

# Parshat Chayei Sarah - Torah from the Holy Land

Written By Sam Blustin

## The Missing Blessing

A few weeks ago, as I was walking to a Shabbos meal, a man came up to me and the people I was with. "My wife just gave birth to a new baby girl," he said, "and my Rabbi says to ask every person I come across for a blessing for my new daughter. Would you offer a blessing for her?" he asked. Taken aback, I offered some sort of blessing that was less than inspiring, as did one of the people I was with (hers was much more inspiring). It struck me that this was the first time I had ever actually been asked for a blessing from someone, and it was someone I didn't even know!

In the next few weeks, we will see the strife caused by a father's blessings to his sons. In our parasha however, it's blessing that is noticeably absent from the end of Avraham's life. He gives his children gifts, but no blessings. Rabbi Danny Nevins, Dean of the JTS Rabbinical School, comments, "Rashi, working off a midrash in Bereshit Rabba (61:6), feels that Abraham was 'afraid' to bless Isaac since there might be implications for the other members of the family. Rashi says that Abraham didn't want his future grandson Esau to receive the blessing, but the source Midrash says that Abraham was stymied by the challenge of his other children. If I bless Isaac, then what about Ishmael and the children of Keturah? Instead, Abraham gives Isaac material gifts, including the burial plot in Hebron, and then says, 'I have done my part; if the Holy One wants to act in His world, let Him do so.' Rashi rephrases this as, 'let the master of blessings come and bless whoever it fits Him to bless.'" The challenge posed by blessings is great: on the one hand, it can lead to strife and jealousy, and on the other hand it can spread love and kindness to the world. Where is the balance between the silence of Avraham and the inequality of Isaac's blessings to Jacob and Esau?

Blessings are an opportunity to connect to a person's core. They say, "I care about you, and I want the best for you." But for a blessing to uplift the other, it needs to come from that place of love. Not a selfish love, where the blessing is actually in some way beneficial to you as well, but a love that says "May you be blessed to fulfill the purpose for which you were put on this earth." It may have been this reason Avraham couldn't bless his own children. He knew that the destiny of one was to rule over the other, and so he left it in the hands of the Holy Blessing One. While he respected the Ultimate blessing, he preferred that his last words would bring his sons together in unity as opposed to divisiveness. This week, may we be blessed with the energy to renew our commitment to our ultimate purpose, and may our way be illuminated with the light of those came before us.

## Origins of the Mincha Service

*“Isaac went out to commune with God in the field towards evening, and he raised his eyes and saw, and behold! Camels were coming.” (Bereshit 24:63)*

Where does the afternoon mincha service come from? Was it ordained by the Rabbis, after the destruction of the Temple rendered the afternoon sacrifice obsolete, or are its origins much older? Many early sources argue this very question, but it’s from this verse that the Talmud (Berachot 26b) and Midrash derive that our obligation for afternoon prayer stems from Isaac himself! While I won’t endeavor to solve that disagreement here, there’s an important question that remains. If the mincha service does indeed stem here from Isaac, what can we learn about the essence and spiritual energy of the service?

The verb translated above as “To commune with God” is *lasuach*. *Lasuach* is a complicated word, but could mean to commune, to meditate, to supplicate (as translated in ArtScroll), speak, or complain. In the BDB Bible dictionary, they claim it could mean *l’hithalech*, to walk or stroll, but the implication, from the use of the word in the context of Noah, is that here Isaac “walked with God”. In contrast to the morning and evening services where there are many prayers surrounding the Amidah (where we commune directly with God), the mincha service is our only daily service in which the Amidah pretty much stands alone. While there are practical time circumstances for this shortened service, the spiritual consequence is important. We come immediately from the outside world of all our cares and worries and walk immediately into the presence of the Divine. The focus of the service, as supported by the biblical passage, is clear; we are there to commune with the Divine. For a few minutes, in the hustle and bustle of our day, we stop to give ourselves perspective and remind ourselves that there is more to life than just the moment we are in. We are a part of something much larger.

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