

Five hundred twentyfive thousand six hundred minutes. . . five hundred twentyfive thousand moments so dear . . . five hundred twentyfive thousand six hundred minutes . . . how do you measure, measure a year?

While I would really love to see how you would all respond if I spend ten minutes just singing to you from Rent, I'll depart from the score here. That song popped into my head last night as I was reading the commentary on the first line of this week's parasha, Chayyei Sarah, literally, the life of Sarah. It begins, ironically enough, with Sarah's death right after the episode of the Binding of Isaac.

The first line has a curious, hobbling repetition. It reads: And the life of Sarah came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years. Why the repetition of "years"? Commentators love chewing on any apparent redundancy, sucking meaning out of it. Perhaps the most referenced commentary is from Rashi, the 11th century French sage, who says that the repetition of the word "years" indicates that each year stood on its own in perfection. That Sarah was as innocent and pure a soul at the age of one hundred as she was at twenty, and at the age of twenty as she was at seven.

Now, I'll admit, the first several times I encountered that reading, I had somewhat of a raised eyebrow reaction. Sarah, a perfectly pure soul? Practically all that Torah tells us about her personality is that Sarah gave her handmaid, Hagar a hard time because she was jealous of her pregnancy. We are also told that she laughed in disbelief when promised that she would bear a child in old age. And we are told that she demanded the expulsion of Hagar's son, Ishmael, from the household, refusing to allow the possibility that Isaac would have to share the inheritance with him.

So: the years of Sarah, filled each one, with innocence and purity? The years of Sarah, all for the good?

But the great thing about Jewish tradition is that if you have trouble with a commentary, there's always commentary on the commentary. So last night I was reading the Sefas Emes, a late nineteenth century hasidic work, and based on Rashi's commentary, it notes that Sarah had lived through great trial, as well as great blessing, and remained equanimitous and committed to serving God through all of this. Specifically, the Sfas Emes mentions that in her youth, in Parashat Lech Lecha she and Avram traveled to Egypt because of a famine, where she was taken captive by Pharaoh for her beauty. Later in life, she taken captive by Abimelech, we are told, again because of her legendary beauty. And yet, says the Sefas Emes, all of her years were "perfect," because throughout all of her trials, she remained attached to what the author calls "the upper root" - her connection to her deepest soul, and through that, to the divine.

And you know, I think there is something to this idea. It occurred to me that my judgement of Sarah's character, my eyebrow raising, perhaps reflects my own privilege of having been born a Jewish woman in possibly the most uniquely safe and empowered time and place in history to hold that identity.

Of course, Abraham comes off more generous in the Torah. All the patriarch do. But it's easy for Abraham to be generous. He waxes rich, he wins battles, all following the directives of a God who appears - and who rewards - frequently enough to satisfy any doubts that might appear.

It is a marker of privilege to be able to demand generosity, equanimity and liberal tolerance as the definition of virtue. To impose those values can often mean to silence the voices of those whose heroism can only be expressed through the fact of their survival.

So what if we cut Sarah some slack? What if we consider not only that she was frankly abducted at a young age in a foreign land twice; with her husband unwilling to risk himself to save her, but another interesting fact about her in Torah - and here's my commentary on the commentary on the commentary - which is that of all the named characters in her household, she is the only one whom God does not directly address. Torah tells us that God speaks directly to Abraham all the time. God responds to Eliezer, Abraham's servant, later in this Torah portion, when he goes back to Haran to seek a wife for Isaac. God sends an angel to speak to cousin Lot, and God even speaks - twice! - to her handmaid Hagar, once right after Sarah's own fit of jealousy.

There is an idea described in Jewish tradition as *hester panim* - the hiding of God's face. In Christian tradition, it's *the dark night of the soul*. The condition of wanting to feel connected to the divine, but feeling lost. Many of us go through this, but according to the Biblical narrative, Sarah dealt with it while surrounded by people who were receiving Divine communication.

Sarah's life begins to look like an awful lot of grief and broken promises. And yet, later in the parasha, Chapter 24, verse 67 says that after Isaac married Rebecca, and that he loved her, and that he found comfort after his mother's death. Isaac is the only patriarch who is said to love his wife. And Isaac is the only patriarch who is mentioned to mourn his mother. So through all of Sarah's trials, and all of her visible lapses in faith and in generosity; she raised a son who was capable of grief, and capable of love; in a time and culture when that was either rare or unworthy of mention.

Imagine following your partner to a distant land, full of faith in your partner's divine inspiration. Imagine *everyone in your household* - your underlings, your partner, your child, receiving explicit Divine guidance. But you receive no dreams. Through abduction in Egypt then again in Philistine territory; through unfulfilled promises of fertility, year after year, transmitted to you secondhand - you; no voice ever speaks in your head. Would you be able to teach faith, honest grief and love to the next generation?

And so yes; Rashi, by that measure, I see that in some way Sarah did remain attached to what the Sfas Emes calls “the upper root” - her connection to her deepest soul, and through that, to the divine.

I think that Sarah’s life teaches us about the possibility of heroism in bare survival, of how an ordinary person, a person theoretically uninspired the Divine voice, can live a life of spiritual heroism. It does mean that she never snapped any anyone – Torah tells us how she did. She made terrible mistakes. And yet, we can still call her perfect.

I wonder if we can look to her for a model. Of course we all snap sometimes. None of us are perfectly patient. But day by day, do we live lives that hook to faith in something? Do we teach others to love? Might we be allowed to imagine our potential, even now, flawed as we all are, to be connected to our deepest souls, and through that, to the divine?

**Five hundred twentyfive thousand six hundred minutes. . . ?**

**Seasons of lo-----ve. . . .measure in love.**