

In Praise of Three Women
Parashat Chayei Sarah
Genesis: 23:1 - 25:18
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It was with jubilation that many of us learned of Sasha Lutt as she became bat mitzvah. Now it is almost ubiquitous to learn that a young Jewish woman is called to the Torah as a bat mitzvah, and each should be celebrated. Since the first bat mitzvah almost a century ago, when young Judith Eisenstein, then Judith Kaplan (daughter of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan), stepped to the bima in New York City, we have celebrated women's leadership in our community. But, Sasha Lutt's experience was unique (and hopefully not for long), as she was surrounded by her family and community of Women of the Wall, Sasha read from a kosher scroll from the family of World Union for Progressive Judaism leaders, Noeleen and John Cohen, at the Western Wall. Sasha and her supporters stood up to the patriarchal, ultra-orthodox hegemony, and asserted her right as a young woman to take her place among those who will perpetuate Jewish identity, Jewish learning and Jewish leadership. Kol HaKavod, Sasha!

This week we read from a parasha - the only parasha -- named for a woman: Chayei Sarah - the Life of Sarah. And yet, only two lines are devoted to Sarah. The Torah states; "The life of Sarah - she lived 127 years. Sarah died in Kiriath Arba - now known as Hebron -in the Canaanite land; and Abraham went to mourn her and bewail her." Most people know that Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhaki, one of the greatest commentators - 12th Century) lifted up three similar midrashim that explained Sarah's "sudden" death in this chapter - that she learned of her husband's attempt to sacrifice her son Isaac, and she died of a broken heart. While that is a most powerful image, and one worthy of tomes of commentary, I prefer to see the text differently. What I glean from these first two lines is that Sarah's

life could only be described in its wholeness and fullness – that her life story can only be told at her death. Every day, every moment, is a chance to change our lives – we have the ability to decide how we will act, what we will say, what we value -- and if that is the case, our life's story in an open book, an unfinished work, until that book is closed. Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose death is marked by how long she lived – and to live 127 years, we are told, is to live to the “ideal age” (‘May you live to be 120!’) with the mystical and sacred number 7 added in. So only in death could Sarah's life be understood – and from this we learn that we are all given an opportunity, at every moment, to write our story, and only with our last breath, can that story be understood. We are grateful to Sarah for teaching us that we can keep on writing and rewriting our lives until the spirit departs. Kol HaKavod, Sarah!

And then we have the true focus of this week's portion: Rivka. Abraham sends his servant Eliezer to find a suitable woman to marry his son Isaac. Abraham has only two requirements: that the woman come from his ancestral land (and not the land of the Canaanites) and that the woman consent. Eliezer makes the selection even harder by adding additional requirements: that she be gracious enough to offer a stranger (Eliezer) water to drink, and further offering to water the stranger's camels. Of course we know that the woman, Rivka, meets all the requirements, and Eliezer reaches out to her family to seek their permission to bring her to his master's son. At first they agree, but then ask that he delay his return for 10 days. Eliezer begs that his return not be delayed and Rivka's brother and mother ask her directly if she is prepared to go with Eliezer. Without hesitation, she consents. And as she departs, they bless Rivka with a blessing that has been repeated for brides on their wedding day for generations, “O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads. May your offspring seize the gates of their foes!” Very few women in the Bible ever receive a blessing, and Rivka is the only one to receive one from her own mother. While Abraham was once commanded to leave his father's house; women throughout the millennia have left their ancestral homes to make a new home and to create a future. Rivka later gives

birth to Esau and Jacob. And as Jacob becomes Israel, Rivka is truly the mother of us all. Kol HaKavod, Rivka!

We are strengthened by Sasha, who taught us to fight for our rights; by Sarah, who taught us to live every moment until our last; and by Rivka, who willingly and bravely faced an opportunity to build a future. They all deserve our praise.

NB - I am grateful to our teachers: Dr Ellen Frankel for her "The Five Books of Miriam": Rabbi Elyse Goldstein and her many contributors to "The Women's Torah Commentary"; Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Dr. Andrea L. Weiss who edited "The Torah: A Women's Commentary"; Dr. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg for her "Genesis: The Beginning of Desire". I am also grateful for the three most important women, of whom I sing their praises: my mother, Sylvia Granatoor; my beshert and beloved Marianne, who shres with me a hyphen and gave me half of my last name and with whom we created our daughter, Samantha Bretton-Granatoor, for whom we will soon be able to say, "O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads!"