



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

A 2010 *New Yorker* profile of Israeli writer David Grossman bears the emotionally raw title, “The Unconsoled.” Its author, journalist George Packer, notes that Grossman’s more recent creative work deals with “the new reality that I am acquainted with now, which is the proximity of life and death, and how to contain death in life.” Grossman’s middle child, Uri, was killed in battle in the final hours of the Second Lebanon War in 2006.

According to Packer, Grossman “has discovered that grief—like childhood, like marriage, like a military occupation—is not monolithic. It changes, and experiencing each variation brings him in closer touch with his loss.”

How does a person contain death in life? What does that reality look like? How do we deal with the proximity of life and death—even the death of a child?

In the Torah portion *Hayyei Sarah* we find a dynamic story about bereavement, business and burial; blessings, betrothal and birth; more bereavement and more blessings—in other words, the ongoing interplay of life and death. In brief, here is how it unfolds:

Chapter 23: the death of Abraham’s wife, Sarah; Abraham’s spirited negotiation for the purchase of a family burial site—the cave of Machpelah—and Sarah’s burial there. Chapter 24: Abraham’s arrangement of a marriage partner for Isaac—the longest and arguably the most literary chapter in all of Genesis. Chapter 25: Abraham’s marriage to Keturah and the birth of their six sons; the death of Abraham and his burial in the cave of Machpelah; and, finally, the death of Hagar’s and Abraham’s son, Ishmael—but not before we learn of the birth of Ishmael’s twelve sons.

The Torah also tells us that, Sarah’s death notwithstanding, God “had blessed Abraham in all things.” And what’s more, “after his mother’s death, Isaac found comfort” in his love of his wife Rebekah. Indeed, Abraham died at “a good, ripe age, old and contented.” And, what’s more, “after the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac.” In other words, *Hayyei Sarah* shows us what that “new reality” of Grossman’s can look like: it looks like a string of inevitable losses cradled in a life abundant in blessings—the birth of babies, the marriage of children, the love of spouses, the optimism of people who plan for the future. Love, comfort, hope and blessing contain death. The valley of deepest darkness is long; and yet, as the psalmist says, my cup overflows.

There is one golden image in this *parasha*—three Hebrew words that express one of the Bible’s most profound truths about loss. It is the name of a place in the Negev Desert where Isaac had been just before Rebekah appeared, like a romantic vision, on her camel; and it is the place where Isaac and Rebekah made their home after his father’s death: *Be’er-Lahai-Ro’i*—the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me. This is also the place where Hagar met God (in Genesis 16) and was told that “God has paid heed to your suffering.”

Be’er: a well or a spring—source of water in the desert; source of survival and renewal. *Lahai*: the Living One—the God who lives; not a relic, not a memory, but a living and life-affirming God. *Ro’i*: the God who sees me, who knows who I am, who pays attention to my suffering. The Well

of the Living One Who Sees Me may appear to us in different shapes and forms: words of condolence in a familiar handwriting, a quiet walk with a friend during *shiva*, a memory shared on a *yahrzeit*, an unexpected opportunity to honor the memory of the person we've lost, a new perspective on the meaning of solitude and community in our life.

Informed at daybreak of her brother Uri Grossman's death in Lebanon, fourteen-year-old Ruthi responded this way: "After weeping, she said, 'But we'll live, right? We'll go on trips like before, and I want to go on singing in the choir, and we'll continue to laugh like always?' David and Michal hugged their daughter and assured her that they would live." (*The New Yorker*, September 27, 2010)

Ruthi learns that the absence of a loved one does not signal the absence of a gratifying life. What's made her life worthwhile in the past will continue to make life worth living — singing, laughing, family outings and, presumably, much more. Most important, this young newcomer to the wilderness of grief gets her first taste of the healing waters that flow from *Be'er-Laḥai-Ro'i* — the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.

And what was that first taste? Was it her parents' assurance and physical embrace? I think her very first taste from the Well came from deep within herself. Ruthi's weeping — her pure expression of grief — cleared the way for the questions she needed to ask. Sometimes the Well is within us.

For those of us whose loss is wrenching and who wonder "how to contain death in life," the Bible offers this place, *Be'er-Laḥai-Ro'i*, as a spiritual home, a refuge in the wilderness of grief.

A Prayer:

Hamakom y'nachem et-chem b'toch she'ar aveilei tziyyon viy'rushalayim...

May you find a place of comfort together with all those who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Sheldon Marder, Director of Jewish Live, Jewish Home of San Francisco. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

