

# The Two Lives of Sarah, Abraham, and Jacob

## שבעים פנים בתורה

There are seventy modes of expounding the Torah;  
Bamidbar Rabbah 13;15

Very, very few knowledgeable Biblical students, not to say scholars translate or understand

## שני חייו

as “*two lives*” rather than as “years of their lives”?

When I first submitted this article to groups of reasonably knowledgeable Bible scholars, the responses I received were essentially;

“Nice try Bloom!”, but you would do better to understand שני חייו and graciously accept that in that context the proper, widely accepted English translation of שני חייו can only be **the years of their life** and emphatically not, their “*two lives*”.

Perhaps my attention had been drawn to the specific text of

## שני חייו

that Sabbath morning, as the Torah reader began that weeks portion with the words ויחי יעקב (Jacob lived in Egypt) because the name given me at my ברית on the eighth day of my life was the second word the reader recited. Gen; 47;28

The very first time שני חייו appears with יעקב (Jacob) follows upon יעקב blessing Pharaoh. The ruler of the Upper Nile and the

Lower Nile, he who rules all Egypt asks; **כמה ימי שני חייד**—How many are the days of your “*two lives*”?  
And **יעקב** responds;

**שלשים ומאה שנה מעט ורעים היו ימי שני חיי**

...**thirty** and a hundred years, few and ill-fated were the days of my “*two lives*”.. Gen: 47; 8&9

Just verses later, ten years have passed, **יעקב** has died and **יעקב**'s obituary reads;'

**ויהי ימי יעקב שני חייו שבע שנים וארבעים ומאת שנה**

And the days of **יעקב שני חייו**, his “*two lives*” were seven years and a hundred and **forty** years. Gen: 47; 28

I do think the chronicler, who was careful, often parsimonious in choosing words, intended the special use of **שני חייו** as a very specific message to describe the life experience of the patriarch so described. Given that I think there is a special meaning implicit in that choice, and useful for us, I have taken the liberty of translating **שני חייו** as his “*two lives*”.

After the almost unanimous rejection by my colleagues of my translation, it was back to the drawing board. I consulted the Mandelkern concordance, which was given to me as a result of my father's suggestion to a gentile business associate, as to what might be an appropriate ordination gift for his beloved Jackie. My father, who at that time owned a Dairy Queen, suggested to Mr. Robert Dinkins—a major franchise owner of many Dairy Queens, that a Hebrew Concordance would be a great gift. Mr. Dinkins was totally oblivious to what a Hebrew Biblical concordance was, and who used **Hebrew** anyway!

בראשית, in all its contexts. is used four times in בראשית (Genesis) and nowhere else in the תנך (The Hebrew Bible.)

שני חייו does not appear in any obituary or in any other way in the entire rest of the תנך.

The first use of שני חייו is by the author of בראשית (Genesis), in summing up the life of שרה (Sarah).

ויהיו חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה  
ושבע שנים שני חיי שרה

Now שרה's life was one hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the “*two lives*” of שרה. Gen:23;1

Perhaps her “*two lives*” were;

The **first**, before she left Ur of the Chaldeans.

The **second**, after that long journey with her husband to Canaan.

Or an alternate understanding of “*two lives*” might be;

The **first**, before and including the birth of ישמעל (Ishmael).

The **second**, following her giving birth to יצחק (Isaac), or alternately;

The **first** life might be before the עקדה (The binding of Isaac) and

The **second** life, her shortened time following that traumatic event.

We can never be sure how life-changing events can transform someone and can indelibly mark the lives of those who endure them, into a “**before**” and an “**after**”!

The second use of שני חיי אברהם recounts אברהם's "two lives".

ואלה ימי שני חיי אברהם אשר חי מאת שנה  
ושבעים שנה וחמש שנים

Now these are the days of אברהם's "two lives" who lived a hundred and seventy-five years. Gen: 25;7

אברהם's "two lives" seem simpler; to describe.

1. The great divide is the years before his arrival in Canaan.
2. The tumultuous years following that long migration.

Or if one wishes to, one might parse them as being before and after the עקדה.

The thoughtful reader will note that the death of יצחק is recorded quite differently.

ויהיו ימי יצחק מאת שנה ושמנים שנה

And the days of יצחק were a hundred years and eighty years, and then יצחק expired. Gen: 35;28

There is **no** mention here of שני חיי יצחק, of יצחק having "two lives". Perhaps his passivity, having most things happen **to** him, rather than initiating change, pervaded his being and was indicative of a simple, largely unconflicted life.

And perhaps surprisingly, שני חייו does not appear with יוסף's (Joseph's) death.

יוסף merits a singular obituary befitting one whose life has been of one cloth. יוסף, whose father loved more than all his brothers, יוסף, who dreamt that his brothers would bow down to him. יוסף,

who grandiosely maintained that God had sent him to Egypt to save life.

יוסף was single minded in his obsession with power and rank and fulfilled his dream of being adored not only by his brothers, but even by all Egypt. Despite all this, with יוסף there is no שני חייו “two lives”, even though יוסף was greatly loved, favored, powerful and hated.

The same יוסף who was such an overwhelming, conniving and stupendous personality, merits only a simple mention. He is single minded and there is no mention of שני חייו nor שני חיי.

וימת יוסף בן מאה ועשר שנים  
ויחנטו אתו וישם בארון במצרים

And יוסף died, a hundred and ten years old. They embalmed him and they put him in a coffin in Egypt. Genesis50;26

שני חייו appears in בראשית only with שרה, אברהם, and יעקב, not with יצחק or יוסף. Someone else will have to explicate that, perhaps by taking into account יצחק’s personality and apparent passivity, in contradiction to יוסף’s grandiosity and astonishing achievements.

However all that may be, יעקב is a multifaceted personality with at least “two lives”.

יעקב comes into the world as a twin, clearly fraternal, not identical. יעקב works seven years for his beloved רחל (Rachel) and shrouded in the darkness, לאה (Leah) shows up for the wedding night. Then he is provided with not one, but a pair of concubines. זלפה (Zilpah) and בלהה (Bilhah). יעקב leaves his

home a fugitive and returns wealthy and powerful. **יעקב** implores God to save him from a perhaps vengeful **עשו** (Esau) whom he fears may be in the mood for retribution.

“Too small am I for all the faithfulness and trust that you have shown your servant. For with only my rod did I cross this Jordan, and now I have become two camps”. In Hebrew- **מַחֲנֵיִם** <sup>Genesis;32;11</sup>

Two camps is Everett Fox's<sup>1</sup> translation of **מַחֲנֵיִם**. It could also mean-Double Camp. **יעקב** epitomizes in the **תנך**, a personality both divine and very human and flawed. In the words of Everett Fox, **יעקב** was both troubled and triumphant. In other words, **יעקב** like most of us, was a multi-layered often conflicted personality par excellence.

<sup>i</sup>What **יעקב** presents to the world is often not what **יעקב** experiences himself to be. **יעקב** often pretends to be what he inwardly recognizes he's not. He dresses up as if he was his brother **עשו** and dissimulates with his aged and almost blind father. You can read all about it in **בראשית**.

**יעקב** is both a shrewd trickster and incredibly brave. He is both deceitful and noble. He presents and covers his actions as something else. He is sometimes steadfast and struggles to do what is right. He wrestles steadfastly with his unacceptable “selves”. He bargains though painfully wounded with God's emissary of the night, who with dawn coming, wishes to end the bout. **יעקב** despite his wound and consequent pain responds;

**“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”**

The stranger blesses him with a new name and consequently a new identity.

“Not as יַעֲקֹב /Heel-sneak/ shall your name be henceforth uttered,  
but rather as יִשְׂרָאֵל (Israel). . Gen,32;29

## כִּי שָׂרִית עִם אֱלֹהִים וְעִם אַנְשִׁים וְתוֹכַל

For you have fought with God and men and have prevailed.

It is not accidental that the great metaphor of יַעֲקֹב's life is about being wounded and blessed. His life story is in many, many ways about his relationship with his "wounded selves", the struggle between different aspects of his being.

Rabbis like all humans are multiples. We intimately know struggle from the inside. Who we are and what we do!

יַעֲקֹב wrestles in the night. We rabbis in Israel wrestle day and night. יַעֲקֹב never rids himself of those parts that give him difficulty. We often try and fail at ridding ourselves of that which causes us trouble. We are Symbolic Exemplars, who do not experience ourselves as symbols and certainly not as exemplars. But it is in working out the relationship between the different parts of our "self" that our greatness emerges. We need be neither victorious nor defeated, We can be both wounded and blessed. You can read all about it in בְּרֵאשִׁית.

How a rabbi in יִשְׂרָאֵל is going to manage his/her at least two lives and yet recognize in the turmoil that the victory is in the wrestling and working at creating a mutually respectful relationship between one's "wounded parts".

We rabbis, descendants of the wounded יַעֲקֹב, whose surname is שְׂרָאֵל, we who serve the people so named, are each and all of us like יַעֲקֹב both wounded and blessed, with at least "*two lives*". Like יַעֲקֹב / יִשְׂרָאֵל, each and all of us have at minimum two lives-

-which have an independent existence-in us, and often we experience, these other “lives” as independent and not of us.

We often struggle to expel or at least, overcome them, and if that does not work, to at least hide them. We have our public face and our private being.

We love our congregants and resent them fiercely.

We bless those who are with us and demean those who are not.

We are both grandiose and hopelessly impotent. Who else would take upon themselves to tell large gathered audiences how they should lead their lives, and simultaneously wonder if we make any difference at all.

We are kind and understanding to many and detest the “noodges” who compliment our most incoherent teachings, our inane meanderings.

We affirm that all are created Tzelem and N’shamah<sup>2</sup> with the two interacting with each other.

The **Tzelem**, our cognitive being, provides thought, form, and direction.

The **N’shamah** gives life, energy and vitality.

They are of us and with us from our first breath to our last...no two Tzelems are identical; no two N’shamahs the same. Each pair is an entity and often a unique relationship.

**We live in a Both and World.  
We Often Mistake It For An Either Or World.**

The purpose of our Jewish religious experience is not to get rid of unwanted wounded parts. It is to be in a loving relationship with those parts of ourselves that we perceive as not ready for prime time. We ignore that we are above all a series of relationships between parts that are acceptable and those that we think are an embarrassment.

All the parts of us are in a relationship.<sup>3</sup> Whether that relationship works or is destructive is determined by how we wrestle.

We try almost desperately to hide our OTHER lives.

We struggle and strive to eliminate or at least conceal those parts of us we think are not ready for prime time.

A more useful task should we undertake it, would be to open a respectful and caring relationship with, and even bless those parts.

### ויקרא יעקב שם המקום פניאל Gen:32;31

יעקב called the name of the place פניאל (Face of God) Maybe it was truly פני אל,(God's face) that appears only as we “wrestle” with all the wounded parts of us and create a loving caring relationship between them and between us and them, that we like יעקב have a chance at seeing the face of God.

And rest assured that God the קדוש ברוך הוא (The Holy Bountiful One) is also a relationship—though we might prefer otherwise.

That God is both singular and paradoxically plural and possesses wounded parts is referred to many times in Jewish tradition viz; God said to Moses: You want to know my name? I am known by what I do. I am called many things.s

When I judge humanity, I am אלוהים (Elohim).

When I war on evildoers, I am צבאות, (Tzevaot).

When I suspend judgment, I am אל שדי (El Shaddai).

When I am merciful to My world I am יהוה (Yahweh).

My name is אהיה אשר אהיה I will be- there howsoever I will be there. I am known by what I do. I am who I am. Exodus Rabbah 3;16

Or noting God's prayer?!

May it be My will that my compassion overcome My anger and may My mercy prevail over My attributes [of justice and judgment]. May I deal with My children in accordance with My attribute of compassion. May I act towards them beyond the letter of the law. Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 7A

That God is a [Both/And] personality is amply present in Rabbinic tradition; The twelve hour Divine day is said to include a variety of activities; God spends three hours studying Torah; three hours dispensing justice; three hours providing for the needs of the world's creatures and three hours playing with Leviathan. Babylonian Talmud; Avodah Zarah 3b

There is much more evidence of the fact that we have multiple aspects of personhood. That in itself is not a problem. It is what we do with that fact that is sometimes problematical. I am at times God's recalcitrant servant. At times, God is my hide and seek partner. What I have to solve, is working out the relationship between the multiple parts of me.

"The point is, **בְּרָכָה** really does exist as a human being. His beingness in all of his various characteristics is blessed...and brought into relationship with each other. And into that relationship that he has wrestled to achieve the experience of beingness via blessings from influential others... is first known.

Most people can remember someone in their lives-a family member, teacher, friend--who really saw them as special and unique. This is not a cognitive event. It is about witnessing seeing and calling forth the spirit of life that infuses each person.

The blessings that follow the wrestling for relationship are crucial acts in the emergence of each person into the world. Without them, love and other skillful human acts are not possible<sup>1</sup> Blessings happen because of who we rabbis are perceived to be, despite our own greatness and/or ineptness.

## **Be Blessed For All You Are! And All You May Yet Be!**

<sup>1</sup> Everett Fox-The Five Books of Moses; Schocken Books 1995, is the default English translation whenever I find one required.

<sup>2</sup> Viz; The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar; By the Power Vested in Me; Jack H Bloom, PhD. Haworth Press, Binghamton N.Y. 2002 pp157-167.

<sup>3</sup>.Adapted from Stephen Gilligan, Ph.D. "The Relational Self; The Expanding of Love; Guilford Press'1996