what is really important in life.

This is the lesson we learn from Eliezer, a lesson the Torah deems worthy of repeating several times.

By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg

Sunday, November 8, 2020 --- 21 Cheshvan, 5781

Passing of R. David Ibn Zimra (1574)

R. David ibn Zimra, known by the acronym Radvaz, was a great rabbi and scholar who led the Jewish communities of Egypt and Safed for sixty years. Radvaz was held in high esteem by his contemporaries, and is the author of 3000 responsa, covering a vast array of topics. Among his more famous students are R. Isaac Luria (the Ari) and R. Betzalel Ashkenazi (author of *Shitah Mekubetztes*). It is said that Elijah the Prophet revealed himself to him.

Monday, November 9, 2020 --- 22 Cheshvan, 5781

Lisbon Earthquake (1755)

A great earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal, destroying much of the city including the courthouse of the Inquisition.

Tuesday, November 10, 2020 --- 23 Cheshvan, 5781

Hasmonean Holiday (137 BCE)

In Talmudic times, Cheshvan 23 was commemorated as the day on which the stones of the altar which were defiled by the Greeks were removed from the Holy Temple.

Wednesday, November 11, 2020 --- 24 Cheshvan, 5781

Passing of R. Avraham Azulai (1643)

R. Avraham was a famous kabbalist who resided in Hebron, Jerusalem, and Gaza. He authored *Chesed L’Avraham*, and was the great-grandfather of R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai (the Chida).

R. Avraham’s signature had the appearance of a ship, to commemorate the time when the ship he was traveling on capsized along with all his possessions, and he was miraculously saved (*Shem Hagedolim*).

Thursday, November 12, 2020 --- 25 Cheshvan, 5781

Passing of R. Efraim Eliezer Yolles (1988)

R. Efraim Eliezer was an influential rabbi in Philadelphia who enjoyed a close relationship with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, with whom he corresponded regularly. He would often pay a visit to the Rebbe in conjunction with Sukkot, Passover, and/or Shavuot, quoting the Talmudic passage, “One must greet his teacher during the holiday.”

Friday, November 13, 2020 --- 26 Cheshvan, 5781

Passing of R. Refael of Hamburg (1803)

R. Refael was the chief rabbi of the three sister cities of Altona, Hamburg and Wandsbek in Germany for twenty-three years. These three important Jewish centers were known as *AHU*, after their Hebrew abbreviations, and were the residence of many famous scholars and personalities, such as R. Jonathan Eibeschutz, R. Tzvi Ashkenazi, R. Jacob Emden, and Glueckel of Hameln.

Shabbat, November 14, 2020 --- 27 Cheshvan, 5781

Flood ends (2104 BCE)

On the 27th of Cheshvan of the year 1657 from creation (2104 BCE) "the earth dried" (Genesis 8:14) completing the 365-day duration of the great flood that wiped out all life on earth save for the eight human beings and the animals (two of each species) in Noah's ark; on this day G-d commanded Noah to "Come out of the ark" and repopulate, settle and civilize the earth.