

**D'VAR TORAH ON PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH, delivered by Elizabeth Siegel at
Congregation Agudas Achim, Austin, Texas, November 19, 2011**

This week's parshah is Chayei Sarah, the life of Sarah, which ironically starts not with Sarah's life but her death: "And the life of Sarah was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; [these were] the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died in Kiriath Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her."

So that's it, huh? That's Sarah's life. The entire parsha is named the life of Sarah and all we are given is her obituary. No stories, no details. Just a few quick lines about where, when, how long, and who cared. We see the Torah as a way to live our lives. But how does it tell us to remember those who are gone? If we were to look at Chayei Sarah as our guide, it would appear that the Torah doesn't put much stock in remembering the deceased. Which is surprising, since the entire purpose of the Torah is all about memory. It's about remembering our past, our heritage, and our covenant with G-d. So why isn't more time devoted to remembering Sarah? Maybe it has to do with how memory itself works.

We tend to see our memories as windows into the past, but in reality one of the best things about our memories is how truly imperfect they are. The human memory is far cry from the written record. Our images of the past morph and change as time and life experiences take their toll. A great example of this is the "how we met" stories. In 1992 Dr. John Gottman of the University of Washington conducted a study on 52 couples who had been married for an average of five years and asked them to relate the story of how they met. At the end of the interviews, Gottman and his team predicted which couples they thought would stay together and which they thought would end in divorce. Three

years later he invited the couples back for a follow-up to see how their relationships had progressed. Not only were the researchers 95% correct, it also turned out that over time the couple's stories had changed. The couples that were still happily married had modified their stories over time, adding cute little details and embellishments. They now said they just "knew" they had found the right one and it was "love at first sight," when in reality they hadn't known at all. The couples that were divorced or doing poorly had also changed their stories, but not in so flattering a light. These couples tended to focus on annoyances and aggravations rather than sweetness and serendipity. It turns out that how we see our spouses now can influence how we saw them (or at least thought we saw them) back then. Not only can our past help shape our present, but it turns out that our present can retool how we think about the past.

But while some couples choose to de-romanticize their stories (perhaps as a method for dealing with the reality of a failed marriage and the pain of divorce), I think that most of the time our memories tend to be more kind and forgiving. Robert E. Lee was once quoted as saying, "It is good that war is so terrible, lest we love it too much." I find the opposite to be true with memory. It is good that memory is so terrible lest we forget how to love. An obituary is short. It has no time for frills or flourishes. It has time, as Joe Friday would say, for "just the facts, ma'am." It leaves space only for the nitty-gritty details of where, when, how long and who cares. And to many people this may seem unfair or unflattering. To condense a life into so few lines, to leave out so much of who we were and what we did seems like a monstrous injustice. And yet perhaps the shortest obituary is actually the kindest. Our lives are not perfect. They are messy, ugly things filled with regrets, mistakes, and remorse. No one knew this more than Sarah. A tortured woman, she knew the agony of being barren, a violent jealousy and hatred that led her to demand the exile that was sure to be the death of Hagar and Ishmael, the abject heartbreak of thinking that her one and only son would be sacrificed. While Sarah was no doubt a righteous woman, these flaws serve to make her more human, not less. She is

like so many of us. A mixed bag of good and bad. Of proud moments but also abject failures. But none of these flaws find their way into an obituary. The regrets, misfortunes, unhappiness, sorrows and defeats ... these have no place in the few lines allotted to the recently deceased. All we are given is a handful of words and our memories. Our memories, which tend to soften the rough edges and smooth away the creases of life. Which make difficult times seem "not that bad" and whitewash all those little white lies we've plastered on the walls of our lives through so many years. In a way, an obituary is a rare gift. As the writer Tom Rachman said, "The obit is as close as news gets in structure to the short story. After all, how many other news articles have a conclusion?" And how many let just so easily fill the blanks in between?

In the end, the Torah gives us what we need to know about Sarah. That she was a woman, she lived, and Abraham loved her deeply. And when she died he mourned and he wept. The rest is for us to fill in the blanks. We can fill it with what we want. We can choose to remember the rough times, the heartache, disappointment and sorrow. Or we can do what Abraham did: forget all of that and remember to do what matters most. To love.

At my ripe old age of 25 ... I'm losing it. My mind, which once was a steel trap, is now more of a sieve. And I hear 26 is when it really starts to go downhill. But if I can only remember one thing, I hope it's to love. To re-create my past with nostalgia instead of regret and to create new memories better than the ones that I let slip away. Like Sarah, my past isn't perfect. It's had times that have been ugly, messy, cracked, and flawed. And yet, when my time comes, I hope my obituary is short enough to let everyone forget all that. And to allow them to choose to remember the better times. And to do as Abraham did, to mourn, to weep, and to love.

Shabbat Shalom.