

Dear Shir Tikvah:

Chayei Sarah—this week’s parsha—opens with the death of the first Jewish woman, Sarah. Avraham, her husband, tends to the arrangements to ensure that he has a proper burial.

Sarah’s lifetime—the span of Sarah’s life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, “I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.” And the Hittites replied to Abraham, saying to him, “Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead. ...Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst [Gen 2:1-6].”

The text doesn’t express the depth of Avraham’s grief, though it does let us know he sheds tears upon the death of his beloved. As a rabbi who has officiated at hundreds of funerals in my 19 ½ years as a rabbi, I can hear the reverberations of the dirt as it struck the earth and can feel in my bones the thunderous echo of Avraham’s tears as they flooded the universe. There are few moments in life as painful, holy, and important as l’vya-at ha-met~accompanying our loved ones to their final burial place.

Avraham, it seems, did not have a plan for when Sarah died. Their story is a cautionary tale for us: One of the most precious gifts we can give to our loved ones is to make our intentions around our death, funeral, and burial known to them whenever possible. For some people, for a variety of legitimate reasons, this is not possible. But for many of us, it is possible. And it is a gift to ourselves and to those we love.

If the theme of Pesach each year is, “Let My People Go!” let’s make Chanukkah this year a time for conversation about our desires at end of life; the gift we can give our loved ones? “Let My People Know!”

If you want a quiet graveside service, let your loved ones know. If you’ve signed up as an organ donor, let them know. If you have a health care directive, let them know. If you have someone you would prefer to eulogize you, let them know. If you want a full week of shivah observed, let them know. If you’re able to make the logistical arrangements beforehand (such as the cemetery you wish to be buried at), you provide the opportunity to have your final moments on earth be as you desire. And you give your loved ones the responsibility and the gift to honor your final wishes.

These can be challenging conversations. We don’t talk much about death in American life, and when we do, it too often indirect and euphemistic.

But the very fifth Torah portion of B’reishit opens with Sarah’s death and the mitzvah—the commandment—of Avraham burying her. Judaism invites us—compels—to do the hard, holy, messy work of living and dying, together, in our beloved community. The mitzvah of accompanying our dead to their final burial place is considered one of the most important mitzvot—because the person on the receiving end is never able to do the same for us. It is an obligation without measure, that Pirke Avot teaches, whose reward is beyond measure.

May you have these important conversations with the people you love. And may each of us live ad meah v’esrim~to 120!

Wishing each of us a Shabbes of soulful inspiration and deep connection,

Michael