

SIDRA OF THE WEEK: חיי שרה

1. When Avrohom returns from the *Akkaydoh*, he finds that his wife Soroh has suddenly died. She was 127 years old. Avrohom sets about acquiring a burial vault that shall remain in the possession of his family for all time, and he has set his heart on that burial vault in which Oddom and Chavvoh are buried. To this end, he approaches the Chittite people who at that time live in that part of the country, and he asks to purchase the Cave of Machpayloh from its owner, Efron. Efron, who is suddenly raised to prominence amid his own people because of this connexion with Avrohom, the acknowledged “Prince of G-d,” would much rather give away his field as a gift to Avrohom (because then, according to Chittite custom, the field would revert back to him on Avrohom’s death — at an enhanced value as a burial vault because of the prestige of Avrohom and his wife Soroh being buried there) but Avrohom indicates that he wishes to buy the field outright, in perpetuity. Eventually, Efron agrees to sell his field with the Cave to Avrohom as is his wish — but at a price: 400 silver *Shekollim* (a vast sum for those times, equivalent to approximately three million pounds today).

2. After the burial of Soroh, Avrohom’s thoughts turn back to the *Akkaydoh*, and to what would have been had he been allowed to actually carry out the command of HaShem as Avrohom had originally understood it ... If Yitzchok would have been married with children, however, then at least the future would have been assured: through children, the teachings of Avrohom and Yitzchok would have been continued. And now, who knows? Maybe HaShem will command such a sacrifice again, only this time for real. It was thoughts such as these that prompted Avrohom to consider the need to now find a suitable wife for Yitzchok.

3. Avrohom was aware that he had been able to accomplish so much because he had had a wife like Soroh as his life’s partner. If Yitzchok is to continue along the same way, he too will need a wife with the same noble qualities. He reasoned, therefore, that it would be from among the people that had produced Soroh that a suitable wife for his son would also be found. Avrohom himself could not be away from his on-going sacred task of teaching and preaching — all the time, people came from far and wide to learn from him, to experience his great teachings. The house of Avrohom was quite a landmark. He could not absent himself for what could be a long time. Also, HaShem had directly told him to leave that land of Arram: would it be right to go back, even temporarily? Furthermore, because of his very great care and concern for his son and the future that he represented, he might not be satisfied that *anyone* would be good enough for Yitzchok. For all these reasons, and others besides, Avrohom came to the conclusion that he himself could not go on this all-important venture. Instead, he calls for his loyal servant and instructs him in this mission of paramount importance. This man, the most trusted of Avrohom’s household and who himself passed on to great numbers of people the teachings of his master, would choose the wife of his son Yitzchok.

4. Avrohom tells his loyal servant that two conditions are of the greatest importance: Firstly, she must be of the same people as Avrohom himself, and not of the Kenaanites and their kind. Even though Avrohom has lived amongst them for many years now, and many of these clans had accepted his teachings and renounced their idol-worship, Avrohom knew that the inherent good qualities of the people that had produced his wife Soroh would far outshine any false ideologies or pagan culture that might be the accustomed lifestyle of the as yet untrained girl who would be Yitzchok's wife. In other words, if the character is good and noble, it will eventually transform one's lifestyle, but the converse is not always true. Not always can a newly assumed lifestyle or pattern of noble behaviour transform one's very being straightaway. And secondly, she must be willing to come to live in the land that HaShem has promised to Avrohom and his descendants, for his son Yitzchok is not to leave this Holy Land.
5. The servant promises on oath that he will abide by the wishes of Avrohom his master. Taking with him ten camels and some men from the household of Avrohom, with gifts and precious things (as befits the emissaries of a great and wealthy man like Avrohom) for the family of the girl who will be willing to come away from there, the caravan of camels and people travels northwards, to Arram, the Land of the Two Rivers.
6. When he arrives at Chorrion, it is towards evening, and he waits at the well of water on the outskirts of the town. Soon, the women and girls of the town will be coming out to draw water for the needs of their menfolk returning from their day's work in the fields. It is then that the servant realizes that the task that he has been set is indeed formidable. Mindful as he is that he is in fact to choose the future mother of the Jewish People, he knows that he cannot rely on his own efforts and he prays to HaShem for His help and guidance, in the merit of his master Avrohom.
7. HaShem hears his prayers and, even before the servant has quite finished making his request, he is answered: Rivkah, the daughter of Besu'el (a nephew of Avrohom) appears. In response to the servant's request for but a sip of water from her pitcher, she gives him and his men generously to drink from the water she has drawn and then she proceeds to water the camels which make up the caravan of the servant and the men with him.
8. This clear demonstration of Rivkah's kind-heartedness and considerate feeling for the tired travellers convinces the servant — at first amazed at how exactly his prayers to HaShem had been answered — that she will be the worthy life's companion to Yitzchok the son of Avrohom, whose house is founded on kindness to others. Even without asking who is her family, to ascertain whether or not she is of suitable family background (as stipulated by Avrohom) the servant knows that HaShem has answered his prayer. He comes to the house of Besu'el and recounts the events that HaShem has brought about, so that Rivkah's family, too, are aware how the Hand of HaShem has made things happen as they have. He asks that Rivkah be allowed to come away with him to be married to Yitzchok, as she herself wishes.
9. With her family's agreement obtained at last (they had wanted to delay the marriage for some time) and with the blessing of Lovvon, Rivkah's brother, they take their leave. Yitzchok and Rivkah are married, and that spiritual bliss and material blessing that had

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departed from the house of Avrohom when Soroh died, returns with Rivkah's coming as the wife of Yitzchok: a worthy successor to the righteous Soroh.

10. After this, Avrohom marries again Keturoh, and there are born to him other children who are destined to become famous and mighty tribes. They too will eventually have a part in spreading the knowledge of HaShem among the peoples of the world. Avrohom's death, at the age of 175 years, is reported in this week's Sidra. (He is buried by his sons Yitzchok and Yishmo'el near to Soroh in the Cave of Machpayloh, near to present-day Chevron.) There are also enumerated the twelve clans of his son Yishmo'el, who died aged 137 years.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra חיי שרה please go to HAFTORAS.