

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5774 -- Avraham's Telling Response to Loss

As with the findings of its preceding National Jewish Population Surveys, the major conclusions of the Pew Research Center's Portrait of Jewish Americans will reverberate for some time. Soon enough, they will begin to impact policy and the allocation of funds and energy at the grassroots.

As we, broadly in the Jewish community of greater Detroit and more narrowly in the B'nai Israel community, discern our response to the new and accelerating trends of American Jewry, we have much to gain from looking to our tradition and its responses to moments of existential anxiety, when the pressure to act is intense.

Avraham – chieftain, missionary, leader of just a very few in a land of many – is beset by existential anxiety his entire career. After all, he has only a newly-nourished relationship with God and his own personal assets to rely upon in blazing the path for monotheism in the land of Canaan. He journeys, negotiates, wages war, and takes to the task of settling the land strengthened only by his belief, a foundational self-confidence in his abilities, and the amazing capacity to take one deliberate step after another in his mission.

This week, in parashat Chayeh Sara, Avraham is thrown into certain existential chaos by the death of his wife and partner-in-mission Sarah. The crisis and demands of the moment only reinforce to Avraham his precarious situation as a self-acknowledged *ger v'toshav*, a resident and alien who, though promised the land, as yet owns none of it – and has nowhere to bury his wife.

It's a moment when Avraham could run home to his native land and bury Sarah there. After all, he still maintains connections in his native land, which will come in handy when he, soon after, looks for a wife for his son Isaac. But, instead, summoning remarkable strength and remembering his charge, he negotiates patiently with Ephron the Hittite to purchase a burial site for Sarah, which will also serve as Avraham's first land possession in the land of Canaan. In the heat of the moment, Avraham doesn't forget who he is and what he and his late wife stand for.

This is not a moment that Avraham is visited and bolstered by God's most imminent presence, when Avraham is at his most vulnerable, episodes which I discussed last week – after arriving in Canaan, with no plan for further action; after his circumcision, when he is in pain and understandably self-absorbed; and when he turns 100, still without a successor to his leadership.

At first glance, it's surprising that God's doesn't *וירא*, appear, to him when Sarah dies, at a moment of loss and practical uncertainty. On second or third look, it makes sense. Just think about it. The moments between death and mourning, the period of *אנינות*, are not primarily God moments. Rather, they are moments propelled by human instinct, will and spirit. For a day, sometimes longer, mourners take vigorously to the responsibilities of burying their loved ones and giving them a proper funeral.

The rabbi or officiant – I know this well from my own experience – makes every effort to invoke God's presence in those liminal moments between death and mourning. And I can tell you that God is assuredly there when family members share reflections and memories of their loved ones and their

relationships with them, prior to and during the funeral. That being the case, it always feels to me that God is in the back row during **אנינות**, struggling to move further up, but recognizing ultimately that the reality of death is a uniquely human experience which human beings must respond to in a uniquely human way.

Avraham, of course, has a much taller task than calling the local funeral home and cemetery. He has neither a cemetery nor a funeral director. He has no specialists to carry out his wishes. Under the gun, bereft of his partner, he makes one of his greatest yet most under-appreciated achievements, and passes another test of leadership.

The rabbis elaborate on this in the 14th century compilation of midrashim, **Midrash Ha-Gadol**, as cited by **Nechama Leibovitch** in one of her commentaries on **Chaye Sara**.

בוא וראה ענוותנותו של אברהם אבינו! שהבטיחו הקב"ה לתת לו ולזרעו את הארץ עד עולם ועכשו לא מצא קבורה אלא בדמים מרובים, ולא הרהר אחר מידותיל של הקב"ה ולא קרא תגר, ולא עוד אלא שלא דיבר עם יושבי הארץ אלא בענוה, שנאמר: "גר ותושב אנכי עמכם" -- אמר לו הקב"ה: אתה השפלת עצמך, חייך שאני אשימך אדון ונשיא עליהם.

"Come and understand the humility of our patriarch Avraham. For God promised to give him and his descendants the entire land of Israel forever, and now he could only find a burial place for his wife by payment?!?! To his credit, he did not lodge a complaint against God but rather chose to speak with the people of the land with great humility, as it is written, 'I am a stranger and

dweller.' God said to him, 'You humiliated yourself; on your life I will make you a lord and a prince over them.'

Avraham rests not on the promise of and covenant with God, bows quite low within the social hierarchy of Canaan, and acts with supreme humility to do what he must do as a husband and emerging national leader of a people -- find a place to bury his wife that he can be sure will be his and his children's for perpetuity.

In verse 3, as I mentioned, he calls himself a גר ותושב. In verse 4, per the protocol not of a prince but rather of a commoner, he consults with the Hittite people before going to their leader. Beginning in verse 7 and repeatedly throughout the episode, he bows lows before the Hittites, recognizing that their assent to a deal would be critical to its culmination. Moreover, in verse 16, focused not on the shekels in his pocket but on the acquisition, he immediately pays Ephron's requested sum.

At a moment of loss, with God just in the background, Avraham does his duty as a mourner, plus. We do the same, guided by Avraham and the laws of our tradition, which reflect so sensitively the feelings of shock and abandonment present after death. Our laws and customs fill the existential void and help us walk, one step at a time, through the process.

More broadly speaking, in light of the Pew Study and its revelations concerning the waning of Jewish identity amongst American Jews, it is certainly a time for us to mourn losses and recognize realities. We're shocked and humbled. It's also a time for us, like Avraham, to put one foot in front of

another, to continue to attend to the Jewish community's needs, at the same time as we plot its future course on the map of a land we now better understand.

We at Bnai Israel are bucking trends in the American Jewish community, and we speak to the expressed desire of Jews, clear from the study, for authentic Jewishness and connectedness that's heavy on people-presence and low on institutionalism. Still, the crisis of our moment, and the fears of waning Jewish identity, could make us run for our homes and for the insular ghettos of the past, instead of marketing our model more vigorously to the thousands of Jews out there who are clearly looking for something.

In this community, we love and appreciate this country, and our existence demonstrates how well American values cohere with the values of Jewish tradition. We're working at it quite hard.

This is a human moment, a moment that God leaves up to us. God certainly supports us, but God won't do the job for us. Responding to the trends of American Jewry means not turning back to the past but deliberately and dispassionately looking at the future that we represent as a synagogue community, and figuring out the steps we need to take to strengthen our model and share it with Jews around us -- particularly with younger people and those who grew up involved but have disaffiliated over the years.

As in the moments after death and in loss, this is a moment for our move, not God's.

