

## Chayei Sarah: The Cycles of Sarah: Unity and Complexity in the First Matriarch Denise Blumenfeld, Class of '28

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In the opening of *parshat* Chayei Sarah, the Torah tells us, “And Sarah’s life was a hundred years, twenty years, and seven years; these were the years of Sarah’s life” (Genesis 23:1). Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, explains the unusual breakdown of Sarah’s age: one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years. Rashi points out that the repetition of the word “years,” instead of simply saying 127 years, is intentional—each stage of her life retained unique qualities. At one hundred, she was as pure and sinless as she was at age twenty, and at twenty, she maintained the beauty and freshness of age seven.

This explanation by Rashi is well known. But beyond the wisdom of the texts, as women, we also know that each of us goes through different cycles throughout our lives. In the book *The Harmony of the Seasons*, by R. Abraham Auriel Silbiger, the metaphor of the four seasons is used to describe the phases of the female menstrual cycle. During our “active age,” many of us experience days of physical and spiritual closeness with our husbands, akin to the warm, fiery hues of fall. There are other days when closeness is only spiritual, shaped by the rhythms of our menstrual cycle. However, it is not just our ages that bring different periods and challenges; our names or roles also reflect how we evolve over the years.

### Three Names, Three Phases

Sarah’s life can be understood through the three names by which she is known in Jewish tradition. In Genesis 11:29, she is referred to as Iskah in her youth. Rashi explains that this name, derived from the root סכה (*sakhah*), means “to see” or “to contemplate,” suggesting that from a young age, she possessed a spiritual or prophetic vision that set her apart.

Later, she becomes Sarai, “my princess,” a name that symbolizes her role within her family but with a limited reach. This name reflects the nobility and leadership she held in her private context, without yet achieving a universal function. Rabbeinu Bachya (on Genesis 17:15) comments that the name Sarai denotes authority and influence that had not yet expanded to the level of “Sarah.” She was a leader in her immediate context, but her mission and impact had yet to reach their full potential. Finally, in Genesis 17:15, God changes her name from Sarai to Sarah, which means “princess” in a broader domain. This transformation—including the division of the letter *yud* (equivalent to the number 10 in Gematria) in Sarai into two *heis* (equivalent to the number 5), one for Sarah’s name and one for Abraham’s—represents an expansion of her mission, allowing her to become the mother of Isaac and a matriarch for future generations.

## Fragmentation or Unity?

The Israeli poet Zelda, in her work “Each Man Has a Name,” reflects how each of us is known by different names, given by family, surroundings, and life experiences. Each name represents a different facet of our being, revealed in different moments. This raises the question: Are we truly fragmented beings, or is there an essential unity underlying all our identities? Are these stages of life not like matryoshka nesting dolls, where each layer reveals a broader and deeper aspect of the same essence? Or is each “doll” a new self?

Truthfully, I am not sure. I want to believe that Sarah is not fragmented but rather a unified being. As I reflect on this *parsha*, I see Sarah *Imeinu* as an example of development, transformation, and continuous change. Each stage of her life adds another layer to her essence, which is not static but dynamic and evolving. As the first matriarch of Israel, Sarah exemplifies unity within complexity. Her life teaches us that each phase is an opportunity to refine our being, grow, and transcend personal limitations, even when it may seem we are leaving parts of ourselves behind. Rather than fragmented, Sarah is a whole, integrating each stage of her journey into a unified and cohesive essence.

## Conclusion

Sarah’s legacy is not just that of a woman who experienced life’s cycles, reflected in her names and her ages. Rather, Sarah shows us that through changes in age, name, and place, her essence became more complex and resilient, allowing her to reflect increasingly more aspects of her being.

In today’s world, there seems to be a societal expectation that a 50-year-old woman should look as young as someone in her twenties to be accepted and valued. However, Sarah’s legacy in Judaism offers a different perspective. Sarah shows us that each stage of life has its own beauty and purpose. It is not about denying the years or trying to go back to the past but embracing each stage with pride, recognizing the fullness each moment of life can bring.

By living fully in each cycle, Sarah teaches us that the value of a life is not measured by external appearance but by the depth and wisdom we accumulate and transmit. May we, like Sarah, accept each phase of our life as an opportunity to reflect the best of ourselves and leave a legacy of integrity, growth, and light for future generations. Shabbat Shalom.

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