

Noa Kushner
November 18, 2022
Chayyei Sarah 5783
Is Anyone Home?

1.

It is strange

In this week's torah a giant, seemingly, relatively mundane story is not only told in great detail, it is almost completely *repeated*

Let me back up

Abraham, who has just buried Sarah, his wife

Sends his servant to go find a wife for his son Isaac

And the servant, maybe you remember, creates a whole little set up

Whereby if the woman he meets shows a level of kindness, *hesed*, an over and above kindness

She will be the one

The unnamed servant is indeed successful, spoiler alert, it is Rebekkah, she is kind over and above any obligation

But this is a *drasha* not just a rom com and so the successful match, while heartwarming, is not my point

Rather, I want you to first understand that this telling of the errand and the servant in our torah is very long.

Don't get me wrong

It is not that this story is not important, it is just that Torah uses many, many verses to describe this servant

His inner thoughts

His tribulations, his moments of anxiety

Rebekkah's responses

And, again it is not that it is not important but in the same book that gives Abraham's binding of his son Isaac on the alter a couple dozen lines

In a book that describes the destruction of the world with just a few paragraphs

In a book that, let's just say leaves a lot of things to the imagination even in existential circumstances

You're telling me this same book

Gets so very detailed about this arranged match of Isaac and Rebekkah to the point where the narrative is told with detail not just once but twice, because when the servant reports on all that happened he goes through the entire thing, almost verbatim, again ?!

Torah does not waste words, so why?

2.

Perhaps, my teacher Avivah Zornberg offers

Perhaps because this obvious, hit-us-over-the-head-repetition is there to remind us of the less obvious repetitions in the parasha
Less obvious because they are so common, both in Torah and in our lives

But they are repetitions nevertheless:

You see

In the beginning of the parasha Sarah dies

And at the end of the parasha Abraham dies

Still, a repetition

And then, in the middle of the parasha we have our story about Isaac and Rebecca, the story of the next generation, the story of life carrying on

You see, as it says in Kohelet Rabbah
Before the sun of one righteous person sets,
God causes the sun of another righteous person to begin to rise.¹

And this kind of epic repetition, that of death and life, and death and life again is so fundamental, it is so enormous we don't even see it

Even when it is framing one torah portion
Even when, especially when, it is framing our own lives

So perhaps this strange repetition of a meandering servant's account in finding a bride in our torah
Is to remind us to remember that repetitions, or more accurately, this kind of doubling back, a pattern to life –
It is unavoidable

These repetitions are built into the system
The question is, once we realize we are in the midst of a repetition

One that might be as unavoidable as time or history itself
We might still ask
Torah might just be suggesting we notice and ask

¹ [kolhelet rabbah 1:5 1 to 24:67]

What is there for us to learn?

What might be different this time around?

Because you don't need me to tell you that just repeating the same patterns again and again without change, without alteration, without iteration

This is what makes something not only predictable but tragic

If our life stories always have the same endings

Within our lives

or from generation to generation within our families

Or in our political realities

this is not just repetition it is a life sentence

So, for example, if Trump wants to be president again

And his announcement is a repetition of sorts

We are brought back to the last time he made the same announcement

And we don't ask ourselves "What will be different this time around?"

If we forget all that we've learned

About the incredible diligence and effort it takes to maintain our democracy

That the power of words, of rhetoric, no matter how dubious and preposterous they are or their source, are formidable and lasting

That autocrats aren't always brilliant geniuses – how they can just as easily originate from simple bullies with brutal instincts

If we forget all that we've learned
Or, if, after the last grueling political rounds we are so tired
So cynical and distracted
That despondency takes over
We will find ourselves not only in a repetition of previous years
We will be in a repetition with a decreasing possibility for
change
The ultimate political rerun

You see the Trumps of the world will always try to gain power
Now more than ever
They will always gain traction
The only question is, what have we learned?
Can we gather our strength
Not only to influence the results of a given election
But so that we can grow, as people, as a society, as a country
Can our conversations evolve into something different or will we
go back to our entrenched positions?
Will we run around in the same circles, on the election, on Israel
(another feeling of election *deja vous*, spoke about it last week –
will we run in the same circles regarding what Dave Chapelle
said on SNL, our talking points carving out the same tired
grooves?)
Or can our *growth* be the operating question? *What will be
different this time?*

Perhaps I am especially sensitive to this motif of growing
through repetition because I am a rabbi's child and yes, I am
also a rabbi

But all our lives go round and round,
Not just generationally but all the time
the holidays, the birthdays, the baby namings, yes, the funerals
The repetition, the homecomings, the weddings
The couple is circling each other in front of the chuppah
but we're all circling that huppah over the course of our lives
We're standing in different places at the huppah, at the
cemetery, around the table
All of us in different places at repetition, each revolution
As we return this time around, can we shake off the old roles
and ask ourselves, what is there for us to learn?

3.

This week we learn about the death of Sarah
Famously, she dies abruptly
According to the *midrash*, she hears what Abraham did up there
on the mountain with their son and her soul leaves her

The *midrash* does not seem to be over reaching
Her sudden death does seem strangely timed, the lack of detail
provided does seem mysterious

And poor Isaac has so much going on
What with his super intense father and all
When we find him, wandering in the field, about to meet
Rebecca his wife
Perhaps we think about him – as I mentioned earlier – as a little
bit out of his mind in a good way, reaching for the sky and the
sunset, talking to himself, inventing prayers on his own

And that story of Abraham and Isaac is so riveting and troubling
And perhaps because women just generally get relatively so
little attention in Torah

We just sort of forget about Sarah

She dies but, other than thinking what it was that caused her
death

We don't think of the aftermath that her death causes

We don't consider the grief her death causes

She just kind of disappears and

We don't usually imagine that perhaps, Isaac is wandering
around the field, creating prayers because he is inconsolable
because his *mother* is suddenly gone

It is true but now we remember

Abraham, according to the *pshat*, plain text, has already made
arrangements for his son to meet a wife

That's what the business with the servant was all about, after all

But Isaac is strangely absent from that negotiation, that scene,
that announcement of that holy errand

Maybe, it is not hard to imagine, Isaac and Abraham are on
strained terms

Sarah is gone, it is just the two of them, not a lot to say at the
dinner table these days

You think your thanksgiving is going to be awkward

So maybe Abraham doesn't consult Isaac at all in this matter, just
sends the servant on his way

But maybe the truth is darker

And in fact in Midrash HaGadol

Based on the phrase *acharei imo / after his mother, after* this mother's death

There is a suggestion that Isaac mourned his mother three years

A prolonged mourning

Not missing, mourning

Too long to be in mourning

As he wanders in that field

And you see not only does Isaac's grief remain unchanging

It seems, in the *midrash*, Sarah's tent remains too

Not unlike a room today that remains intact but is entirely uninhabited

Sarah's tent was just as she left it

Only, according to the rabbis, her essence was not there

That is to say in the very place where we would, where Isaac expected and wanted to find his mother

In the very place where one would anticipate Isaac feeling close to this mother

Her presence was absent, it was vacant

Where there was once her light in the tent, her light was gone

Where there were once open doors, now the doors were unattended

The feeling of Sarah was gone

And it seems Isaac's grief could not lift because he could not find even her memory, her light, as a source of comfort

But now Isaac meets his Rebekkah in the field

And our hope swells

Perhaps the shining sun of the righteous, Isaac's sun,
preordained long ago, will yet rise and be seen

But this is not at all certain –

We can imagine a version of this story, where Isaac and Rebecca
now run away, leaving it all behind, and leaving our Torah
without its next natural repetition

Given everything who could blame them?

And we can imagine a version where Isaac, unable to alter the
predictable pattern of his grief

Unable to relinquish the safety of his well earned victimhood
Shuns the efforts of his father and the servant, and turns away
from the possibility of Rebekah, and continues to live out his life
walking in the same circles in that field

But in our parasha of repetitions

In our torah of repetitions

Against a backdrop of the holy repetitions of our lives

We begin to understand that with each repetition comes
another chance

and so Isaac, with great courage

Takes Rebekkah, of all places, back to the very tent where he
most precisely feels his mother's absence

A homecoming where there's no one home

Why he risks taking her and being disappointed by Sarah's
absence again there I am not entirely sure

Why Isaac risks taking Rebekkah there I am not sure but I know it has something to do with faith

With Isaac asking himself, given the inevitable repetitions of life
Now that he is not only the child but now also becoming someone else

What he might learn this time around

Who he might be

Thank god for the faith of the unnamed servant

Who goes to such great lengths to ensure Rebekkah would come to find Isaac

Thank god for Abraham who sends the servant

Thank god for possibility of repetition, for homecoming

Thank god for the yearning of children for parents even after they are gone and parents for children

Even after they are gone

Because no matter how many times we have tried and failed in our repetitions –

This time around

As Isaac returns back home with Rebecca

Torah says he loved her and was, at last, comforted after his mother's death

Before the sun of one righteous person sets, it says in Kohelet rabbah

God causes the sun of another righteous person to begin to rise.²

² [kolhelet rabbah 1:5 1 to 24:67]

And so I think that on that day Issac returned home
to see what he might learn this time around
The sunrise of Isaac, his sunrise, preordained from long ago, was
finally visible on the horizon

And I believe, of course!, that's when light of Sarah's tent finally
returned, too