YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat CHAYEI SARA**

**Sicha of HarAV Yehuda Shaviv *zt"l***

**From Sunset to Sunrise**

Translated by David Strauss

I.

*Parashat Chayei Sara* feels like a *parasha* of sunset, of evening hours. Twice the Torah sees a need to emphasize this timing: Once when Avraham's servant (identified by the midrash as Eliezer) arrives in the city of Nachor: "And he made the camels kneel outside the city by the well of water **at the time of evening**" (*Bereishit* 24:11), and a second time as he returns: "And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field **toward evening**" (*Bereishit* 24:63). Whereas the previous *parasha* mentions getting up early in the morning multiple times, here the time of sunset is a more powerful presence.

The same is true in a metaphorical sense. Two suns set in this *parasha*: Sara's sun at the beginning of the *parasha*,and Avraham's sun towards its end. The setting of Sara's sun even brought actual darkness with it: "All the days that Sara was alive, a candle burned from one Friday night to the next Friday night. When she died, the candle stopped burning" (*Bereishit Rabba* 60,16). With the death of Sara, the tent became dark; with the death of Avraham, the world became dark (as the *midrash* later connects Avraham to light[[1]](#footnote-1)).

But before the sun had set, a new sun had already risen – as Rabbi Abba bar Kahana expounded:

"The sun rises and the sun sets" (*Kohelet* 1:5) – Do we not know that the sun rises and the sun sets? The meaning is, however, that before the Holy One, blessed be He, causes the sun of a righteous person to set, he causes the sun of his righteous counterpart to rise… Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused Sara's sun to set, Rivka's sun rose. First, "Behold, Milka, she too has borne children" (*Bereishit* 22:20), and only then: "Sara's lifetime was one hundred years…" (23:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 58,2)

Scripture alludes to a sunrise that precedes a sunset; thus it is with the righteous, who are the foundation of the world. Before Scripture tells us about the death of Sara, it already told us about the birth of Rivka, and needless to say, before Avraham's sun set, Yitzchak's sun had already risen and was shining brightly.

II.

The rise of a new sun solves the problem of light. But is there any repair (*tikkun*)of the sunset itself? Perhaps an allusion may emerge from the two verses cited above that speak of sunset: "at the time of evening," and "toward evening." Both contexts involve an appeal directed toward God: explicitly, with regard to Avraham's servant – "O Lord, the God of my master Avraham, send me, I pray you…" (*Bereishit* 24:12) – and by allusion, with regard to Yitzchak – "And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field…," from which *Chazal* learned:

Yitzchak instituted [*tikein*] the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: "And Yitzchak went out to meditate (*lasu’ach*)in the field toward evening," and "meditation" means only prayer, as it is stated: "A **prayer** of the pauper when he faints and pours out his **meditation** (*sicha*) before the Lord" (*Tehillim* 102:1). (*Berakhot* 26b)

Eliezer's appeal to God was a one-time event, but Yitzchak's prayer became a permanent institution; Yitzchak instituted the afternoon service.

III.

The verse from which *Chazal* derived that meditation is prayer is interesting: "A **prayer** of the pauper when he faints and pours out his **meditation** before the Lord." A pauper's prayer is certainly special in that the petitioner truly has no one to lean on other than his Father in heaven, and he pours his heart out to Him.[[2]](#footnote-2) But it is also special in another way. A pauper's prayer is a prayer of an individual. "Wealth adds many friends; but as for the poor, his friend separates himself from him" (*Mishlei* 19:4). "All the brothers of the poor hate him; how much more do his friends go far from him" (*Mishlei* 19:7). A poor person has only himself. "A prayer of a pauper when he faints."

IV.

A world of individuals is a world of strict judgment. Kindness involves giving and receiving, love and friendship. But in a world of fear of judgment, individuals are locked in their isolation. In kabbalistic tradition, Yitzchak represents the attribute of judgment. The afternoon prayer is aligned with the attribute of judgment: as opposed to the morning prayer, which begins at sunrise when everything is harmonious and in perfect combination, the afternoon prayer takes place towards the setting of the sun, when the evening shadows begin to stretch out and the harmonious picture breaks down into its various pieces. The person becomes enwrapped in his soul, and he becomes bound to his Creator by meditation-prayer. Indeed, when Yitzchak engaged in his prayer, he lifted his eyes and through the shadows saw camels from afar and met Eliezer and Rivka – she who would accompany him from that time on, so that he would no longer be alone.

V.

With Avraham as well, we find a great sunrise that comes after what appears to have been a great sunset. The *parasha* opens with a great sunset for Avraham, who eulogizes, mourns, and buries his wife and companion. But this is in fact the last step in an ongoing process that has been taking place since the beginning of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. In His first revelation to him, God instructs Avraham: "Go forth [*lekh lekha*] from your country, and from your homeland, and from your father's house" (*Bereishit* 12:1), and from that point on his entire life is conducted in the shadow of "*lekh lekha*," which the *Zohar* understands as meaning "Go to yourself":

"*Lekh lekha*" – [Go] to yourself, to repair yourself, to correct your rank. (*Zohar* 77b)

In order for Avraham to truly go to himself, he must physically and mentally detach himself from his country, his homeland, and his father's house. This is a difficult test for Avraham, who is a kind and loving man who cleaves to his family and to his father's house (remember that at the end of *Parashat Noach,* Avraham left Ur Kasdim with his father and his household). If we review Avraham's life, we see that it moves through repeated stages of "*lekh lekha*" – detach yourself from your surroundings.

When a quarrel broke out among the shepherds, Avraham asked Lot to separate from him, and he separated himself from his nephew. The war of the kings put Avraham in sharp conflict with the nations of the land. It is not for naught that Avraham is called "Avraham the Hebrew (*ha-ivri*)" (*Bereishit* 14:13), for this teaches that "the entire world stood on one side [*ever*] and he on the other side [*ever*]" (*Bereishit Rabba* 42,8). Certain allies remained with him: Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre (*Bereishit* 14:3), and then came the command to undergo circumcision, which was intended to separate between him and others. And indeed Avraham was concerned: "He said: Even before my circumcision, people would come and confront me [in battle]. Certainly after I am circumcised, they will come and confront me. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Avraham, it is sufficient for you that I am your God; it is sufficient for you that I am your Guardian" (*Bereishit Rabba* 46,2). At that point, his entire family was still with him, but then another moment of separation came, when God commanded him to listen to Sara and send his son Yishmael and his wife Hagar away. Yitzchak, who was to be his spiritual heir, remained with him – until Avraham received the Divine command: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and *lekh lekha* to the land of Moriya, and offer him there for a burnt-offering" (*Bereishit* 22:2). The voice of God's angel stopped Avraham from executing the ultimate separation – "Lay not your hand upon the lad" (*Bereishit* 22:12) – but still, Yitzchak did not return with his father; in contrast to the emphasis when the two went to Mount Moriya that "they went both of them together" (*Bereishit* 22:6-8), on the return, the Torah only mentions Avraham: "And Avraham returned to his young men" (*Bereishit* 22:19).[[3]](#footnote-3)

And at this point, God's angel says to Avraham: "Now I know that you are God-fearing" (*Bereishit* 22:12). Avraham, whose defining characteristic was love and kindness, reveals himself when he is alone as God-fearing.

Avraham, however, retains the sense that he is not alone, because waiting for him at home is his faithful companion, who has accompanied him on all the paths of his life as his partner in good times and bad times. But she too separates from him and passes on to the next world. And Avraham was left alone! Is there a sunset greater than this?

VI.

Indeed, the sun had set, but it immediately rose again – and the sun was the same, the sun of Avraham. He gathered himself together and acted and operated. This is evident in his purchase of the field and the cave, as well as in finding a suitable match for Yitzchak. Furthermore, he reawakened his youth and married another woman and had more children.

*Parashat Chayei Sara* tells of the deaths of Sara and Avraham, but it highlights and enhances the life story of people who were "very old," whose lives were filled with intense days that were full of action.

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(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. As R. Yehuda ben Simon expounded the verses at the beginning of *Bereishit*: “‘Now the earth was unformed and void’ (*Bereishit* 2:3) – ‘Unformed’ – this refers to Adam… ‘And void’ – this refers to Kayin… ‘And darkness’ – this refers to the generation of Enosh… ‘Upon the face of the earth’ – this refers to the generation of the flood… The Holy One, blessed be He, said: ‘Until when will the world conduct itself in darkness? Let the light come!’ – ‘And God said: Let there be light’ – this refers to Avraham" (*Bereishit Rabba* 2,3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is why the Mishna states that for the special services that were conducted on fast days, they chose as prayer leader "someone who has children but whose house is empty, so that his heart will be whole in prayer" (Mishna *Ta'anit* 2:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Chazal* already asked: "And where was Yitzchak?" and offered several answers (*Bereishit Rabba*, end of 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)