



***Parashat Chayei Sarah***  
***Claiming an Unworded, Yet Holy Union***

by Moshe Ben Chacon on Saturday November 18, 2006  
27 Cheshvan 5767  
Genesis 23:1 - 25:18, Shabbat

**In a Nutshell**

This week's Torah portion presents us with the first case of Jewish marriage, with God as the matchmaker, no less. Through the story of Isaac and Rebecca, our Jewish "first couple," we encounter a heartwarming account of love at first sight. But what lesson does this story of heterosexual union offer to the queer reader? We will see that there is potentially much more to the narrative than meets the eye.

Intriguingly enough, *Parashat Chayei Sarah* ("The Life of Sarah") starts after Sarah's death. In it, Sarah's grieving husband, Abraham, seeks a spouse for Isaac, the son born to Sarah "in her old age." At this point in the story Isaac is motherless and pained by Sarah's death – a pain that finds its resolution when he falls in love with and marries Rebecca. As the sages wrote in the Midrash Rabbah, "As long as Sarah lived, there was a blessing on her dough, and the lamp used to burn from the evening of the Sabbath until the evening of the following Sabbath; when she died, these ceased; but when Rebecca came, they returned." Along with providing a full case study for avid Freudians, as we shall see, the union of Isaac and Rebecca emphasizes *Chesed* (mercy) and *Tzedek* (righteousness) as the ultimate tests of true love.

**Death and Trans-formation**

In the beginning of the portion, Abraham is planning Sarah's burial: "And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her" (Genesis 23:2). The sages have suggested that Sarah's death is connected to the binding of Isaac. The Midrash says that Sarah was frightened by the possibility that Abraham would not fulfill God's command to sacrifice Isaac – her only son—and when she saw Abraham coming back with Isaac still alive, she went into shock and died.

The binding of Isaac itself contains a startling "queer" subtext that also plays a significant role in the issue before us in this week's *parasha* – the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca. Although extremely controversial, one Midrash holds that Isaac was born with a female soul. The binding of Isaac was a ritual through which Isaac's soul transmuted from female into male, enabling



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Isaac to eventually fall in love with and marry Rebecca. She would, in turn, bear Jacob, the man who would come to be “*the glory of the patriarchs*” (Zohar, 35.487). Is this a clear account of female to male transition in the Torah? Is gender physical reassignment surgery the painful “sacrifice” my trans brothers and sisters have to endure in order to achieve harmony and to find love? As it says in the Zohar’s description of the binding of Isaac: “*Now water (the masculine) was mixed with fire (the feminine)*” – and it was not until then that Abraham achieved perfection in his days (Zohar 35.490).

### **The Search**

After Abraham buries Sarah, he summons his servant, Eliezer, to go to his homeland and find a spouse there for his son Isaac. After placing his hand “under Abraham’s thigh” as an oath that he would do what he was asked, Eliezer sets out for Abraham’s birthplace. Torah commentators agree that “under my thigh” is a reference to Abraham’s circumcision. As this awkward euphemism highlights, we rarely find words in the Torah that refer directly to sexuality – whether it be genitalia or copulation, heterosexual or queer.

### **A Resonant Call for Equality**

After reaching Abraham’s homeland, Eliezer stops and prays to God that he will be able to fulfill his mission: “*O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master.*” (Genesis 23:12-14).

And so it comes to pass, exactly as Eliezer asked in his prayer. With this, we witness an event that occurs only three times in the Torah: a prayer is answered immediately after being recited. The other two biblical characters to be blessed in this way are Moses and King Solomon, two of the most important people in Jewish history. Yet here, the prayer of a servant and non-Israelite is answered directly and without delay. Could giving a non-Israelite servant the exact same status as Moses and King Solomon be considered a sign that being a “chosen/choosing” people does not imply superiority of any sort? Should this be a reminder of the equality of all humankind?

### **The Wedding**

After praying to God, Eliezer meets Rebecca, who welcomes him with water and hospitality. After negotiating with her family (relatives of Abraham), Eliezer brings Rebecca back to the land of Canaan where she is to meet with Isaac. Still on the camel as they approach the settlement, Rebecca sees her future spouse walking in a field: “*Raising her eyes, Rebecca saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel and said to Eliezer, ‘Who is that man walking in the field toward us?’ And Eliezer said, ‘That is my master.’ So she took her veil and covered herself...Isaac then*



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*brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.” (Genesis 23: 64-67).*

Commenting on why Rebecca was chosen to be Isaac's mate, Rashi tells us that: *“She is suited for [Isaac] because she engages in acts of kindness, and she is fitting to enter into Abraham's house.”* (Rashi:24:14). Isaac is regarded in Midrashic literature as the embodiment of self-control and strictness. He was able to see beyond himself, accepted his father's plan to bind him and offer him in sacrifice – a voluntary act of giving. Thus, tradition teaches us that the union of Isaac and Rebecca was not one of oil and water, rather they each complemented each other emotionally and spiritually, challenging each other in acts of charity and kindness.

The union of Rebecca and Isaac leads me to an issue that is very dear to me and to many people in the LGBT community who have to fight arduously for the right to sanctify their lives through marriage. Rebecca is the embodiment of mercy and kindness (*chesed*), traits that endear her to Isaac and form the basis of their love. As a queer male, I ask myself what traits God would consider most important in a life partner: the person's gender or their loving and kindness? And when I meet my beloved, who is entitled to tell me that I cannot marry? God? Religion? Demagogues? The State?

### **A New Consciousness Based on Everlasting and Universal Torah Principles**

While the Torah does not present a diversity of sexual and gender identities (perhaps embedded in the same opacity that stops short of naming sexual terms), it does provide abundant evidence of fairness – of deconstructing the widely accepted and otherwise unchallenged modus operandi of a society.

I can almost hear God in his cry for conscientious and logical thinking based on true loving and kindness. I can almost hear God say: *“Whereas my herd was once unprepared to break the binaries, a new consciousness is on the rise. I lay before you the foundations of a world built upon CHESED.”* As it is written in Psalms 89:3, *“the world is built from chesed.”* Justly so, my LGBT brothers and sisters continue in their struggle to create change in their societies. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, like straight members of society, are required to pay taxes and fulfill civic obligations, and consequently, they should be allowed the same civil rights as heterosexuals. The LGBT community should be allowed to fulfill religious obligations to sanctify their lives through marriage just like all other members of society, and those marriages should be fully recognized, respected and celebrated by our government, our religious leaders and our families, just as heterosexual marriages are. Because *“one must repeat, from time to time: The world was created for my sake. Never say: What do I care about this or that? Do your part to add something new, to bring forth something that is needed, and leave the world a little better because you were here briefly”* (Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav).



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