

**Parshat Chayei Sarah:
Listening to Trauma**
Rabbanit Leah Sarna
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I want to open with a bit of a warning-- today I'm going to talk about some difficult things. But not the difficult things themselves, rather the aftermath of those things. With this week's parasha, we *could* talk about the fallout of trauma in general. But since we're on a college campus, I'm going to talk about sexual assault. Because one in five women and one in sixteen men on college campuses experience sexual assault. We might like to think that as an Orthodox community, this issue is far from us. Let's be real. It isn't. It's us and it's our roommates and our friends.

My freshman year at Yale, the fraternity DKE marched their new recruits around outside my dorm chanting "No means Yes, Yes means Anal." It didn't feel far away from me.

There's a lot of research out there and a lot of work to be done towards prevention-- but that's not what I'm going to talk about today. Today I'm going to talk about what happens after the trauma has occurred.

Last week's parasha ended in trauma. We don't know what happened to Yitzhak after the *akeda*. We saw him tied up, on a *mizbeach*. And then we hear about how Avraham sacrificed the ram instead, and Hashem blessed Avraham. For all we know, Yitzhak is still there on the mountain. We know that Avraham left alone.

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba. (Bereishit 22:19)

וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נַעֲרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶל-בְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵאֵר שָׁבַע: (בראשית כ"ב:י"ט)

There's nothing ambiguous about this verse. Yitzhak didn't go with him. The world moves on, and Yitzhak isn't there. Sarah dies, Avraham mourns her and bargains for a burial plot. Yitzhak doesn't even seem to have a hand in his own affairs. Avraham decides what kind of woman Yitzhak should marry, and sends his servant to go find her. But throughout, Yitzhak is absent. The midrash asks-- where was Yitzhak?

Where was Yitzhak?

Rabbi Berachya in the name of Rabanan say
He was sent to the beit midrash of Shem to learn
Torah from him

ויצחק היכן הוא?
רבי ברכיה בשם רבנן דתמן:
שלחו אצל שם ללמוד ממנו תורה

By the Midrash's account, Yitzhak was sent away. But there's textual evidence to believe that Avraham didn't do this-- that Avraham kept him close. We know for sure that by the time the servant returns with Rivkah, Yitzhak was close by, because the pasuk tells us that he brought Rivka into *אימו* - the tent of Sarah his mother. A tent near Avraham.

But what does seem clear is that either way, whether Yitzhak was close or far, he was isolated. When we see Yitzhak for the first time in this week's parasha, he has gone out into the field, by himself. ויצא יצחק לשוך. --and Yitzhak went out *lasuach* in the field. There are a million different translations of this word. Rabbi Yaakov Zvi Mecklenburg, a student of Rabbi Akiva Eiger wrote a commentary on the Torah called HaKtav v'HaKabbalah. He wrote that the usage of *ש"ה* here is to mark that it's a type of speech which helps the soul.

Or that the speech comes from internal suffering.
 And then he brings some prooftexts like this one from Iyyov
 I will "lasuach" with the bitterness of my soul.
 Each of these prooftexts is about speech as an activity which relieves
 a strong internal feeling
 And to bring it out, through abundant and ongoing introspection.

שתסתייע הנפש ע"י הדבור,
 או שיהיה הדבור מחמת צער פנימי
 כמו, אשיחה במר נפשי,
 כולם עשות עסק בדיבור כדי להקל
 המוחש הפנימי העצום,
 ולהוציאו לחוץ מרוב עיונו בו תמיד

This is a picture of Yitzchak out in the field, talking to himself. He was hurting, and he himself was his only resource up to that moment. Avraham, a participant in the traumatic incident, couldn't be of help. Sarah might have been, but she had passed away. The Midrash Tanchuma imagines, actually, that she died right in the middle of speaking with Yitzchak about it.

This kind of isolation is common after traumatic incidents. Either the victim doesn't tell anyone about the incident-- and this might happen for a whole host of reasons-- or worse, people sort of know about the incident and then distance themselves from the victim. When you're hearing about it now, you might think, "what kind of horrible person would ever do that?" but the truth is that it's natural. It's pretty much a reflex. When we see someone else hurting, part of us says "I don't want to hurt like that I'm-- afraid to take in the other person's hurt, because then I might hurt too" -- and it makes us run away. But when we run away, we make the victims feel even more isolated than they ever did before. And this leads to a cycle, where victims are afraid to speak out because they are afraid of how it will feel if they aren't heard so then they don't seek care, and the isolation deepens.

In this week's parasha, we see two characters who break Yitzhak's isolation: Rivka and Yishmael. Rivka meets Yitzchak in a beautiful scene he looks up from his *siach* in the field and sees the caravan coming.

Rivka raises up her eyes and sees Yitzchak
 And what she sees must be totally jarring because--
 She fell off her camel.

וַתִּשָּׂא רִבְקָה אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא אֶת-יִצְחָק;

וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל. (בראשית כד:סד)

Rivka really saw Yitzchak. She saw that he was off in the field, hurting, by himself. And the sight was overwhelming Rashi says she was ותורה she was dumbfounded. But instead of running away, instead of giving in to the fear that his hurt would become her hurt, she continued to see him, she continued to be present for him, and she comforted him, the *pasuk* tells us, in the way that Sarah might have been able to comfort him. וַיִּבְרָח וַיֵּצֵק אֶחָדָּי אָמוּ. And for that, Yitzvhak loved her. וַיִּבְאָהּ.

The other character to interact with Yitzchak in this week's *parasha* is Yishmael. He comes back to bury Avraham. The *pasuk* tells us that וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אוֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וַיִּשְׁמָעֵאל -- and Yitzchak and Yishmael buried Avraham. Commentators wonder why Yitzchak is mentioned first, since Yishmael is the eldest. Rashi says that this comes to teach us that Yishmael did Teshuva from his former ways, and upon his return, והולך יצחק לפניו -- he had Yitzchak walk before him. Literally, this just means that he allowed Yitzchak to play some kind of larger role in the burial of Avraham. But there's metaphorical meaning in "walking someone before you" -- there's an element of inspection involved in that. An element of I'm putting you where I can look at you. Where I can see you in a deep way, and perhaps provide some comfort in this extraordinarily complicated moment of burying Avraham.

Rivka and Yishmael gave Yitzchak permission to break out of his isolation. That permission is only the beginning, but it's a huge step.

When the fraternity brothers of DKE paraded in front of my freshman dorm, we had no idea what the outcome would be. All of a sudden my dorm building was on nationwide television. It turned out that that incident set off the latest wave of awareness and activism surrounding sexual assault on campuses. And that wave of activism opened the gates for people to talk and write about their experiences. Some such pieces have even been published recently here at Harvard. People are talking. And when people talk, it's our job to listen. If you vaguely know the person who wrote an article, you might be tempted to look down when they walk past just because you don't know what to say. That temptation is normal, but I want to encourage us to fight that instinct. When someone tells their story, we should thank them for it. It's a gift of confidence, a gift of intimacy-- and it's a courageous gift to give.

Receiving that gift of intimacy, though, comes with a certain degree of responsibility. Our responsibility is to support that person in their next steps, and encourage them to take next steps towards healing. To help them assess all of the options. Whether that is to find a therapist, go to a crisis center or seek medical attention.

But there are also limits to that responsibility. Our responsibility is not to push them to report an incident if they don't want to, and certainly not to report it on their behalf. Our responsibility is *not* to be the sole caretaker of that individual.

Our responsibility *is* to take care of ourselves, to seek help for ourselves. Trauma spreads out in circles, and just because you didn't go through the traumatic incident doesn't mean that the trauma doesn't affect you. When Rivka first saw Yitzchak's trauma, she veiled herself. She found a moment of privacy, to take care of herself as well. That's healthy, and important.

We live in a world full of hurting, traumatized people. *Bereishit* itself is a *sefer* full of people who are hurting, and who hurt each other. And for generations, *Bereishit* has been teaching the Jewish people how to live better, hurt each other less, and help each other more. May those who are hurting find comfort, and may we be blessed with the opportunity to build a safer community and a safer world.



Rabbanit Leah Sarna is the Director of Religious Engagement at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, IL. Rabbanit Sarna holds a B.A. in Philosophy & Psychology from Yale University. She has studied Torah the Beit Midrash for Women at Migdal Oz, Drisha Collegiate Kollel and the Center for Modern Torah Leadership Summer Beit Midrash. Rabbanit Sarna was also a Wexner Graduate Fellow, a Hartman Rabbinical Student Fellow and a JOIN for Justice Rabbinic and Cantorial Leadership for Public Life Fellow. Rabbanit Sarna has worked at Camp Yavneh and the Dr. Beth Samuels Drisha High School Program, and she has been the clergy intern at Harvard Hillel, Ohev Sholom: The National Synagogue, and the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. She has completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and served as a visiting chaplain at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women.