

Parashat Chayyei Sarah 5781

Even though this Shabbat's Parashah is called Chayei Sarah, literally "the life of Sarah" it begins with the death of Sarah and recounting the length of her life. Much of the rest of the Parashah has to do with Abraham being concerned with the life of Isaac, their son. Avraham wants to find a suitable spouse for Isaac and sends his servant, Eliezer, back to Avraham's place of birth to find the right match. Eliezer is the first *shadkhen* (matchmaker).

In this Shabbat's Parashah, it is easy to overlook one small phrase that is my jumping off point for this talk. In Chapter 24 verse 27 after Avraham's trusted servant has found Rivka (Rebecca) in Aram-naharaim the city of Nahor, Avraham's brother. Rivka is the daughter of Betu'el, the son of Milcah, the wife of Avraham's brother Nakhor. You know the story, the servant asks Hashem, the Eternal One, G!d of his master Avraham, that when the young women come to draw water from the well, the one he asks to let him have a drink and who responds affirmatively and adds that she will draw water for his ten camels also, will be the one for Avraham's son Yitzkhak (Isaac).

After Rivka does this exactly, Avraham's servant says "*Barukh Hashem Elokei adoni Avraham asher lo azav khasdo va'amito me'im adoni.*" (Blessed is the Eternal One, the G!d of my master Avraham, Who has never withheld his love and his truth from my master). This phrase with the use of the word *Barukh* fits the formula for blessing and prayer that is so familiar to us. A quick survey of the uses of this word "*Barukh*" in the Torah show that most of the appearances of the word refer to humans being "blessed" for example, in the Parashah two weeks ago, *Lekh Lekha*, (p. 81 in *Etz Chayim*) Malkitzedek the king of Shalem whom, the Torah describes as a priest to *El Elyon*, (the Most High G!d) blesses Avraham saying "Blessed be Avram of *El Elyon* Creator of Heaven and Earth (and blessed be *El Elyon* who has delivered your foes into your hand)." There's an episode in Exodus 18: 10 where Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, a priest of Midian says to Moses (p.433) "Blessed is the Eternal One who delivered you from the hand of Egypt and from the hand of Pharaoh." It's interesting that both of these cases are times when non-Jewish priests use the phrase *Barukh* with G!d's name.

So I would like to talk a little about prayer tonight.

A number of years ago in our Monday morning adult ed class we watched a series of discussions by Jewish thinkers on various topics. One of the many segments discussed prayer. Of the maybe 20 people who spoke during the segment, some of them I agree with a lot and some I strongly disagree with.

The verb “to pray” in Hebrew is “*L’hitpa’el*” which is a reflexive verb. In other words it connotes an activity that is not outwardly directed, but inwardly directed. What is its purpose? What is its significance? I think, as with many other things, the meaning of an activity can evolve over time and there may not have been only one purpose or significance at one time. We find in our Siddurim (prayer books) different types of segments that are part of the service. If you look at the middle of p.61 in our Shabbat and Holiday Siddur you will see the one line that we open the morning service with on both weekdays and Shabbat: “*Mah Tov*” which is quoting Bilaam’s words as he looked out from a hilltop at the Jews encamped below and, though hired by Balak to curse the Jewish people, he praised them instead saying: “How goodly are your tents, oh Jacob, your dwelling places Israel.” If you look a few pages down on p.64 we recite a section from Leviticus saying how we should be holy because the Eternal One is holy. It goes on to say we should neither curse the deaf nor put an obstacle before the blind, don’t judge unjustly, nor favor the rich nor the poor and you should love your neighbor as yourself.” You’ll notice when we recited the *Sh’ma Yisrael*, probably the best known prayer of all, it too is a quotation from the Torah (the first and second paragraphs are from the book of Deuteronomy, and the third paragraph, which is about wearing Tzitzit and their significance, is from Bemidbar – Numbers). The first paragraph is essentially telling us to love the Eternal One and keep G!d in our consciousness throughout the day and all the days of our life and the third paragraph is telling us to live a holy life. It is true that in the weekday silent Amidah there are blessings in which we ask for things for the community in general, but most of our prayers are words of praise of G!d. This could be heard by some people as trying to “butter up” G!d, so to speak, but I see it as also trying to keep in our minds a focus on that which is transcendent, to keep us attuned to the wondrous presence of the Eternal in the midst of the ephemeral.

Everyone has a personal relationship to prayer. Some prayers will speak to some of us, others will speak to others of us. Within a specific prayer, some lines will speak to some of us and some lines won’t. If you’ll notice when reading in English I try to never use a pronoun which will make G!d sound like a physical being such as the pronoun “He.” If you look in our

Siddur on page 53, the song Yigdal (with which we end the service) the beginning of its third paragraph in English (and the third line in Hebrew) it says that G!d has no body or form (*ayn lo d'mut haguf, v'ayno guf*).

I don't want to take too long, so I'll end with the issue of what can it mean to say *Barukh*, literally "blessed" to the Eternal One." Avraham's servant in our Parashah on p. 135 verse 35 says that Avraham has been blessed by the Eternal One and in the earlier verse that I first mentioned at the beginning of this talk, he says that the Eternal One is blessed. They can't mean the same thing. If you noticed that our Siddur translates *Barukh* as "praised" rather than "blessed" trying to distinguish what it might mean to refer to G!d as *Barukh*, (blessed) as opposed to speaking of a person as being "Barukh" (blessed). I would like to offer another way of seeing it and that is to try to keep us aware of the Eternal One as being the source of all blessing, and of trying to keep us conscious of ourselves as part of the grand all-encompassing oneness that fills existence and transcends it.

Shabbat shalom.