

Parshat Chayei Sarah: May Her Life Be for a Blessing

Sarah Pincus, Class of 2026

A few months back, I was at shiva house and one of the aveilim remarked, “I’m finding I don’t really like when people say, ‘May her memory be for a blessing.’ Turning her life into a memory makes her feel like something of the past. In her living and in her death, may her life be for a blessing.”

When I began reading this week’s parsha, Chayei Sarah, those words immediately came to mind.

After Sarah Imeinu’s full life of 127 years, the Torah tells us that she dies in Kiryat Arba, and that “Avraham came” —vayavo Avraham— “to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her” (23:2). Most commentators understand this literally: Avraham physically travels from Be’er Sheva to Kiryat Arba.

But the Rashbam adds a subtle insight. Yes, Avraham may have come from Be’er Sheva, “but even if he hadn’t come from another place, it would still be appropriate to describe his arrival for the purpose of eulogizing Sarah with the words ‘vayavo Avraham’” (Rashbam on Bereishit 23:2). According to the Rashbam, eulogizing requires a kind of coming—a showing up, an intentional arrival of the self. The movement toward grief is not geographical, but spiritual; it is the act of turning oneself fully toward loss. In this act of showing up to face the loss of his beloved wife, Avraham is moved, according to the Ramban, “shenit’orer Avraham”—Avraham was stirred—to eulogize Sarah. In his coming, he understands that speaking about Sarah is itself a form of honoring her.

The Malbim (on 23:2), using the same word for stirred or moved as the Ramban, says that typically, a person is moved to tears (y’or’ru bechiya) because of the pain of loss, and only afterwards is moved to eulogize (y’or’ru hesped). Here, Avraham does the reverse: first he eulogizes, then he weeps. Surely Avraham’s love for Sarah was profound. This reversal cannot suggest a lack of emotion. Rather, it highlights the significance of the hesped itself.

The Torah’s phrasing can help us appreciate the true value of Avraham’s hesped. Avraham weeps “for her,” but he eulogizes Sarah. Though his tears are deeply personal, tears can be shed for many reasons. His words, however, are specific. In his hesped, he does not speak about grief in general. Rather, he speaks about her—about Sarah’s particular life, her unique qualities, her legacy.

The Malbim suggests that, in Sarah’s case, it is the words of the hesped that move people to tears. He seems to imply that it is specifically the hesped, and not necessarily the death itself, that makes people cry.

Avraham’s hesped sets the template for all eulogies that would follow throughout time. A eulogy must not render a person into abstraction, a zikaron, a memory—but rather must honor the specific, the concrete, the stories, the life of the soul before us. We are not meant to eulogize “her memory,” but to speak of Sarah, to make her life itself the blessing.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the opening verse of our parsha (23:1): “And the life of Sarah was one hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.”

Before we even hear of her death, the Torah insists twice on her life. It is *chayei* Sarah—the lived years of Sarah, her vitality, her distinct being—that become the true source of blessing, both in her lifetime and beyond.

The Torah’s focus on her life reminds Avraham to mourn her: by eulogizing her, by recognizing that even though their relationship has changed, it continues. Yes, he weeps—and that is healthy and necessary—but through the hessed, the tone shifts from despair toward blessing.

Sarah’s life is not just a memory to be recalled. It is not her remembrance that is meant to be a blessing, but her life itself—a life that continues to be an active presence and a source of blessing for Avraham and for all who come after.

Even in her death, we are being invited to allow her life to be the blessing. We do this by showing up, by telling her story, by allowing her courage and faith to take root in us. Like Avraham, we speak not of what is gone, but of what endures—a life that still breathes through her name, and through us, continues to bestow blessing upon the world.

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