



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

25 – 26 November, 2005

24 Cheshvan, 5766

Parashat Chayei Sarah
(Genesis 23:1–25:18)

Rabbi Michael Schwartz
Cantorial Soloist Julie Howard

D'var Torah by Rabbi Michael Schwartz

Shalom Chaverim,

It's remarkable that, as a story, the Torah succeeds in grabbing and holding our attention all the way through the first twenty-one chapters with not a single reference to "love". Hollywood and the paperback book industry wouldn't stand for such an omission!

The first reference to "love" in the Torah comes only in the twenty-second chapter (verse two), where "love" concerns the tie between a parent and a child. Only in this week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*, does the second reference to "love" occur, this time in connection to the relationship between spouses:

"Isaac then brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac **loved** her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death." (Genesis 24:67)

This verse puts us modern readers on familiar territory. We can just see Isaac carrying Rebekah across the threshold, a la the famous newlywed tradition. Isaac's depth of character is revealed, and we realize that his love for Rebekah has a psychological component to it, intriguingly connected to his relationship with his parents and the loss of his mother. Did Rebecca have any qualities all her own that fueled Isaac's love for her? Although Rebekah previously agreed to marry Isaac, we wonder about this somewhat one-sided telling of the story: Did she, too, love Isaac? What were her feelings and hopes and frustrations with this situation and relationship? Although she seems to adopt a passive role here, how does Rebekah grow into her status as matriarch? How, or does, she learn to become more assertive in her relationship with Isaac and the running of the family?

And yet, this is not a modern love story. Samson R. Hirsch points out that "the order of the words, *He took Rebekah, she became his wife, and he loved her*, calls for comment. In modern life, we would place the 'he loved her' first and write: 'He loved Rebekah, he took her, and she became his wife.' But, however important it is that love should precede marriage, it is far more important that it shall continue *after* marriage. The modern attitude lays all the stress on the romance before marriage; the olden Jewish view emphasizes the life-long devotion and affection after marriage."

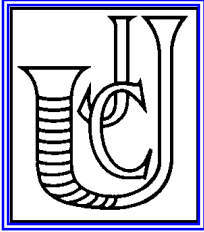
Rarely, though, do we find advice and wisdom about what makes a lasting and successful marriage, whereas resources about finding a mate (and coping with divorce) are rather plentiful.

A personal story: After my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, I asked them if they believed in true love. Now, my grandparents happen to be the happiest, lovey-doviest couple I have ever met, seen, or have heard of - Hollywood movies included. They answered simultaneously, with no hesitation, in the exact same words: "Absolutely not. It's just a lot of hard work." (Thank God, they are still the happiest couple around and now married 63 years.)

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote a poem with suggestions for 'good love'. Interestingly, he couldn't resist concluding the poem with the mirror image of advice for good love: advice for bad love.

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Advice for good love

Advice for good love: Don't love those from far away.
Take yourself one from nearby.
The way a sensible house will take local stones for its building,
stones which have suffered in the same cold
and were scorched by the same sun.
Take the one with the golden wreath around her dark eye's pupil,
she who has a certain knowledge about your death.
Love also inside a ruin, like taking honey out of
the lion's carcass that Samson killed.
And advice for bad love: With the love left over
from the previous one make a new woman for yourself,
then with what is left of that woman make again a new love,
and go on like that until nothing remains.

Among the advice the Talmud gives, is this: "A man should love his wife as himself and honor her more than himself." (Y'vamot 62b)

A rare woman's voice in our classic texts (Song of Songs 6:3) gives this advice about how to love: "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me," and (8:7): "Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it."

Pirke Avot (5:15) counsels: "Whenever love depends upon some material cause, with the passing away of that cause, the love, too, passes away; but if it be not depending upon such a cause, it will not pass away for ever."

Ben Sira (26, 36) observes that: "The grace of a wife delights her husband, and her knowledge fattens his bones...A modest wife is blessing after blessing, and a self-controlled spirit no scales can weigh."

Traditionally, we begin the Shabbat meal by reciting Psalm 31, which concludes: "A woman of valor...opens her mouth with wisdom and on her tongue is a Torah of loving-kindness. Looks are deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised..."

The rest and peace of Shabbat, a time when there is time to appreciate those most important to you in life, a time for both partners to be at home and involved in the community, is a crucial element of a successful Jewish marriage.

On this Shabbat and on many more, and throughout the weekdays as well, may we all strive to be as kind, compassionate and caring as Rebecca; and may we all learn to love as directly and peacefully, and generously as Isaac.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Michael
15 Cheshvan 5766

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