**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Midrash on the Parasha**

**Dr. Tziporah Lifshitz**

**Parashat Chayei Sara:**

**Generational Shift: “The Sun Rises and the Sun Sets”**

**Introduction**

*Parashat Chayei Sara* deals with the end of the era of Avraham and the subsequent generational shift. The *parasha* opens with the burial of Sara, and at its end, we find the burial of Avraham. In between, we are informed about the founding of the house of Yitzchak through the arrival of Rivka.

In corresponding fashion, *Bereishit Rabba* on *Parashat Chayei Sara* deals at length with two issues relating to the dimension of time in the history of the people of Israel: the phenomenon of death and the transition from one generation to the next, and the relationships and gaps between the generations.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this *shiur,* we will address the first issue.

**The Motif of Sunrise and Sunset**

Let us examine the following *derasha* relating to the death of Sara in *Bereishit Rabba*:[[2]](#footnote-2)

I (1)

"The sun rises and the sun sets" (*Kohelet* 1:5).

Rabbi Abba said: Do we not know that the sun rises and sets?

Rather [this is what it means]: Before the Holy One, blessed be He, causes the sun of one righteous person to set, he causes the sun of the next to rise.

The day that Rabbi Akiva died, our Rabbi [Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi] was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

On the day that our Rabbi died, Rav Ada bar Ahava was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

On the day that Rav Ada died, Rav Avin was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

On the day that Rav Avin died, his son Rav Avin was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

On the day that Rav Avin died, Abba Hoshaya of Traya was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

On the day that Abba Hoshaya of Traya died, Rabbi Hoshaya was born, and it was said about him: "The sun rises and the sun sets."

I (2)

Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun of Moshe to set, He caused the sun of Yehoshua to rise…

"And the Lord said to Moshe: Take you Yehoshua" (*Bamidbar* 27:18).

Before the sun of Yehoshua set, the sun of Otniel rose.

"And Otniel the son of Kenaz… took it" (*Yehoshua* 15:17).

Before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Shemuel rose.

"And the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Shemuel was laid down to sleep" (I *Shemuel* 3:3).

Rabbi Yochanan said: Like a perfect calf (*egleta*).[[3]](#footnote-3)

I (3)

Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun of Sara to set, He caused the sun of Rivka to rise.

First, "Behold, Milka, she has borne children" (*Bereishit* 22:20).

And afterwards: "And the life of Sara was" (*Bereishit* 23:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 58, 1, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 619-621)

This *derasha* is a *petichta* reported in the name of Rabbi Abba.[[4]](#footnote-4) The verse being expounded is the first verse of *Parashat Chayei Sara*: "And the life of Sara was a hundred and twenty and seven years; these were the years of the life of Sara" (*Bereishit* 23:1). It is expounded by way of the verse: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hastens to its place where it arises" (*Kohelet* 1:5). The general idea conveyed is that God ensures continuity in the leadership of His people by introducing a new leader while the previous leader is still in office. In this way, God's rule and His concern for His people become manifest.

**The Structure**

The *derasha* is artfully constructed. It is comprised of three parts, each one beginning with the words: "Before the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun of X to set, He caused the sun of Y to rise," and each part is shorter than the previous one. The first part is comprised of six repeating units, the second part is made up of three units, and the third part has only one unit — for a total of ten units.

The motif of sunrise and sunset in the verse appears throughout the entire length of the *derasha*, only in opposite order: the setting of the sun is mentioned before it's rising. Whereas the rising and the setting of the sun are presented apart from each other in the verse, as two separate actions taking place at different times, the *darshan* describes them as happening simultaneously. In this way, the *derasha* creates a rhythm of frequent sunsets and sunrises, the one following the other.

In the first part of the *derasha,* the wording is different from that in the other parts. Each unit opens with the phrase: "On the day that X died, Y was born," thereby adding precision and drama to the sunrise-sunset cycles.

**Sunrise and Sunset in the Life of the Nation**

Each part of the *derasha* relates to a different period in the life of the nation. The first part relates to the period of *Chazal*; the second part to the end of the period in the wilderness, the years of the conquest and settlement of Eretz Israel, and the period of the Judges; and the third part to the period of the Patriarchs. However, of the three, only the first part presents an extended period with absolute continuity. In the second part, between the period of Otniel and the period of Eli there is a gap the length of the period of the Judges, of about three hundred years. These two features of the first part of the *derasha* seem to indicate that it is the *darshan's* intention to present the period of *Chazal* as a time of special Divine providence in the history of the people. This finds expression in the absolute continuity in the chain of Tannaim and Amoraim — from the time of Rabbi Akiva, extending for more than three hundred years.

Thus, the main topic of the *derasha* before us is *Chazal* themselves. The *derasha* itself is *Chazal's* reflection upon themselves and their period as a one-time phenomenon in Jewish history since its very inception.

"The sun rises and the sun sets" describes the cyclicality of nature.[[5]](#footnote-5) The *derasha* projects what is found on the natural plane onto the historical-national plane. Unlike nature, however, when it comes to history, the sun that rises today is not the same sun that set yesterday, but rather a new sun that shines forth in the world and will be followed by more new suns in succession, with each new sun appearing just before the disappearance of its predecessor.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps the *derasha* is hinting at the lack of cyclicality in the history of the people, which bears the actions of those that carry it forward — its great leaders and righteous people who advance the world. In other words, the history of the righteous is progressive and changing, as opposed to nature, which simply repeats itself without advancing. If so, the *derasha* contains two layers of meaning relating to processes of time: on the one hand, the rise and decline of each righteous person and every generation in itself; on the other hand, the transition between periods.

**The Process or the Processes?**

One may then ask the following question: what is the overall process described in the *derasha*? The answer to this is that the *derasha* describes not one but three different processes in three different periods.

The second part of the *derasha* refers to the people's beginnings and their maturation, until the establishment of the monarchy, from the days of Moshe to the time of the prophet Shemuel. The verse, "And the lamp of God had not yet gone out," which is cited in the *derasha* in connection to the overlap between Eli and Shemuel, appears near the prophecy of the destruction of Shilo and the removal of the House of Eli from the priesthood,[[7]](#footnote-7) and it indicates that the situation of "Before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Shemuel rose" relates to the end of an era.

The third part relates to the period of the Patriarchs until the establishment of the house of Yitzchak — the entire life of Sara, her barrenness, the birth of Yitzchak, and the creation of continuity for his descendants through the figure of Rivka. Hence, the second and third parts describe a process of advancing from one period to the next.

Now we may ask a further question: what is the process described in the *derasha* that relates to the period of *Chazal*? To answer this question, we must identify the chain of Sages mentioned here.

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi] are Tannaim; Rav Ada bar Ahava, Rav Avin and his son are Babylonian Amoraim of the first, second and third generations, respectively.[[8]](#footnote-8) Abba Oshaya of Traya is an Amora of Eretz Israel of the fourth generation. The last figure in this chain is Rabbi Hoshaya bar Shimi, an Amora of Eretz Israel of the sixth generation.[[9]](#footnote-9) The chain begins with Tannaim and ends with Amoraim; it begins in Eretz Israel, shifts to Babylonia, and then returns to Eretz Israel. The intergenerational process to which the first part of the *derasha* relates is the “setting” of the Torah of Eretz Israel and the “rising” of Babylonia as the Torah center of the people.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the consciousness of the sixth-generation Amora of Eretz Israel, Rabbi Abba, he words "the sun rises and the sun sets" echo the decline of the center in Eretz Israel, as opposed to the establishment of a new Torah center in Babylonia, which arises while the Torah of Eretz Israel is still active. Sunrise is in the east, sunset in the west, in line with Babylonia being east of Eretz Israel. The Geonic tradition that Rabbi Abba himself emigrated from Eretz Israel to Babylonia during the days of Rav Ashi also reinforces the interpretation offered here.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This reading of the *derasha* explains the inner division of the generations and characters mentioned in the first part. We have seven characters divided in the form of 2-3-2 (two Tannaim, three Amoraim in Babylonia, two of the last Amoraim in Eretz Israel), and we have six generations mentioned in the *derasha* in the six-time use of the phrase: "On the day that X died, Y was born."

The cycle of the sun on the day referred to in the *derasha* likens the six generations from Rabbi Akiva to the end of the period of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel to the last six hours of the day, from noon to sunset. Rabbi Akiva marks the climax of the Tannaitic period, like the sun at noon. That period ends with the death of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi and a new sun "was born," the Babylonian center of the *yeshivot* of Sura and Neharde'a. The Torah of Eretz Israel continues to exist and to shine, parallel to that of Babylonia in the first generations of the period of the Amoraim, but these are its last hours of grace. At this time, we may say that before God caused the sun of Eretz Israel to set, He caused the sun of Babylonia to rise. In subsequent generations, the light dims and the approaching sunset is evident.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The full verse: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hastens to its place where it arises" (*Kohelet* 1:5), points to the east not only as the place where the sun rises, but as "its place" to which it hastens so that it may rise once again. In the context of the *derasha*, Rabbi Abba points to a tendency that exists in the nation, to return to the initial point of Avraham in order to start anew, that is to say, to leave Eretz Israel in order to re-form and to return to it, over and over again. In doing so, he links Rivka's birth in Charan to Babylonia's rise as the center of Torah in the Amoraic period.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In the wake of this, we may point to another layer of cyclicality present in the *derasha*, in addition to the two layers already discussed (the rise and decline of each of the characters and the rising that takes place in each part of the *derasha*). The three parts of the *derasha* togetherconstitute one great cycle of rising and setting: the Matriarchs who come from Aram to Eretz Israel in order to give birth to the nation, the people who enter the Land and learn its path and destiny, and the decline of Eretz Israel in the generation of the *darshan.[[14]](#footnote-14)*

From a distance of 1500 years, we view with awe the artistry of Rabbi Abba's *derasha* and the historical consciousness implicit in it. Indeed, the special Divine providence that gave the Jewish people the Tannaim and Amoraim has allowed us to stand firm in our Torah and in our faith over the course of a long and terrible exile. Eretz Israel has once again become the Torah center of the Jewish people, and we have merited to live in it and see it in its shining glory.

**Retreat and Continuity in Divine Providence**

Let us examine another *derasha* in *Bereishit Rabba* on *Parashat Chayei Sara*, which also deals with the transition from one generation to the next:

II (1)

"And it came to pass after the death of Avraham, that God blessed" (*Bereishit* 25:11).

Rabbi Simon said: Wherever it is stated: "And it came to pass after [the death]," the world retreated.

"And it came to pass after the death of Avraham."

Immediately, "Now all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Avraham his father, the Pelishtim had stopped them" (*Bereishit* 26:15).

"And it came to pass after the death of Moshe" (*Yehoshua* 1:1).

Immediately, the well, the manna and the clouds of glory stopped.

"And it came to pass after the death of Yehoshua" (*Shofetim* 1:1).

Immediately, the pegs (*yitdot*)of the land (the powerful nations that remained in Eretz Israel) attacked them.[[15]](#footnote-15)

"And it came to pass after the death of Shaul" (II *Shemuel* 1:1).

Immediately, "Now the Pelishtim fought against Israel" (I *Shemuel* 31:1).

II (2)

His colleagues raised an objection against Rabbi Simon:

But surely it is written: "Now after the death of Yehoyada came the princes of Yehuda, and prostrated themselves [before the king]" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:17)!

Rabbi Tanchuma said: Rabbi Simon only spoke about: "And it came to pass after [the death]."

II (3)

Rabbi Yudan said: Had the Holy One, blessed be He, not stood others in their place, the world would already have retreated.

As it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Avraham," "And Yitzchak dug again the wells of water" (*Bereishit* 26:18).

It is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Moshe, the servant of the Lord, that the Lord spoke to Yehoshua" (*Yehoshua* 1:1).

It is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Yehoshua… And the Lord said: Yehuda will go up" (*Shofetim* 1:1-2).

"And it came to pass after the death of Shaul" (II *Shemuel* 1:1), and it is written: "when David was returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites" (ibid.), and it is written: "Now David was the son of that Efrati" (I *Shemuel* 17:12). (*Bereishit Rabba* 62, 4, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 675-676)

According to Rabbi Simon, there are eras and leaders whose end brings about a retreat from their achievements. Scripture marks them with the words "And it came to pass after the death." The periods thus marked are periods of new beginnings: the arrival of the father of the nation, the formation of the nation at the time of the Exodus and in the wilderness, the beginning of life in Eretz Israel, and the beginning of the monarchy. But is it possible to turn these wondrous life achievements into the permanent reality of the nation, or are we dealing with a rare talent and a transient resting of the *Shekhina*?

The success of these periods on a historical scale is measured by their ability to have a lasting impact. Rabbi Yudan accepts Rabbi Simon's analysis, while relating to the Divine assistance that is required in order for these achievements to be preserved, by way of God's appointing a new leader who will continue the work of his predecessor.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Rabbi Yudan's proofs are characterized by the fact that they mark historical progress in the life of the nation as compared to their predecessors. Yitzchak makes greater inroads in the land of the Pelishtim than did Avraham, the people of Israel enter Eretz Israel in the days of Yehoshua, and the kingdom of the house of David is greater than the kingdom of Shaul. There is difficulty at the end of a period, there is difficulty in separating from the familiar order, but "He that called the generations from the beginning" (*Yeshayahu* 41:4) wants to advance the Jewish people, and the rest of the world after them, towards their destiny. According to Rabbi Yudan, human history is sometimes like the waves of the ocean, where every retreat is a preparation for the wave that will follow, in a way that carries on its power, movement and vitality.

Unlike Rabbi Abba's *derasha*, the *derashot* of Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Yudan do not offer a panoramic view of the generations as a whole, but rather a discerning eye focused on the transition that takes place in the wake of the death of a great leader in a special generation. Nevertheless, the recurring theme of generational shift, emphasizing the Divine partnership and direction which the Jewish people across the generations merit, is worthy of mention. It seems that we can assert with a reasonable level of certainty that the manner in which the Amoraim of Eretz Israel read the transition from the period of Avraham to that of Yitzchak reflects their own reality and era. In addition, it provides us with tools to contemplate the enormous changes passing over the people of Israel in our own time, before our very eyes.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Concerning the issue of death and generational shift, see: *Bereishit Rabba* 58, 1; 59, 1; 59, 4; 61, 2; 62, 2. Regarding the relationships between the generations and the gaps between them, see *Bereishit Rabba* 60, 8; 61, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In order to facilitate our examination of the *derasha*, we have divided it into three parts. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rabbi Yochanan's statement is difficult to understand both on its own and in its context. Commentators on the Midrash explain the Aramaic word *egleta* to mean either a female calf (*egla* in Hebrew, R. David Luria) or a circle (*igul* in Hebrew, Maharazav); others consider it a term of beauty (*Yefei To'ar*), without relating to the meaning of the word in its context.

The usual meaning of the word in Rabbinic literature is “chariot,” as we find in *Yerushalmi*, *Shabbat*, chap. 3. Perhaps Rabbi Yochanan means to say that the overlap of righteous characters creates a perfect chariot for the *Shekhina*, similar to the statement of his disciple-colleague, Reish Lakish, in *Bereishit Rabba* 47, 6: "The Patriarchs themselves are the Chariot (*Merkava*)." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Regarding the identity and time of Rabbi Abba, see below. Parts of the *derasha* are brought in parallel passages in BT *Yoma* 38a and BT *Kiddushin* 72b. In BT *Kiddushin* 72b, the *derasha* is changed and attributed in part to late Babylonian Amoraim. It should be noted that the parallel versions in the Babylonian Talmud use in connection to sunset the term *kibbui* (extinguishing) rather than *bia* (setting, literally: coming inside), a term which denotes finality, rather than a gradual process of descent. For further consideration, compare the wording of the *derasha* to the version of the statement of Rabbi Chiya bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yochanan brought in BT *Yoma* 38a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The verse, "The sun rises and the sun sets" is understood in the Tannaitic literature in its plain sense, as an expression of nature's obedience to the word of God; or as a metaphor for the wicked who have no reward in the world, just like the heavenly bodies who are not rewarded for their actions. See *Sifrei Devarim* 1; ibid 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. So also in Rabbi Shemuel Yafeh Ashkenazi's *Yefei To'ar* commentary. We disagree with his position and attach importance to the difference between the metaphorand what it signifies. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The verse, "And the lamp of God had not yet gone out," in the context of the appointment of Shemuel prior to the death of Eli and the destruction of Shilo, should be understood in a metaphorical manner. *Yefei To'ar* (ad loc.) understands the lamp as relating to the prophecy that reaches Shemuel even before the prophecy of Eli ceases. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rav Ada bar Ahava was a devoted disciple of Rav. The fact that he was born on the day that Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi died appears also in *Kiddushin* 72b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In light of the order of names appearing in this chain, Rabbi Hoshaya in the *derasha* cannot be identified with Rabbi Yochana's teacher, Rabbi Oshaya Ha-gadol. Accordingly, it would appear that Rabbi Abba, the author of the *derasha*, should be identified not as Rabbi Abba, the Babylonian Amora of the third generation, who went to Eretz Israel and studied with Rabbi Yochanan; but rather as Rabbi Abba, an Amora of Eretz Israel of the sixth generation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The two centers correspond to the different suns, each one different from the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Teshuvot Ha-geonim* (Harkavy), no. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We have seen that Rabbi Abba's *derasha* is laden with artistic devices and constructed with beauty, such that its form reflects its content. It should be noted that the later versions of the *derasha* in the literature of *Chazal* do not preserve its original structure. See, for example, *Kohelet Rabba* 1, 1; *Midrash Zuta le-Kohelet* (Buber), 1, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For further study, compare the chain beginning with Adam and ending with Sara, cited in the name of Rabbi Bena'a, a sage of Eretz Israel, in BT *Bava Batra* 58a. In the source under discussion, Sara is presented as the beginning of the chain of the nation's matriarchs, whereas in the words of Rabbi Bena'a she is the end of the chain of those whose faces reflect Divine beauty. As in the *derasha* under discussion, the Babylonian Talmud juxtaposes the Adam-to-Sara chain to a chain of rabbis; but unlike our *derasha*, the two chains in the Babylonian Talmud intersect in the person of Adam. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It should be noted that *Chazal* interpret the following verse as referring to Avraham:

Who has raised up (*Mi hei'ir*) one from the east, at whose steps victory attends? He gives nations before him, and makes him rule over kings; his sword makes them the dust, his bow as the driven stubble." (*Yeshayahu* 41:2)

They even establish this chapter as the *haftara* for *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. In *Bereishit Rabba* 2, 3, the words “*Mi hei'ir”* (with an *ayin*), "Who has raised up," are expounded as if they were *“Mi hei'ir”* (with an *alef*), "Who has shined," likening Avraham to the light that issues forth at sunrise. This image seems to be the creation of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel; compare *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 15, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. That is to say, the powerful inhabitants of the land who were not driven out during the years of the Israelite conquest and settlement. It should be noted that some manuscripts of the Midrash read “*yitrot*,” “those who remained” (*noteru*)in the land. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rabbi Simon and Rabbi Yudan are contemporaries. Rabbi Simon is a member of the second-third generation of Amoraim in Eretz Israel, whereas Rabbi Yudan is a member of the third-fourth generation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)