Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Chayei Sara

November 23, 2024 *** 22 Cheshvan, 5785

Chayei Sara in a Nutshell
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3174/jewish/Chayei-Sarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Chayei Sarah," means "The life of Sarah" and it is found in Genesis 23:1.

Sarah dies at age 127 and is buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron, which Abraham purchases from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver.

Abraham's servant Eliezer is sent, laden with gifts, to Charan, to find a wife for Isaac. At the village well, Eliezer asks G-d for a sign: when the maidens come to the well, he will ask for some water to drink; the woman who will offer to give his camels to drink as well shall be the one destined for his master's son.

Rebecca, the daughter of Abraham's nephew Bethuel, appears at the well and passes the "test." Eliezer is invited to their home, where he repeats the story of the day's events. Rebecca returns with Eliezer to the land of Canaan, where they encounter Isaac praying in the field. Isaac marries Rebecca, loves her, and is comforted over the loss of his mother.

Abraham takes a new wife, Keturah (Hagar), and fathers six additional sons, but Isaac is designated as his only heir. Abraham dies at age 175 and is buried beside Sarah by his two eldest sons, Isaac and Ishmael.

Haftorah in a Nutshell: I Kings 1:1-31
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/585783/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah describes an aging King David, echoing this week's Torah reading, which mentions that "Abraham was was old, advanced in days."

King David was aging, and he was perpetually cold. A young maiden, Abishag of Shunam, was recruited to serve and provide warmth for the elderly monarch.

Seeing his father advancing in age, Adoniahu, one of King David's sons, seized the opportunity to prepare the ground for his ascension to his father's throne upon the latter's passing — despite King David's express wishes that his son Solomon succeed him. Adoniahu recruited two influential individuals — the High Priest and the commander of David's armies — both of whom had fallen out of David's good graces, to champion his cause. He arranged to be transported

in a chariot with fifty people running before him, and invited a number of his sympathizers to a festive party where he publicized his royal ambitions.

The prophet Nathan encouraged Bat Sheva, mother of Solomon, to approach King David and plead with him to reaffirm his choice of Solomon as his successor. This she did, mentioning Adoniahu's recent actions of which the king had been unaware. Nathan later joined Bat Sheva and the king to express support for Bat Sheva's request. King David acceded to their request: "Indeed," he told Bat Sheva, "as I swore to you by the Lord God of Israel saying, 'Surely Solomon, your son, shall reign after me and he shall sit on my throne in my stead,' surely, so will I swear this day."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Next Chapter: Chayei Sara by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l (5772)
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/chayei-sarah/the-next-chapter/

One of the most striking features about Judaism in comparison with, say, Christianity or Islam, is that it is impossible to answer the question: Who is the central character of the drama of faith? In both of the other Abrahamic monotheisms the answer is obvious. In Judaism, it is anything but. Is it Abraham, the founder of the covenantal family? Is it Jacob, who gave his name Israel to our people and its land? Moses, the liberator and lawgiver? David, the greatest of Israel’s kings? Solomon, the builder of the Temple and the author of its literature of wisdom? Isaiah, the poet laureate of hope? And among women there is a similar richness and diversity.

It is as if the birth of monotheism – the uncompromising unity of the creative, revelatory and redemptive forces at work in the universe – created space for the full diversity of the human condition to emerge. So Abraham, whose life draws to its close in this week’s Parsha, is an individual rather than an archetype. Neither Isaac nor Jacob - nor anyone else for that matter - is quite like him. And what strikes us is the sheer serenity of the end of his life. In a series of vignettes, we see him, wise and forward-looking, taking care of the future, tying up the loose ends of a life of deferred promises.

First, he makes the first acquisition of a plot in the land he has been assured will one day belong to his descendants. Then, leaving nothing to chance, he arranges a wife for Isaac, the son he knows will be heir to the covenant.

Astonishingly, he remains full of vigour and takes a new wife, by whom he has six children. Then, to avoid any possible contest over succession or inheritance, he gives all six gifts and then sends them away before he dies. Finally we read of his

demise, the most serene description of death in the Torah:

> *Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.* Gen. 25:8

One is almost tempted to forget how much heartache he has suffered in his life: the wrenching separation from "his father's house," the conflicts and aggravations of his nephew Lot, the two occasions on which he has to leave the land because of famine, both of which cause him to fear for his life; the long drawn-out wait for a son, the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and the double trial of having to send Ishmael away and seemingly almost to lose Isaac also.

Somehow we sense in Abraham the beauty and power of a faith that places its trust in God so totally that there is neither apprehension nor fear. Abraham is not without emotion. We sense it in his anguish at the displacement of Ishmael and his protest against the apparent injustice of the destruction of Sodom. But he places himself in God's hands. He does what is incumbent on him to do, and he trusts God to do what He says He will do. There is something sublime about his faith.

Yet the Torah – even in this week's Parsha, after the supreme trial of the Binding of Isaac – gives us a glimpse of the continuing challenge to his faith. Sarah has died. Abraham has nowhere to bury her. Time after time, God has promised him the land: as soon as he arrives in Canaan we read, 'The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land"' (Gen. 12:7).

Then in the next chapter after he has separated from Lot, God says "Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you" (Gen. 13:17). And again two chapters later, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (Gen. 15:7).

And so on, seven times in all. Yet now Abraham owns not one square inch in which to bury his wife. This sets the scene for one of the most complex encounters in Bereishit, in which Abraham negotiates for the right to buy a field and a cave.

It is impossible in a brief space to do justice to the undertones of this fascinating exchange. Here is how it opens:

> *Then Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." The Hittites replied to Abraham, "Hear us, my lord. You are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead."* Genesis 23:3-6

Abraham signals his relative powerlessness. He may be wealthy. He has large flocks and herds. Yet he lacks the legal right to own land. He is "an alien and a

stranger." The Hittites, with exquisite diplomacy, reply with apparent generosity but deflect his request. By all means, they say, bury your dead, but for that, you do not need to own land. We will allow you to bury her, but the land will remain ours. Even then they do not commit themselves. They use a double negative: "None of us will refuse . . ." It is the beginning of an elaborate minuet. Abraham, with a politeness to equal theirs, refuses to be sidetracked:

> *Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you."* Genesis 23:7-9

He takes their vague commitment and gives it sharp definition. If you agree that I may bury my dead, then you must agree that I should be able to buy the land in which to do so. And if you say no one will refuse me, then surely you can have no objection to persuading the man who owns the field I wish to buy.

Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead."

Again, an elaborate show of generosity that is nothing of the kind. Three times Ephron said, "I give it to you," yet he did not mean it, and Abraham knew he did not mean it.

Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there." Ephron answered Abraham, "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead."

Far from giving the field away, Ephron is insisting on a vastly inflated price, while seeming to dismiss it as a mere trifle: "What is that between me and you?" Abraham immediately pays the price, and the field is finally his.

What we see in this brief but beautifully nuanced passage is the sheer vulnerability of Abraham. For all that the local townsmen seem to pay him deference, he is entirely at their mercy. He has to use all his negotiating skill, and in the end he must pay a large sum for a small piece of land. It all seems an impossibly long way from the vision God has painted for him of the entire country one day becoming a home for his descendants. Yet Abraham is content. The next chapter begins with the words:

Abraham was now old and well advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed him in all things. Genesis 24:1

That is the faith of an Abraham. The man promised as many children as the stars of the sky has one child to continue the covenant. The man promised the land “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates”[1] has acquired one field and a tomb. But that is enough. The journey has begun. Abraham knows “It is not for you to complete the task.” He can die content.

One phrase shines through the negotiation with the Hittites. They acknowledge Abraham, the alien and stranger, as “a prince of God in our midst.” The contrast with Lot could not be greater. Recall that Lot had abandoned his distinctiveness. He had made his home in Sodom. His daughters had married local men. He “sat in the gate”[2] of the town implying that he had become one of the elders or judges. Yet when he resisted the people who were intent on abusing his visitors, they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!” (Gen. 19:9).

Lot, who assimilated, was scorned. Abraham, who fought and prayed for his neighbours but maintained his distance and difference, was respected. So it was then. So it is now. Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism. Non-Jews disrespect Jews who disrespect Judaism.

So, at the end of his life, we see Abraham, dignified, satisfied, serene. There are many types of hero in Judaism, but few as majestic as the man who first heard the call of God and began the journey we still continue. ([1] Gen. 15:18 [2] Genesis 19:1

Chayei Sara: Power Rooted in Life, Not Trauma and Death by Rabbi Jessa Shaw

https://truah.org/resources/jenna-shaw-chayei-sara-moraltorah_2024_/

This week, we read Parshat Chayei Sara (“The Life of Sarah”), and the title seems to suggest a focus on Sarah’s legacy, yet the text itself spends far more time on her end. Sarah’s death comes soon after the trauma of the *Akedah*, the near-sacrifice of her son Isaac, and her passing is described by Rashi as the direct result of hearing the devastating news that her son almost died at the hands of her husband, Abraham. Dr. Aviva Zornberg, in her book “The Beginning of Desire,” teaches that Sarah died of the shock and grief of this near-sacrifice, not just from physical trauma, but from the profound emotional and spiritual rupture that comes with the realization of how thin the line is between life and death.

This image of Sarah’s death — coming on the heels of harrowing trauma — brings us face-to-face with a difficult and uncomfortable truth about the Jewish people today: We are a people who, for generations, have been defined by trauma. We remember and feel deeply the Inquisition, the pogroms, the Holocaust, and the

countless times that Jews have faced oppression and persecution. This trauma lives deep in our bones, so when we hear about a Jew suffering or a threat to Israel, our trauma response can go into full effect. This trauma plays a central role in defining how we understand ourselves and interact with the world.

The tragic events of October 7, which shook Israel and world Jewry to its core, have been met with overwhelming grief and a deep sense of vulnerability, and rightly so. But in the aftermath of Hamas' attack, Israel has responded with overwhelming force — brutal bombings on Gaza, forced expulsions, mass displacement, the destruction of entire communities, and now reports that Israeli officials have stated there are no plans to allow Palestinians in Northern Gaza to return to their homes. We cannot ignore that in the name of Jewish safety and security, entire communities are being made unsafe.

The atrocities taking place in Gaza are deeply disturbing. So, too, are the continued abuses of power in the West Bank, where settlement expansion and violence are increasing at an astronomical rate and where Palestinians live under constant threat of violence and displacement. The human rights violations, the collective punishment, the siege — it all brings us to the question: Now that Jews have power, are we inflicting a version of the violence and oppression that we ourselves have suffered and feared for centuries?

The danger we face today is that, in the name of Jewish safety, we risk perpetuating the very violence that we have suffered. We risk turning our trauma into the justification for inflicting more trauma — both for others and for ourselves. Just as Sarah's death was a result of the trauma of the *Akedah*, we must ask ourselves: Will we, too, die spiritually and morally, if we allow our trauma to destroy us?

This focus on trauma isn't new to this year. Josh Leifer, in his new book "Tablets Shattered," articulates how the traumatic influences of the Holocaust live deep in our bones; they have become a core part of our identity. Leifer writes:

> While we must remember our past, stories of the Holocaust — and Jewish trauma — have become the focal point of our religion. We have given these stories so much power and the idea that this trauma could have happened to American Jews has permeated our narratives. The remembrance of the Holocaust and its residual trauma has become the unifier of the Jewish people. If surveys are true, remembering the Holocaust is one of their only reasons for being Jewish. The centrality of the Holocaust has enabled the indefinite deferral of articulating positive reasons for continued Jewish identification. We are so focused on our victimhood that we cannot be fully present in our Jewish rituals and communities today.

In the aftermath of trauma, there is a natural desire to protect, to retaliate, and to

secure our own safety at all costs. But, here is the danger we must confront: In seeking safety, in seeking justice for our own pain, we can risk perpetuating cycles of violence that dehumanize others — and ultimately ourselves. We cannot allow the trauma of the past to become a justification for the violation of others' rights and dignity. When Jewish power is wielded in the name of vengeance or fear, as Jews we risk losing our soul — just as Sarah lost hers in the trauma of the *Akedah*.

We must not let the fear of another Holocaust bring us to a place where we condone horrors enacted upon other human beings. We are called to be a people of healing, of life, and of flourishing; let's hold each other to that higher standard.
(*Rabbi Jenna Shaw (they/them) is the associate director of Israel campaigns and education at T'ruah. They were ordained in 2023 from the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Newton, MA.)*

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“Ger Vetoshav”: A Lesson on Vulnerabilities and Humility by Gordon Tucker

https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/ger-vetoshav-a-lesson-on-vulnerabilities-and-humility/

When we last left Abraham he had somehow managed to suppress all of his emotions as he virtually sleep-walked through the fearful mission he was sent on with his son Isaac to an altar on Mount Moriah. But in the aftermath, Sarah dies, and the emotions finally pour forth. He hurried to where she had died, and paid tribute to her. And then he cried. “Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to cry for her” (Gen. 23:2). It is interesting to note that it is only the second instance of weeping in the Torah; the first was caused by Abraham when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away from his home, and now it is Abraham himself who is brought to grief and tears.

But Abraham rose, as he had to, from his wailing, because there was a necessary and sacred task to perform. And at that moment of needing to bury his dead, an enormity confronted him. Here’s how Abraham put it: “ger vetoshav anokhi”—I am merely a stranger (ger), come to be an alien resident (toshav) here. I have no place; I have no accumulated rights and privileges. Abraham was at the mercy of the locals, who could either give him—actually sell him for a pretty penny—the plot of land he needed, or who could deny it to him altogether. He was of no status in this new place. So much so that it did not yet even come into consideration that he might have a place in which to live, or to settle. No, he could only imagine a place in which to bury his dead in this land to which he had come. And why had he come there? The Torah, in its typically laconic style, simply told us (Gen. 12) that God had sent him. It presents Abraham’s journey as a simple story of destiny. The Rabbis, however, in their own characteristic way of filling in the unstated, imagined something more lifelike in the midrashim that they spun for us. They imagined that Abraham was persecuted, hounded, his life threatened in his birthplace. Thrown into a literal, or metaphorical, fiery furnace for the beliefs that others rejected and hated. And here he was, a refugee, someone who could not go back to a place in which he could not be assured of safety. He was here on a mission of building a family and a life in order to rescue himself.

The precariousness of Abraham’s lack of status continued into the next scene, in chapter 24. We are usually taken with Rebecca showing her kindness and her suitability to marry into Abraham’s clan. But we forget the essential anxiety that animated the entire tale. Abraham knew that his son Isaac could be swallowed up. His faith could be quashed, nipped in the bud, were he to marry into a local family, if they even allowed him to. As an immigrant, he would have no cultural robustness with which to withstand the majority. He knew—as Jews throughout the centuries have known—that his child needed to partner with someone from the old country, who would speak with the same accent, and who would be both a consort and a safe harbor for him.

So yes, the Torah's story in Hayyei Sarah is about the insecurity and the defenselessness of the immigrant, the refugee. And it should remind us that while our distant ancestor lived the fears and vulnerabilities of the immigrant, and while our more proximate forbears did as well just a few scant generations ago, this is a story that is about more than just us.

There is no greater sense of defenselessness that haunts Jews than the reality of antisemitism. So we remember crimes such as the mass murder of Jews in Pittsburgh six years ago. But we must also remember that that murderer was driven to act after years of wallowing in his hatred of refugees, of immigrants. People who, like Abraham, were driven on a precarious journey from their birthplace by both extreme danger and a dream. And who, also like Abraham, must wonder where, or whether, they might be able to bury their loved ones who might die along the way, let alone whether and where they might ultimately be welcomed and given the opportunity to see their hopes fulfilled.

Why did that hatred become a rage against Jews? HIAS (formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) had around that time adopted the slogan "We used to welcome refugees because they were Jewish. Today we welcome refugees because we are Jewish." And therefore, just as those who approve of, and aspire to, that compassion point to Jews with admiration, those who cast the evil eye on hapless and frightened refugees, and call them invaders, also point to Jews, but with fury.

"Ger vetoshav"—the descriptor of the stranger and resident alien. This is the vulnerability and exposure that our ancestors knew all too well, and that binds us to those who experience and shudder from it today, as talk of mass deportations and family separations gains traction.

It is good to consider one other aspect of that phrase ger vetoshav. Abraham used it to describe his status of being a mere transient, a visitor, an immigrant in his surroundings. But the phrase appears at another place in the Torah as well. In Leviticus 25, God echoes Abraham's words by saying to the Israelites, "gerim vetoshavim atem imadi"—you are, with me, gerim and toshavim. The plain meaning is that God is saying to the Israelites, and indeed to all humans: remember that you are visitors, merely resident in my world. You are tenants, not owners. But, looking at the phrase in a hyper-literal way, one notes that a ger is a transient, and a toshav, coming from a root that means "seated," would seem to denote a settled resident. Taken literally in this way, the two words sound as if they are in opposition to one another. How can the Israelites be both?

The 18th-century rabbi Yaakov Krantz, better known as the Maggid—the preacher—of Dubno, read it in that excessively literal way, and by embracing the opposition between ger and toshav, he offered us a remarkably incisive

teaching. He taught us that God was saying this: You humans, and I—God—are, taken together, gerim—transients, and toshavim—settled residents. But which one of us is which? That's the crucial question that only humans can answer. If we consider ourselves to be toshavim—entitled, settled owners of our world—then God will be the ger, the stranger. That is, an awareness of a commanding, obligating Presence will be a mere transient, in and out of our lives in cameo roles. But we can, alternatively, cultivate the deep and abiding conviction that we are, after all, gerim—visitors—humbly invited into God's world to offer our skills in improving it, adding to its beauty, and bringing comfort and security to those whose lives are most precarious. If we can internalize and accept that we are not, in Tom Wolfe's immortal phrase, "Masters of the Universe," and know how much God needs us to spread more goodness and compassion, then our being gerim will cause God to be a toshav, a permanent presence in our lives. And in the lives of those who will come after us, and in the life of the world that we will help to create.

(Gordon Tucker is Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement, and Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy at JTS)

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Yahrtzeits

Ilisia Kissner remembers her stepfather Frank E. Strassfeld on Sun. Nov. 24

Larry Ozarow remembers his mother Mollie Ozarow on Thurs. Oct. 28