



**WOHL LEGACY**

# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

## Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

*"With thanks to The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."*

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Chayei Sarah  
5780

**To Have a Why**

### \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**Faith helps us to find the 'Why' that allows us to bear almost any 'How'**



### PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH IN A NUTSHELL

This week's *parsha* has three main stories. The first discusses how, after his wife Sarah's death, Avraham bought a field with a cave (the Cave of Machpelah, today in Chevron) to bury her. This was the first piece of the Land of Israel to be owned by the Jewish People.

The second story tells us how Avraham's servant searched for a wife for Yitzchak. The servant understood that he must find a woman who lived by the same values as Avraham and his household, and so when Rebecca showed him *chessed* (loving-kindness) by bringing him and his camels water, he knew he had found the right partner for Yitzchak.

The third and final story describes the end of Avraham's life, and his death. He remarried after Sarah's death, had 6 more children, and finally died peacefully at the age of 175.

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think Avraham had a good or a bad life? How do you think he coped with all the challenges and difficulties he had in his life?



### THE CORE IDEA

The first sentence of this week's *parsha* of Chayei Sarah, is: "*Sarah's lifetime was 127 years: the years of Sarah's life.*" Rashi makes a strange comment on the seemingly unnecessary and extra phrase, "the years of Sarah's life." He says "The word 'years' is repeated and without a number, to indicate that all her years were equally good." How could anyone say that the years of Sarah's life were equally good? She had so many challenging episodes in her life.

Twice, first in Egypt, then in Gerar, she was asked by Avraham to say that she was his sister rather than his wife, and was then taken into a royal harem, a very difficult and dangerous situation. There were many years when, despite God's repeated promise she would have many children, she was infertile, and couldn't have even a single child. There was the time when she persuaded Avraham to take her handmaid, Hagar, and have a child by her so that he could be a father, which caused her great emotional pain. Her life

was one of uncertainty and decades of unfulfilled hopes. How can Rashi then say that all of Sarah's years were equally good?

The Torah is similarly puzzling with its description of Avraham. Immediately after he buys a burial plot for Sarah, the Torah says "Avraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Avraham with everything" (Bereishit 24:1).

Seven times, God had promised Avraham the land of Canaan. Yet when Sarah died, he did not own a single plot of land in which to bury her, and had to go through an exhausting and humiliating negotiation with the Hittites to buy a small piece of the land. How can the Torah say that God had blessed Avraham with everything?

Equally confusing is the Torah's description of Avraham's death at the end of the *parsha*: "*Avraham breathed his last*

and died at a good age, old and satisfied, and he was gathered to his people.” Avraham had been promised that he would become the father of many nations, and that he would inherit the land. But he did not live to see these promises fulfilled. So how can we imagine that he was “satisfied” at the end of his life?

The answer, for both Sarah and Avraham, is that to understand a death, we have to understand a life.

Friedrich Nietzsche (a nineteenth century German philosopher) said: *He who has a why in life can bear almost any how.* It was Sarah and Avraham's sense of destiny and calling that gave their lives purpose and allowed them to survive the difficult times and even the unfulfilled goals at

the end of their lives – because they had faith that the journey was not yet over. They died satisfied that they had played an important part, and taken the first steps for their future family.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you feel a sense of accomplishment even if you have only half-finished a task?
2. What do you think your life's purpose may be (your life's "why" – what you hope to contribute to the world)?



#### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Viktor Frankl was born in Vienna in 1905, and Nazis deported him, with the rest of his family, to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt in 1942. He spent the next three years in extermination camps, among them Auschwitz and Dachau. He and one sister were the only members of the family to survive. It was during his time as a prisoner that he made the discovery which later became his life's work.

Already a distinguished neurologist, he survived by constantly analysing what was happening to himself and others as if he and they were taking part in an experiment. The Nazis took everything away from the prisoners: all their possessions, clothes, shoes, hair, even their names. They seized Frankl's most precious possession, a scientific manuscript containing his life's research. They had erased his entire life. Frankl realised at that point that there is one freedom that can never be taken away: the personal choice of how to respond.

Two of his fellow inmates were contemplating suicide. By talking with them he was able to get each to see that they had something still to live for. One had published a series of books on

geography, but the series was not yet complete. The other had a daughter abroad who loved him devotedly and longed to see him again. In both cases, what was essential was the realisation that there was something more to be done that could be done by no one else. This knowledge gave meaning, to life. By helping his fellow prisoners to find a reason to continue to live, he gave them and himself, the strength to survive.

When he survived the Holocaust and rebuilt his life, he created a new school of psychotherapy around this idea. He called it Logotherapy, focusing on the spiritual dimension of human life, that which gives life a sense of purpose. He summarised his teaching in the title of his most famous book: 'Man's Search for Meaning.'

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How can Viktor Frankl's theory help us understand the lives of Avraham and Sarah?
2. Does every life have meaning?



#### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Avraham and Sarah are among the supreme historical examples of what it is to have a 'Why' in life. The entire course of their lives came as a response to a call, a Divine voice, that told them to leave their home and family, set out for an unknown destination, go to live in a land where they would be strangers, abandon every conventional form of security, and have the faith to believe that by living by the standards of righteousness and justice they would be taking the first step to establishing a family, a nation, a land, a faith and a way of life that would be a blessing to all humankind.

We do not know what Avraham or Yitzchak felt as they walked toward Mount Moriah. We do not know what Sarah felt when she entered the harems, first of Pharaoh, then of Avimelech of Gerar. With some conspicuous exceptions, we hardly know what any of the Torah's characters felt. Which is why the two

explicit statements about Avraham – that God blessed him with everything, and that he ended life old and satisfied – are so important. And when Rashi says that all of Sarah's years were equally good, he is attributing to her what the biblical text attributes to Avraham, namely a serenity in the face of death that came from a profound tranquillity in the face of life. Avraham knew that everything that happened to him, even the bad things, were part of the journey on which God had sent him and Sarah, and he had the faith to walk through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil, knowing that God was with him.

In 2017, an unusual book became an international bestseller. One of the things that made it unusual was that its author was ninety years old and this was her first book. Another was that she was both a survivor of Auschwitz, and also of the Death

March towards the end of the war, which in some respects was even more brutal than the camp itself.

The book was called *The Choice* and its author was Edith Eger. She, together with her father, mother and sister Magda, arrived at Auschwitz in May 1944, one of 12,000 Jews transported from Kosice, Hungary. Her parents were murdered on that first day. A woman pointed towards a smoking chimney and told Edith that she had better start talking about her parents in the past tense. With astonishing courage and strength of will, she and Magda survived the camp and the March. When American soldiers eventually lifted her from a heap of bodies in an Austrian forest, she had typhoid fever, pneumonia, pleurisy and a broken back. After a year, when her body had healed, she married and became a mother. Healing of the mind took much longer, and eventually became her vocation in the United States, where she went to live.

On their way to Auschwitz, Edith's mother said to her, "We don't know where we are going, we don't know what is going to happen, but nobody can take away from you what you put in your own mind." That sentence became her survival mechanism. Initially, after the war, to help support the family, she worked in a factory, but eventually she went to university to study psychology and became a psychotherapist. She has used her own experiences of survival to help others survive life crises.

Early on in the book she makes an immensely important distinction between *victimisation* (what happens to you) and *victimhood* (how you respond to what happens to you). This is what she says about the first:

"We are all likely to be victimised in some way in the course of our lives. At some point we will suffer some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which we have little or no control. This is life. And this is victimisation. It comes from the outside."

And this, about the second:

"In contrast, victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you. We become victims not because of what happens to us but when we choose to hold on to our victimisation. We develop a victim's mind – a way of thinking and being that is rigid, blaming, pessimistic, stuck in the past, unforgiving, punitive, and without healthy limits or boundaries."

In an interview on the publication of the book, she said, "I've learned not to look for happiness, because that is external. You were born with love and you were born with joy. That's inside. It's always there."

We have learned this extraordinary mindset from Holocaust survivors like Edith Eger and Viktor Frankl. But in truth, it was there from the very beginning, from Avraham and Sarah, who survived whatever fate threw at them, however much it seemed to derail their mission. And despite everything, they found serenity at the end of their lives. They knew that what makes a life satisfying is not external but internal, a sense of purpose, mission, being called, summoned, of starting something that would be continued by those who came after them, of bringing something new into the world by the way they lived their lives. What mattered was the inside, not the outside; their faith, not their often-troubled circumstances.

**I believe that faith helps us to find the 'Why' that allows us to bear almost any 'How'. The serenity of Sarah's and Avraham's death was eternal testimony to how they lived.**

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you have a sense of your 'Why'? Does that help you bear the "How" (the challenges in your life)?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"The search for meaning represents one of the deepest truths of the human condition, namely that what affects us is not what happens to us but how we perceive what happens to us, and that is not independent of our will. We are not billiard balls or atoms or genes, responses to stimuli, mere effects of a prior cause. We are free because our response depends on our perception, and that can always be revised. You can imprison the body but not the mind."*

**To Heal a Fractured World, p.220.**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What does it mean to have a 'Why' in life? What was the 'Why' of Avraham and Sarah's lives?
2. What is the difference between *victimisation* and *victimhood*?
3. What lessons for your own life can you take from Edith Eger and her story?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. To answer this question you will need to take a survey of the events in Avraham's life. Highlights include leaving the land of his birth and travelling to an unknown land; leaving that land to Egypt due to famine; returning to Israel and arguing with his nephew Lot; being promised a child but experiencing years of childlessness; war; exile again in Egypt; strife between his wives Hagar and Sarah; the birth of Yitzchak; the Akeidah (Binding of Isaac); Sarah's death and burial; Yitzchak's marriage to Rebecca; a second marriage and more children; and then death. Many of these events were deeply challenging for Avraham (and in fact considered tests from God). But because Avraham had faith that his life was fulfilling the destiny promised to him by God, and had meaning (that he was laying the foundations for the birth of the Jewish people) he could rise to each test and each challenge with faith in God and the destiny God had promised him.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. The Mishnah in *Ethics of the Fathers* (2:16) states: ולא אתה בן חורין לקטל ממנה (It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it). Sometimes the most rewarding and important tasks are too big to be completed by one person or in one lifetime. Faith that you are contributing something worthwhile to the final goal should be enough to provide satisfaction.
2. Obviously young people will not necessarily have a developed sense of this, and should not be made to feel they should. However, trying to find meaning and purpose in life is a worthwhile conversation at any age. The message here is that looking for your *tafkid*, your role in life, helps one live with, and overcome, many challenges, to lead a better and more fulfilling life of purpose.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Despite the many difficulties they faced in their lives, including dying before their life's work (and God's promises to them) had been fulfilled, they survived disappointment, frustration, and challenge along the way because they lived a life of meaning and purpose, believing they were fulfilling God's destiny for them. This is Frankl's explanation for how humans can survive terrible challenges and experiences in their lives.
2. Every life has meaning, because every human being is unique and has a unique contribution to make to the world.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. It is never too early to begin thinking about the purpose of our lives, what we hope to achieve and contribute to the world, and what God expects of us. Reflecting on whether a sense of this helps to overcome challenges in life is a complex conversation with no right and wrong answers, but the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, and the writings of people such as Viktor Frankl and Edith Eger, is that it can.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Having a 'Why' in your life means having a purpose to live, knowing that there is something you are uniquely destined to contribute and achieve. Avraham and Sarah are supreme examples of what it is to have a 'Why' in life. The entire course of their lives came as a response to a call, a Divine voice, that told them to leave their home and family, set out for an unknown destination, go to live in a land where they would be strangers, without security, and yet have the faith to believe that by living by the standards of righteousness and justice they would be taking the first step to establishing a nation, a land, a faith and a way of life that would be a blessing to all humankind. This helped them live through the challenges and as-yet unfulfilled goals of their lives.
2. According to Edith Eger, *Victimisation* is what happens to you and *Victimhood* is how you respond to what happens to you. Victimisation comes from the outside – the suffering of some kind of affliction or calamity or abuse, caused by circumstances or people or institutions over which you have little or no control. Victimhood comes from the inside. Only you can make yourself a victim. We become victims not because of what happens to us, but when we choose to hold on to our victimisation.
3. Every single person, whatever age and stage of life, has had things in their life that are a challenge in some shape, way or form. Things that do not go as we would have wished, or worse. Applying the lessons from Edith Eger to our own lives will help us to respond positively to these challenges. Rather than feeling victimised and frustrated by the world, she teaches us to move past the challenges by making the best of the situation we find ourselves in. Rabbi Sacks has told of the time he first visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and used this phrase in conversation with him – "in the situation I find myself". The Rebbe interrupted him and said "we don't find ourselves in situations. We put ourselves in a situation. And we can choose to put ourselves in a different situation!" This is the same message – we cannot always choose what happens to us, but we can always choose how we respond.