

Hayyei Sarah 5777

Sometimes

*Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail.
Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.*

*A people sometimes will step back from war,
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.*

*Sometimes our best intentions do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen; may it happen for you.*

I really wish I'd written that, but I didn't. It's by the Welsh poet, Sheenagh Pugh.

The poem celebrates the raise of the eyebrows which happens when, contrary to our expectations, things go right rather than wrong. Its sentiments sit well with this sidrah.

Because some of the material we read about this week isn't exactly promising. The sidrah begins with the announcement of Sarah's death, not once, not twice, but three times:

Sarah's lifetime – the span of Sarah's life – came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. Sarah died...

It continues with one of those wonderful signals we sometimes get in the Torah – a tiny letter kaf in the word describing Abraham weeping for his dead wife (end of verse 2 on page 127). It's hard not to read this shrunken letter as a signal, in itself, of diminution and grief.

Then we hear of Abraham's old age, and the near-impossible task of finding a suitable wife for Isaac; and then, the risk of the new wife not wanting to leave her family, or her family not wanting to let her go; and finally, the declaration of Isaac as Abraham's sole heir, despite the fact that by the time of his death he has remarried and founded a whole new dynasty – not to mention the one he began with Ishmael. The stage is set for a truly nasty battle for Abraham's estate. And then, to finish the catalogue, Abraham dies.

Nonetheless, notice how the sidrah pulls off a whole series of fortunate outcomes. It is pervaded with a sense of pleasant wonder, of the expected order of things somehow being subverted. And the pattern repeats over the course of the sidrah. Consider the following:

Abraham approaches a group of foreigners to buy a burial cave. Not only are they willing to sell, he has to employ all of his best negotiating skills to persuade them even to accept the money from him. The cave itself appears to be a kind of 'buy one, get one free' – a number of our commentators notice that its name – Machpelah – comes from a word meaning, 'to double.'

Abraham's servant safely makes the journey from Canaan back to Aram-Naharaim. The Torah doesn't force the point, but he is travelling kinda heavy, what with having ten camels and, apparently, ALL of Abraham's wealth – and there would have been brigands on the road. Not to mention the fact that he is making a trek around the edge of a desert. Nonetheless, he, the camels and the wealth all seem to arrive intact.

Rebekah's family, who are an unpromising bunch who you probably wouldn't want at a dinner party, fall into line. Even shifty Laban, who is so quick to welcome a person so obviously rich, who is going to give Jacob so much trouble later, has to concede that me'Adonai yatzah hadavar – this matter came from God.

Just in case we were missing the message, there is also a musical high point in this sidrah. At the central point of the narrative we find a rare and exquisite note, a shalsholet, which occurs only four times in the whole Torah (it's in the last line of the Hebrew on page 132. Judy, plz sing it...) Its function, as on the other three occasions it is sung, is to emphasise an exceptional moment – the beginning of the servant's prayer for success in his quest – a prayer to a God not his own.

This in turn focuses our attention on Rebecca herself. She appears right on cue, even before Abraham's servant has finished his prayer that his quest to find Isaac a wife will be successful. She is beautiful, compassionate, proactive and fearless (both in terms of saying who she is, and in terms of being ready to leave everything she has ever known and make a perilous journey to an unfamiliar place. Hmm, where have we heard that before?!)

When she sees Isaac, she falls clean off her camel. And Isaac loves her, arranged marriage notwithstanding.

And since we are thinking about Isaac...The sidra mentions - not once but twice – a place called 'be'er lehay ro'i'. We hear about it first as the place that Isaac is coming back from when he meets Rebecca for the first time. And later, after burying Abraham with Ishmael, Isaac settles there. Be'er lehay ro'i should ring a bell. It's the very place to which Hagar fled from Sarai's wrath and where Ishmael's birth was prophesied. Indeed, it's named after what Hagar calls God - El-Roi, God of seeing, God of my seeing, God who sees me. As if this is a place where the right things do happen.

Perhaps most astonishing of all is the end of the sidrah. Isaac and Ishmael, those two long-term rivals, come together to bury their father. We are told that together they bury Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, next to Sarah, and Isaac settles down. And the sidrah closes with Ishmael's genealogy and his death.

Rashi and Ramban both observe that the language of Ishmael's death is the same as that which is used for recording the death of the righteous, a death without pain. It is as if Ishmael – the same Ishmael who gave Sarah so much heartache - is finally, by his death, fully rehabilitated into the narrative.

It is interesting, in the light of all of this information, to look again at the opening lines of the sidra. On any reading, Sarah's death is tragic: her lifespan is the shortest of any human being so far recorded in the book of Genesis. Even though she does get an extra seven years over the prescribed one hundred and twenty (Bereshit 6:3), Ishmael outlives her by ten years, and Abraham by 48.

No doubt she would have found this galling. Yet, and perhaps despite herself, the sidra which bears her name and which is titled for her life (rather than for her death) tells a story in which the positive values of love and reconciliation triumph over and over again.

And perhaps this is why the sidrah opens the way it does. It points twice over to life, before mentioning death. Sforzo, in Italy in the 1500s, notes that Rebekah is born before Sarah dies, commenting: 'A righteous person never dies before another righteous person has been born to take their place.'

We should remember that Sarah is the one who steadfastly refused to believe that she could ever bear a child, but was proven wrong. Perhaps her legacy is that sometimes, in defiance even of belief, and even if only for a while, things do go well, after all.