

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## OEDIPUS REX IN PRESSBURG

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אחר and אחרי are synonyms that can be translated into English as “after”. But they are not necessarily interchangeable. Synonyms may differ in nuance and connotation. Nuances and connotations may also differ from place to place and time to time. Synonyms may therefore be identical twins in one text and have a bare familial resemblance in another.

Rabbinic tradition records that Rabbi Yose ben Zimra held that אחר and אחרי have different nuances, respectively “soon after” and “long after”. But the tradition failed to keep track of which means which.

This difference in nuance may correspond to a difference in connotation. *Achar* and *acharey* don’t actually measure clock-time. Objectively identical durations can be marked as אחר in one context and as אחרי in another. Rather, “A happened soon after B” conveys that A was facilitated or caused by B, while “A happened long after B” conveys that A was prevented or inhibited by B.

I cannot recover Rabbi Yose ben Zimra’s original position. However, it seems to me that if the Torah separately describes A1 and A2 as אחרי the same B, then A1 and A2 must share the same causal relationship to B.

However, I have found only one example of this in Sefer Bereishis<sup>1</sup>.

Bereishis 25:11 reads:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם  
וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱ-לֹהִים אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנֵו  
וַיָּשֶׁב יִצְחָק עִם-בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי:  
It happened *acharey* the death of Avraham  
Elokim blessed Yitzchak his son  
Yitzchak settled with *B'er Lachay Ro'y*.

Bereishis 26:15-18 reads:

וְכָל-הַבְּאֵרֹת  
אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ עַבְדֵי אַבְיו  
בְּיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אָבְיו סָתְמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיִּמְלְאוּם עָפָר . . .  
וַיָּשֶׁב יִצְחָק  
וַיַּחְפְּרוּ אֶת-בְּאֵרֹת הַמַּיִם  
אֲשֶׁר חָפְרוּ בְּיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אַבְיו

וַיִּסְתְּמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים  
אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם  
וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן שְׁמוֹת  
כַּשְׁמֹת אֲשֶׁר-קָרָא לָהֶן אָבְיו:

All the wells

that his father’s servants had dug  
in the days of Avraham his father;  
they had been sealed off by the Plishtim  
and they filled them with dust. . .

Yitzchak returned

He dug the wells of water

that they had dug in the days of Avraham his father  
but the Plishtim had sealed them off

***acharey* the death of Avraham**

He called them names

like the names that his father had called them.

It follows that Avraham’s death either facilitated or inhibited both G-d’s blessing of Yitzchak and the Plishtim sealing off the wells. Which seems more likely? And is there any connection between the two consequences of Avraham’s death?

I don’t think the wells provide compelling evidence for the meaning of אחרי. Maybe the Plishtim were barely inhibited by Avraham in his lifetime, and acted immediately after his death, or else they were so inhibited by Avraham that they were unwilling to act until long after his death. The point either way is that Yitzchak did not initially inspire the same fear or reverence.

How long after Avraham’s death did Yitzchak settle *near/with B'er Lachai Ro'y*? *B'er Lachay Ro'y* was named by Hagar when an angel opened her eyes to its presence and thereby rescued her and Yishmael. It represents Yitzchak’s psychological discomfort with their expulsion from Avraham’s house at the insistence of his mother Sarah<sup>2</sup>. This unresolved issue prevents him from finding consolation after his mother’s death. Yitzchak is בא מבא באר לחי ראי = *coming from coming to/from B'er Lachay Ro'I* when he first meets Rivkah and finds consolation, perhaps because he recognizes that he ought sometimes to follow her intuition over his own.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is the only such case in Chumash or even Tanakh - I have not checked thoroughly, Note that *achar hamabul*=*post-Flood*) occurs four times, once with a specific duration of two years. I don’t have a worked-out interpretation of this; perhaps next year for Parshat Noach.)

<sup>2</sup> My interpretation here derives from a superb dvar Torah given by (now Dr.) Joshua Berman at Yeshivat Har Etzion 34 years ago. Any errors are my responsibility.

Yitzchak's new peace of mind enables him to reunite Hagar and Avraham; alternatively, coming to terms with Avraham's need for Hagar makes his own marriage possible. (These possibilities assume the midrashic identification of K'turah with Hagar). Bringing Avraham and Hagar back together facilitates Yitzchak's own reconciliation with Yishmael at Avraham's funeral. That reconciliation, and his father's death, allow Yitzchak to make a final internal reckoning with the role that Hagar and Yishmael's expulsion played in his own life.<sup>3</sup>

On that reading, אחרֵי much mean "soon after". However, I am open to the argument that Yitzchak is unable to settle *near/with B'er Lachay Ro'y* until after Elokim blesses him. On that argument, the question of how long after Avraham's death Elokim blesses Yitzchak.

Talmud Sotah 14a identifies Elokim's blessing with "the blessing of mourners", so that Divine behavior becomes the model for the human mitzvah of *nichum aveilim*. Presumably that would situate the blessing during shiva = "soon after".

However, I am inclined to see this reading as motivated by the desire to provide a Divine example for the mitzvah, especially as we have no record of G-d blessing Yitzchak after Sarah's death.

Various midrashim read Elokim's blessing as emphasizing by contrast that while Avraham gives Yitzchak כל אשר לו = *everything that is his*, he never blesses his son. They suggest two motivations.

Rashi cites a version in which Avraham cannot see how to bless Yitzchak without blessing Esav. It seems to me that in this reading Elokim's blessing of Yitzchak is most likely a posthumous rebuke, although one might argue that the use of Elokim implies a Divine power of discrimination that humans don't have.

Midrash Aggada cites a version in which Avraham cannot bring himself to bless Yitzchak without blessing Yishmael, or alternatively, cannot bear to incite Yishmael's jealousy of Yitzchak, and therefore leaves the matter to G-d. This seems to me backformed from what happens when Yitzchak blesses his twins rather than a direct reading of our unit.

The simplest explanation, but at the same time the most poignant and perhaps disturbing, is cited by Chatam Sofer at least three times from his Rebbe and quasi-father (he began in his yeshiva at age nine) Rabbi Nossan Adler. Here is his fullest exposition, from Torat Mosheh to Devarim 29:9. It is probably not coincidental that this citation is apparently posthumous, whereas the others were apparently written in Rabbi Adler's lifetime.

*You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem your G-d –  
The Torah wrote in Devarim 5:5:*

*I was standing between Hashem and you at that time to tell you the word of Hashem, because you were afraid of the fire, and you did not ascend the mountain*

This can be explained on the basis of what I received from my teacher the most pious of kohanim the gaon Rabbi Nossan Adler zt"l: that all the days of the teacher's life –

the student does not merit experiencing the ultimate pleasant position he deserves,

just as Yehoshua did not merit shining like the moon until after Mosheh Rabbeinu a"h's passing,

and there is no mention of the Divine Presence resting on Yitzchak until it was after the death of Avraham, and Elokim blessed Yitzchak, and Yaakov the whole time he was in his father's house – we know of no speech G-d had with him, until he left B'er Sheva, and then *he dreamed . . . and behold G-d was standing over him.*

So I say the same:

Mosheh Rabbeinu a"h told them then: "At Mount Sinai I was an obstacle preventing you from coming close", but today, the day of his passing, 'there is no domination on the day of death', so they came very close. That is what is meant when Mosheh said at Sinai *I was standing between Hashem and you*, like a barrier, *and you did not ascend the mountain* = you did not ascend the mountain at the same level that you will eventually ascend to the mountain before Hashem,

but *you are standing today* on the day that my days and years are done – *you are standing, all of you, before Hashem your G-d* literally with no barrier.

Rabbi Adler, as reported by his greatest student, felt that the teacher-student relationship eventually but inevitably inhibits the greatest students to some extent. Teachers are essential for students to achieve greatness; but there will always be one step beyond that can only be achieved in their absence. This seems tragic and almost Oedipal.

I suggest instead that it depends on the student, and perhaps on the teacher. Yehoshua here is represented by the moon, meaning that all his light was derived from Mosheh. Yitzchak redug his father's wells. Students whose strengths are reflections of their teacher's strengths will of course be dimmed by the presence of the original, "like a candle in the noonday sun".

Sometimes students do not find their own capacities until their teacher passes, even though those capacities are not mere reflections. This is a loss for both teacher and student, parent and child. Surely Avraham wanted nothing more than to see his child experience G-d's blessing! So the goal must be for these relationships – dare I say all relationships? – to develop in a way that removes "domination" long before the day of death, so that we are never *chas veshalom* a barrier to the full spiritual development and achievements of those we love.

<sup>3</sup> Possibly coming to terms with their suffering enables him to come to terms with the Akeidah.