

Chayei Sarah: A Eulogy For a Tzadekes (Kli Yakar)

- Nisson Shulman. From this piece authored by Kli Yakar, a rabbi can distill a fine eulogy for a woman, provided she is righteous and known for her deeds. Such a woman is missed more and more as time goes on.

HAYE SARA: A EULOGY FOR A TZADEKES

And Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her

Should not the text have read "He came to eulogize and bewail Sarah"? Why separate the word "eulogize" from the word "bewail" by placing the name of Sarah in between? In fact inserting her name into this phrase is altogether superfluous. The text should have merely said "to eulogize and bewail her". Furthermore, weeping, which normally occupies only the first three days of the mourning period, should precede eulogizing which is appropriate for all the seven days of mourning (T. B. Moed Katan 27b).

It is natural for the dead to be gradually forgotten with the passage of time. Sarah was different. Her righteous and charitable deeds were so outstanding that as time passed she was missed more and more. That is why the text first mentions eulogizing her as if the eulogy grew ever more moving as time wore on. Also, the Talmud states that the death of a man's first wife is as tragic to him as the destruction of Jerusalem's Holy Temple. So Abraham first eulogized her, giving her a proper tribute. He did not weep for her since he knew she would receive a just reward in the hereafter. Thus, the passage first says that he came to eulogize Sarah. Only afterwards, when faced with the personal tragedy of her loss, did he weep because of his own sorrow, for the personal tragedy of his own "destroyed Beth Hamikdash". Perhaps that is why the letter kof in the text is written small. The numerical value of the letter kof when fully written out, is 100. The Beth Hamikdash was 100 cubits high. It was as if those 100 cubits were diminished, and like the letter in the text, had shrunk.

The Talmud, based on this verse, concludes that the purpose of the eulogy is to honor the deceased rather than the mourners (T.B. Sanhedrin 41b). One can also assume that Abraham did not eulogize Sarah for her own sake, since her sun sets in this world to rise again in the next where she would be fully rewarded. His eulogy was actually for the sake of what her name signifies; that she was queen of the world in her wisdom and deeds, and woe to the generation that lost this gift.