

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH - GOING HOME

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Going Home¹

And Avraham expired and died at a good old age, mature and content, and he was gathered in to his people.

Repeat a lie often enough, and it will become the academic orthodoxy - especially in regard to criticizing "antiquated" approaches to Judaism. In non-Orthodox circles, it is almost a principle of faith that Jews do not believe in an afterlife. Earlier, Christians had claimed that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was their contribution. After all, they said, the Torah never instructs about it explicitly.

Of course it doesn't. There was no need to teach people about what they firmly believed. Does the Torah teach about the existence of G-d? The Torah does not preach about what was accepted as commonplace. The existence of an afterlife was not only taken for granted by the original recipients of the Torah, but by all their neighbors. Which people in that civilization did not believe in a life beyond the here and now?

Attempts to demonstrate why we ought to believe in an afterlife did not surface in earnest until a much later generation. The assault by forces outside the community on the notion of life after death had taken a grim toll on Jewish belief. It then became necessary to reeducate many Jews on what their forebears had taken for granted.

Our pasuk shows just how deeply ingrained was belief in the afterlife in ancient times. What else could be meant by "gathered to his people?" Gathered where? (Lest you think that this somehow means having his remains mingle with those of his family who perished earlier, realize that this phrase is used in our pasuk before his funeral and burial!) Our pasuk speaks of the path between earthly life and its continuation in olam habo. Avraham departed and joined the neshamos of his people, even before his children began tending to his earthly remains. Those neshamos begin with Hashem in His world, and return there after their sojourn on earth.

Furthermore, the word גָּזַן usually connotes finding protective shelter for something that has wandered away, e.g. a finder gathering in a lost object[2], and Miriam being gathered back in to the main body of the congregation after her forced exile[3]. The term "gathered in" in our pasuk implies, therefore, not just transitioning to another state, but the neshamah returning to its "real" home after a

forced journey to the world that the rest of us call human existence.

Note that the Torah employs two verbs to describe death: "lying," and being "gathered in." Each is associated with a different group. With but one exception in all of Tanach, a person is always gathered into his people, not to his fathers. (The single exception is in Shoftim[4], where people are gathered in to their fathers. We can perhaps explain the anomaly by seeing it in deliberate contrast to a nearby pasuk where an earlier generation is described as abandoning the G-d of their fathers.) On the other hand, those who die are gathered into their people, not their fathers. The dead are physically put to rest with the remains of their relatives, or their fathers. Heaven, however, knows of only one Father. The souls who find comfort there are related in having been faithful to the mission of an entire nation, a people that accepted and lived by the role of putting His message in the best light. Thus, those who merit the eternal life find solace in olam habo in the company of all others of the Torah nation.

Taking It All⁵

Avraham gave all that he had to Yitzchok. But to the children of the concubines...he gave gifts.

The "all" that Avraham bequeathed Yitzchok was not simply a multiple of the gifts that were given to his half-brothers. It does not mean everything left in the estate after the sons of Keturah were assigned their portions.

Until Yaakov founded the first truly Jewish family, no one expected, least of all Avraham and Yitzchok, that all of his children should remain entirely faithful to his message. Such an outcome seemed beyond reach at a time that a child would find absolutely nothing in the greater world congruent with the teaching of his parents. Even today, Jewish parents struggle to achieve what we all think we can expect: that all of our children should stay firmly within the fold. Our children today do not have to go it alone. They grow up in the company of children from homes every bit as dedicated as their own. And yet, with so many distractions and competing values that can lure children away, it is an accomplishment when all in a family continue walking resolutely in the ways of their parents.

In the earliest days of our people, it was much more difficult to raise children. Everything back then, every value and experience was opposed to the morality of Avraham and Sarah, or Yitzchok and Rivka. They could not hope to give more than gifts here and there to most of their children. The children would be able to absorb a bit of the teaching, a fraction of the message, and could receive gifts appropriate to what they had internalized.

Avraham and Yitzchok, however, each had one child to whom they could give more than gifts, to whom they could leave "all" - their entire legacy. They really had no choice. In a society entirely at odds with their ideology, the home had to be the equal of the entire world. The atmosphere at home had to be as attractive, indeed had to outweigh all that the world could muster in opposition. To a

Yitzchok and a Yaakov, their parents were able to leave their everything - the totality of their message and mission. Nothing less than absorbing that allowed those two special people to thrive and develop.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 25:8
 2. Devarim 22:2
 3. Bamidbar 12:15
 4. Shoftim 2:10
 5. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bereishis 25:5-6
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