



Parashat Chayei Sara November 3, 2018 - 25th of Cheshvan, 5779

This issue of the FJMC Unraveller, a weekly commentary explaining the aspects of Jewish history, ideas and thought, is being sent to you by the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs. We hope you enjoy it and find it intellectually challenging. If you wish to 'opt-out' of receiving the Unraveller, please click on the link at the bottom. Your congregants can subscribe, without cost, by clicking on the following link <http://fjmc.org/content/fjmc-unraveller>.

Dear FJMC leaders and supporters,

Like many of you, I have been struggling with the aftermath of the massacre last Shabbat at Tree of Life Synagogue, during which I just happened to be co-leading services with a number of our brothers from the KIO Region and the Tri-State (greater Pittsburgh) Region at their joint biennial men's retreat. A number of the retreat participants both thanked me for the words of Torah that I shared during our weekend together and then implored me to raise my voice as we all seek ways to respond to this tragedy.

To that end, this week and through the coming months, I will be revisiting and adapting Torah commentaries that I composed during my years of tenure as Rabbinic Fellow for the Jewish Theological Seminary's Florida Region Office. I look forward to your feedback as I strive to make my words and the words of our tradition relevant, compelling and meaningful to all of you.

HaMakom Yenachem - May the Everpresent One bring comfort to those mourning in Pittsburgh and Louisville and beyond.

Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director

Parashat Chayei Sara - Genesis 23:1 - 25:18

ויצא יצחק לשוח בשדה לפנות ערב, אין שיחה אלא תפלה, שנאמר (תהלים לב):
תפלה לעני כי יעטוף ולפני ה' ישפוך שיחו. וכן הוא אומר (שם נה): שרב ובוקר
ועהרים אשיחה וטל:

Genesis Rabbah 60:14

And Isaac went out 'la-suach' in the field toward evening . . . (Gen. 24:63): By 'sichah,' prayer is meant, as it says, A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours out his

plea before Hashem (Psalm 102:1); and thus too it says, Evening, morning, and noon, I plead and moan . . . (Psalm 55:18).

Uncertainty, and the anxiety it produces within us, presents one of the greatest psychological challenges we face in life. Our ancient Sages addressed ambiguities in the Torah and in life by seeking wisdom from connections between those worlds. This midrash reveals how the early rabbis understood prayer as a cathartic response to the travails that test our faith and how such an outpouring can transform our reality.

The infinitive verb *la-suach* appears only once in the entire Hebrew Bible, and even today scholars debate how exactly to translate it. While some contend that it means “to walk,” others (such as the anonymous Sage behind this midrash) suggest that it means “to meditate,” basing their opinions on inferences from similar terms found in devotional contexts such as those quoted above. Combining those two definitions offers insight into this Rabbinic view of Isaac’s plight and ours.

Isaac went out walking/meditating literally at dusk and figuratively towards darkness. After meeting Rebekah there, the Torah notes that “he found comfort after his mother’s death” (Gen. 24:67). Whether or not Isaac entered the open space of “the field” seeking consolation, he meets his beloved in that place and returns with her to begin their new life together. As a result of the physical and spiritual act of leaving a place of mourning, Isaac has an encounter that changes the course of his life. That explanation, though, lacks the drama that the verses from Psalms add to this Rabbinic interpretation.

In searching the entire Tanakh for terms similar to *la-suach*, the Sage who composed this midrash chose the two instances in which *sichah* refers to a plea for help and for deliverance from crisis. This midrash, however, does not quote key parts of those parallel texts, perhaps in order to invite the reader to look more closely at what they describe.

Each psalm depicts the wrenching cries of a desperate soul whom God protects from mortal danger. Verses 2–3 of Psalm 102 illustrate the lament of one who is feeling God’s great distance: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry reach you. Do not hide your face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.” The subsequent passage demonstrates the efficacy of such a plea: “As for me, I will call upon God; and Hashem will save me . . . He has saved my soul in peace from the battle that was against me” (Ps. 55:17, 19).

With this expanded reading of Isaac’s walking/meditation, the episode of meeting Rebekah in the field at dusk becomes one paradigm for the rabbinic understanding of prayer. I do not present this interpretation naively unaware of how much bad things happen to good people but rather as a rabbi who knows that God did not answer the prayers of parents whose sick children I watched die of leukemia and brain cancer. I present this interpretation not because I believe God responds with a “yes” to every request uttered but because I have felt God’s embrace when I have summoned the strength to cry in moments of agonizing pain.

This coming weekend, as Jewish communities across North America and beyond gather for #SolidarityShabbat, let us all find ways to connect with others in prayer in order to honor the victims at Tree of Life, who were attacked while in the midst of praying together. Perhaps we will find ourselves, like Isaac, pouring out our hearts and unexpectedly finding comfort with others doing the same.

This week's Haftarah commentary was written by Rabbi Andy Shugerman, Executive Director of FJMC.