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*This week's teaching is provided by Lilly Kaufman, Director of the Torah Fund Campaign of Women's League for Conservative Judaism.*

**Shabbat Shalom,**

**Rabbi Mitch**

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Of all the lessons that *Parashat Hayyei Sarah* teaches us about *hesed* (kindness), perhaps its most important lesson can be summed up in the word “no.”

Rebecca, the heroine of the *parashah*, is both physically and ethically strong. She can lift a heavy water urn with ease, and she possesses a deep graciousness called *hesed*. When she gives water to Abraham's servant, Eliezer, and his camels, she fulfills Eliezer's eloquent prayer, in which he appealed to God moments earlier to find a fitting wife for Isaac. He names the value of *hesed* twice in this brief prayer (Gen. 24:12, 14), and his prayer is answered so rapidly and completely by Rebecca's action that Eliezer is stunned (Gen. 24:21).

Rebecca's *hesed* is rewarded later on with an awkward but real love scene in an open field at dusk (Gen. 24:62-66). Apparently *hesed* is as natural to humanity as young love, and is as basic to our inner capaciousness as a wide-open field is to our sense of human autonomy and possibility.

*Hesed* is defined earlier in the Bible, without being named, in an act that preceded — and may have precipitated — the birth of Isaac, the very man Rebecca will marry. In *Parashat Vayera*, Abraham energetically welcomed three strangers to his and Sarah's tent, inventing the mitzvah of *hachnassat orkhim* (welcoming guests), which is a central form of *hesed* in Judaism. This important kindness leads to the announcement of the miraculous birth of Isaac, who will become the first heir to Abraham's spiritual legacy.

In all these scenes, the kind acts that we read about are forms of an empathic “yes” to another person: whether it is Rebecca generously offering water to a stranger; or Eliezer earnestly praying to God, not on his own behalf, but on behalf of Abraham; or the protective love of the strong Rebecca for the quiet, pensive Isaac in his mother's tent in the field. All these kindly “yeses” are tempered with an important “no” that is implied in two scenes in *Hayyei Sarah*.

When Abraham instructs Eliezer to seek a wife for Isaac in Abraham's homeland and bring her back to Canaan to marry Isaac, Eliezer raises a question: “What if the woman doesn't consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son to the land from which you came?” (Gen. 24:5) Abraham answers that if the woman refuses consent, Eliezer is relieved of his oath. If she does not want to go with Eliezer, she doesn't have to. She can say “no.”

Rebecca's right to say “no” to a man is expressed still more forcefully later on in the story, when Eliezer invites Rebecca to leave her family home and travel to Canaan to become Isaac's wife. Her mother and her brother invent a simple way to decide whether Rebecca should go or not: They ask her! “*Nikra lana'arah venishalah et pihah*,” “Let us call the girl and ask for her reply” (Gen. 24:57). Here, too, Rebecca can say “no.” In *Hayyei Sarah*, the happiest form of “yes,” the consent to marry, is twice predicated on the woman's right to say “yes” or “no.” Her “no,” if she had said it, would have been decisive, both to her nuclear family and to her future father-in-law, Abraham.

Regrettably, Abraham was not always so sensitive to the wishes of women. The first time the word *hesed* appears in the Bible, it is used in a rather terrible way by Abraham towards his wife, Sarah. In the incident at Gerar in *Parashat Vayera* (Gen. 20), Abraham asks Sarah to present herself as his sister in order to protect him from

violence, should the godless men of Gerar desire her. Abraham believes that if these men were to learn that he is her husband, they would kill him in order to seize her. He tells her, “let this be *hasdech* [your kindness] that you shall do to me: whatever place we come to, say there of me: He is my brother” (Gen. 20:13). Here *hasdech* is pointedly Sarah’s kindness, since Sarah is in a unique position to rescue Abraham from danger.

The problem is that making Sarah complicit in this lie about their relationship could result in her unwanted sexual intimacy with dangerous strangers. As the story unfolds, the local king, Abimelech, does seize her, and God must intervene to prevent adultery. Abraham’s plan for Sarah opens the door to Sarah’s sexual coercion, and almost entraps Sarah and Abimelech in a mortal sin. Abraham has instructed Sarah to act against her own best interests; as Rashi notes, “He [Abraham] did not ask [her] permission, rather he forced her, not to her benefit” (Gen. 20:2). Readers are justified in asking: Why was Abraham the only one who deserved protection in Gerar? Why was Sarah not protected? The beautiful word *hasdech* has become a tool of manipulation; it is now a deep distortion of the idea of *hesed*, voiced by Abraham, who is the master of *hesed*.

Years later, in *Hayyei Sarah*, Abraham has grown ethically, and not only as evidenced by his offer of hospitality to three strangers. Now Abraham readily accepts his servant’s concern that a woman may say “no” to a proposal of marital intimacy with Isaac. Perhaps the death of Sarah, recorded in this *parashah*, has caused Abraham to regret how he treated her at Gerar. In Abraham’s old age there will be no more misrepresentations of a woman’s endangerment as her volitional act of kindness.

The vigorous woman of the next generation, Rebecca, is no passive object of desire to be manipulated by men. She has agency, value, and strength, and her powerful and unassuming *hesed*, freely shared, is her most astonishingly beautiful feature. From the first moment we meet her, Rebecca possesses the two essential emotional qualities to be a great practitioner of *hesed* in her own right: empathy for others and respect for herself. This is how Abraham’s *hesed* is transformed by the next generation. It is profoundly shaped by Rebecca’s ability to say “no,” which allows her, when she wishes, to freely and enthusiastically say “yes.”

*Hesed* as a biblical idea becomes kind to women in *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*, and is no less effective for it. If anything, *hesed* is now more strong, more gentle, more vigorous, more joyous, and more hopeful than it ever has been. So it remains to this day.