Parashat Chaye Sarah is overflowing with acts of chesed:

- At the start of the parasha, Avraham buries Sarah.
- Ephron does chesed with Avraham by agreeing to give him the Ma’ara (even though Avraham insists on paying him handsomely).
- Eliezer does chesed for Avraham by going to look for a wife for Yitzchak.
- Rivka gives water to Eliezer and his camels (although he only asked for himself).
- Betuel and Lavan allow Rivka to marry Yitzchak.
- G-d does chesed for Avraham.
- At the end of the parasha, Yitzchak and Yishmael do chesed by burying Avraham.

This list reveals a surprising thing: a large proportion of the chasidim in the parasha are done for Avraham! The very epitome of chesed – חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם – is the person who needs it the most!

This shows us that everyone needs chesed, even Avraham Avinu, the “Man of Chessed.” The Midrash1 (Bereishit Rabbah) says: “Everyone needs chesed. Even Avraham, for whom chesed exists in the world, needed chesed, as it says וַעֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד עִם אֲדֹנִי אַבְרָהָם, and he did chesed with his master Avraham.”

Chesed is something we are all expected to do or give, but it is also something we all need to receive. That’s just the way G-d created the world. It might not always be easy to do chesed but it can be even harder to receive it!

We are not perfect and we are not G-d. Even if we are able to help many others, we will always need help from others. And in those cases, we must allow those others to help us, because true chesed allows for others to do chesed for you as well! It enables others to give and not just to receive.

And even if we don’t need to receive, we need to allow others to give.

The deeper mechanics is that when we allow others to give to us, we are creating a strong and meaningful connection between us, and when we all give and enable others to give, this bond develops into a sense of unity throughout all sectors of our people.2

Today, one positive side effect of COVID-19 is the rise in opportunities to do chesed: helping people in quarantine, people who are sick and their families, the elderly, those at risk, people who have lost their jobs, etc. Many of these people have never been in a position of needing chesed. On the contrary, they may have even been on the side of the givers up to eight months ago.

We learn from Avraham though: even a person of chesed needs chesed.

Moreover, a person of chesed knows how to appreciate the chesed he or she receives, even when it may be the most natural thing in the world. A person of chesed knows how to express gratitude to all those givers around him: parents, spouse, colleagues, employees, teachers, students, etc.

All of the people that make up a person’s surroundings add something to that person’s life, and part of the enjoyment of that life is to notice that chesed, to acknowledge it and to express sincere gratitude to those who do it.

1 Shown to me by my esteemed father-in-law, HaRav Blumenzweig.
2 See Maharal, Netiv HaTzedakah, 6.

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Chayei Sarah is the parasha that concludes the story of Avraham and Sarah. It begins with Sarah's death and burial in Ma’arat HaMachpelah, and ends with Avraham's death and burial in the same place, at which the Torah emphasizes they are both buried “in Ma’arat HaMachpelah… the field that Avraham bought from the Bnei Chet, where Avraham and Sarah his wife are buried” (Bereishit 25:8-10).

The very first thing we hear about Avraham is his marriage to Sarah, and it soon becomes clear that their life path is a joint mission.

It is no coincidence that the Torah reiterates their mutual burial, for, from the first moment they appear on the scene, the Torah treats them as a couple, almost as one unit. The very first thing we hear about Avraham is his marriage to Sarah, and it soon becomes clear that their life path is a joint mission, with both of them setting out to fulfill the first of G-d’s commands to Avraham: "לֶךְ לְךָ... אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ" , “Go for yourself to the Land which I will show you.”

Sarah, initially, appears as a woman dedicated to her husband’s ‘life work,’ and somewhat lives in his shadow while totally identifying with the cause and personifying self-sacrifice and devotion to it. Together with Avraham, she leaves everything and embarks on the trek to Eretz Yisrael. Together, they go down to Egypt and she complies with Avraham’s plans – at great personal risk – to save himself from Pharaoh (Bereishit 12), and together, but at his bidding, she hosts their guests.

However, Sarah is not only a supportive wife but also an active, initiating character. After 10 years without a child, it is she who urges Avraham to marry Hagar. And after Yitzchak is born, it is she who demands that Avraham expel Yishmael, whom she discerns is ruining Yitzchak’s education. Indeed, G-d is on her side, so to speak: "כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקֹלָהּ" , “Anything Sarah says to you, listen to her voice!”

In this sense, Sarah is not just an escort on Avraham’s physical and spiritual journey, but a full partner in his mission and in the creation of the House of Israel. This is also the impression we receive from the well-known midrash (Bereishit Rabbah, Lech Lecha, 39): “Avraham would convert the men and Sarah would convert the women.”

Amongst other things, this partnership manifested itself in the words of Yishayahu who calls the people to “look to the rock from which you were hewn… look to Avraham your forefather and to Sarah who gave birth to you...” (Yishayahu 51:2).

Avraham and Sarah, our first mother and father, built the foundations of our nation – together, listening to the Divine command echoing in reality and guiding their mission to call in G-d’s Name in the world. Together.

Avraham and Sarah are surrogate parents to all those many people, from all nations, whom they cared for during their lifetimes, and they are the couple that serves as an example for all subsequent Jewish families to continue their path of mutual service of G-d.