

Chayah Sarah 2014 - When You Are Feeling Overwhelmed Pt. 2
Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, November 15, 2014

This week we are continuing in our sermon series called, "When You Are Feeling Overwhelmed." We are asking ourselves: "What are the spiritual lessons of our People that can help you get through what you are going through?" In our frequently over-programmed lives we often run the risk of feeling an overwhelming sense of stress, disillusionment, and helplessness. In a world that places such a high value on "productivity", we are almost all prone to feeling completely worn out, and even burnt out from time to time. When you're burnt out, problems seem insurmountable, everything looks bleak, and it's difficult to muster up the energy to care... So we withdraw... On the other hand, (as we spoke about last week) that overwhelmed feeling can sometimes push us to do something rash, something we may later come to regret. That overwhelmed feeling can threaten our jobs, our relationships, and even our physical as well as mental health. And so we are looking at spiritual ways to address these challenges, because the Torah isn't a story-book, it's a guide for life - for meaningful, purposeful and more fulfilling lives.

So, if that's the case, it should not surprise us that many of the Torah's stories are about people feeling overwhelmed by the circumstances in their lives, too. And looking at how they got through it can help us to gain a new perspective on what we are going through as well. This week, the sedra of Chayei Sarah focuses on two episodes, both narrated at great length and in intricate detail. In the first story, Abraham buys a field with a cave on it as a burial place for Sarah. In the second story, he instructs his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. Why are these two events linked; why are they seamed together? The simple answer is because they happened in that order. That, however, cannot be all of it. We misunderstand Torah if we think of it as a book that simply tells us what happened. This is not simply a history book. It is Torah, meaning "teaching." It not only tells us what happened, it also tells us things we need to know now. So what is the "Torah", the "teaching", in these two episodes when taken as a whole? It is, I believe a life lesson on getting through being overwhelmed by present circumstance in our lives.

Clearly, Abraham has every right to feel disillusioned, stressed out and overwhelmed. Abraham, the first Jew, receives two promises from Gd- both stated five times; two promises on which he stakes his life: The first is the promise of a Land of his own - a "Promised Land." Time and again he is told by Gd that the land to which he has traveled - Canaan - will one day be his. The second promise from Gd is that he will have children, and grandchildren, for generations to come. This promise is also stated five times.

Two promises; two dreams that Abraham has about his future. He has a clear picture of what to expect. The Land will be his and his children's as "an everlasting possession," and he, Abraham will have as many children as the dust of the earth, the stars of the sky, and the sand on the sea-shore. But as we see, it does not seem that all is going according to plan. In fact, it's the opposite. The reality is that at the time Sarah dies Abraham owns no land and his son is 37 and has no wife. (He hasn't even had a date!)

Abraham's vision of who he would be at this point in his life has unraveled. All his plans, his vision of the future have gone up in smoke. No wife, no land to bury her, and no heirs to carry on

the family line. So what does he do? First he deals with the death. He buys the grave. He mourns. He sits shiva. He observes Shloshim. And he really mourns. He is low, and the text shows this fairly dramatically. It's the first time the Torah speaks about mourning, and it doesn't say, "Just move on - get over it." It says, "Mourn, grieve, feel justified in your sadness and loss." But then, after the mourning period is over, Abraham focuses on the next chapter of his life, which means helping find a wife for his son. He knows he can't do this himself, so he trusts in his servant and he does what he can to assure that the servant will be successful.

By juxtaposing these two stories, the Torah, we are taught, is emphasizing the fact that even though his life did not go according to plan, and even though he is low, he plans for the future. Not his own future, but that of his son. He shifts the focus off his own "tsuris" and he begins to contemplate his legacy by positively effecting the lives of those closest to him. Part of combating that overwhelmed feeling is realizing that life is a journey and that your life will change, and often for the better. But simply knowing that what you're feeling now will change is not enough. You need to also have a vision of the future. Still, the future is so unpredictable? Who knows what will happen to us? That's why the focus is not on us, but on the future for others. By focusing on finding a wife, Abraham is not just planning for his own future, he's planning for his son's. He shifted the emphasis way from his own challenges to meeting the needs of another, in this case his son.

We have to ask ourselves, "How will the decisions I make today effect the longer term future of those around me? What paradigms am I setting in place? What values am I imparting?" We need to ask ourselves these questions because whether we know it or not, our decisions have a ripple effect on those around us. We realize that, in most cases, we are who we are today because of the choices, the hopes and dreams of those who came before us. Well, we are those people now.

You want to be down - be down. You need to mourn, so mourn. You have frustrations, be frustrated. But don't be so self-absorbed over the long term as to think that your emotions, your reactions, and your self-concept have no bearing on others. Your life, your decisions in the here and now really matter. So take a deep breath and a longer look at your life, and start planning for a better future, for yourself, and for those who will follow...