

Parashat Hayei Sarah 5779

“Who Seeks Life?”

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The words we just sang were עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה “It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and all who hold onto it are blessed. Its ways are pleasantness and all its paths are peace.” The tree of life refers to Wisdom and Torah, and it seems apropos that we should reflect on those words, in light of what happened last Shabbat at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

The Torah portion we read today is titled *Hayei Sarah*; it means “The Life of Sarah.” But the portion is not about Sarah's life. As soon as we begin reading the text, we see that the portion is about Sarah's death. Abraham was a newcomer in Canaan, having followed God's directions to go to the land that God showed him. After they were there, Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, also known as Hebron. In his mourning, Abraham needed to find a place to bury his wife, so he approached the landed gentry among the Hittites, and said: "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you that I may remove my dead for burial. And the Hittites replied to Abraham saying to him, "Hear us, my Lord: you are the elect of God among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead."

While Abraham's negotiations with Ephron the Hittite to buy the double cave known as Machpelah in Hebron were a little sticky, Abraham did buy the land and established his residency in the land with that purchase.

There was a time in America when Jews felt like we were guests in this country, like Abraham felt in Canaan. I sincerely believe that those days are long gone. We know very well that Jews have held prominent positions in our national, state and local governments. Several Jews sit on the Supreme Court of the United States. While there has not been a Jewish president, many Jews have served as cabinet secretaries, senators, and representatives, as well as business leaders, educators, artists and workers in every aspect of activity in our country. But many of us have acknowledged that there remains an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in certain corners of our country. I don't believe that there is a reason or need for any of us to apologize for our existence or participation in the fabric of American life.

When the United States was founded as a nation, our first president, George Washington, made it very clear that we have a rightful place as equals in this land. He confirmed this commitment in his famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. Because it is central to the fundamental principles upon which America is grounded, our friends and neighbors at Touro Synagogue read this letter ceremonially every summer.

Let's remember Washington's words:

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy — a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no

sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants — while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

George Washington showed courageous and magnanimous, highly principled leadership in writing these words to the Jews of Newport, and by implication to all the Jews who lived in the United States then – and now. They served as a beacon of hope and trust that we could live freely in this land, in ways not possible anywhere else on earth. And so more and more of our ancestors came to this country to pursue life in freedom, as equals in this society.

That does not mean that Jewish people have been universally accepted, despite Washington's principled words. I'm reminded of the words in the Passover Haggadah, which remind us that

בכל דור ודור קמים עלינו לכלותינו והקדוש ברוך הוא מצילנו מידם.

“In every generation there are those who seek our destruction, but the Holy Blessed One saves us from their hands.”

Here in America, there have been antagonists who have wanted to exclude us from the fabric of society, to keep us out of certain neighborhoods, social clubs, schools, hospitals or corporate boardrooms. Steadily those doors have all opened, and there is a different spirit afoot in our country at large. That has happened because of the

integrity and vision of leaders among our neighbors, locally and nationally. This is in recognition of the contributions Jews have made to the well-being of this country, and the enlightened recognition of the equality of all people. I'd like to cite just one local example: It is important to recognize that while Father Charles Coughlin was spewing venom about Jews in his radio program, expressing his support for Hitler and Mussolini in the 1930's, Providence College warmly welcomed Jewish students from its earliest days.

What happened last Shabbat morning at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh was a manifestation of the underlying hate that has not been extinguished in this country. We have known that it was there, but we hoped that it would be kept in check by nobler voices. We have known that there was a marked increase in anti-Semitic activity in the past couple of years, and we here have worked to increase security for our members and guests. But when neo-Nazis demonstrated in Charlottesville with no clear rebuke, they and their ilk could feel legitimate in their hateful rants and acts. And here we are, a week later, mourning 11 precious souls who were massacred in the temple they loved, praying to God whom they worshiped.

Those of you who are members of Temple Emanu-El know well that I have been involved in many interfaith dialogues and cooperative projects throughout my years as your rabbi. Many of the friends I have made over these years have reached out in compassionate support for our community, throughout this week. Mayor Elorza called shortly after I got home from services, to offer whatever we need from our city government. Thank you, Mayor, for your support and for being with us today. Officer Moody, of the Providence Police Department, came here on

Shabbat and spoke with Bob Pelcovits, our President, Paul Stouber, our Executive Director, and me, to reassure us that the police would be present to protect us. Thank you, Officer Moody, for being here to protect us today. Commissioner of Public Safety, Steve Pare, called me on Monday, when I was in Chicago. All of these officials have assured us of their concern and vigilance on our behalf. They are working with us and the other synagogues in our community and the Jewish Alliance to do all that is possible to help us be secure and safe in all our Jewish gathering places.

Earlier this week I participated in a meeting of the National Council of Synagogues with our dialogue partners in the National Council of Churches. Before we begin our deliberations, our Protestant colleagues, who were hosting the meeting at the national headquarters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Chicago, suggested that we gather first in the chapel for words of reflection and comfort. Their expressions of support friendship and love were genuine and bountiful. One of the participants in our conference, Peter Makari, representing the United Church of Christ, the Congregationalists, shared with us a lengthy statement that was authored by the Rev. John C. Dorhauer, the General Minister and President of the UCC, together with his colleagues in UCC leadership.

They said: "...The United Church of Christ stands with her Jewish siblings today in ... love as we mourn this terrible tragedy in our midst. And we will not run. We will not hide. We will not shy away from confronting the toxic, white Christian supremacy that is masquerading as faith." Listen again to those words: "We will not shy away from confronting the toxic, white Christian supremacy that is masquerading as faith. We are here with you. We are praying with you. We are

mourning with you. And we are loving with you until every street and every synagogue and every mosque and every sanctuary is free of hate. We are with you until love wins, and this is a just world for all. This is our collective faith. This is our collective hope. This is our collective love. The greatest of these is love.”

I was particularly struck by the UCC statement's candid assessment of the source of the danger, for Jews, for Blacks, Latinos, immigrants, and anyone who is different from these white supremacists. I appreciate that these religious leaders were clear in acknowledging that this hatred for Jews and others is not authentic Christianity. That recognition must be trumpeted widely. No excuses should be made for it. One cannot equivocate and say that there are some good people among American Nazis.

How do we move forward, as Jews and as a nation? Words in Psalm 34 seem particularly suited to our situation today. In Hebrew, the words are:

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַחֲפֵץ חַיִּים אֲהַב יָמִים לְרַאוֹת טוֹב:
נֶצֶר לְשׁוֹנֵךְ מַרְעַ וְשִׁפְתָיִךְ מִדְּבַר מַרְמָה:
סוֹר מַרְעַ וְעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב בְּקֶשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרַדְפָּהוּ:

Who is the one who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune? Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech. Shun evil and do good, seek amity and pursue it.

For all us to find security and peace in this country, we must learn once again how

to speak with each other. We must stop telling lies. We must stop distorting the truth. We must stop calling news that is well researched by competent reporters as “Fake News.” We must stop denigrating other people and speaking of them as trash. Speech is a holy instrument. We learn in the book of Proverbs:

מָוֶת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לְשׁוֹן וְאַהֲבִיָּהּ יֹאכַל פְּרִיָּהּ:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; those who love it will eat its fruit.

We have seen the destructive power of deceitful speech. We have seen that people who scream that “all Jews should die” sometimes do their part to fulfill their wish. We must insist on civility in our speech and in our actions towards one another. We must demand this of our political leaders and of our neighbors. We must show the way to a better future by the way we each speak and behave, today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. We must see the good in each other and recognize that every single one of us is God's creature, endowed with inherent worth and dignity. When we recognize that we are all God's children, we will begin to turn the tide toward a world which is safe for all of us. George Washington understood that. As an effective leader, he showed the way. We need that kind of leadership today.

I know that everyone who has come here today, Temple members, guests of Chloe and her family, and our many friends in the community, are united in our commitment to create a better world for all of us. Thank you to our friends from Holy Name Catholic Church, who have come to be with us. Thank you all for making a special effort to be here today to show your love and support and affirmation for all that is good and right.

I'd like us to take the teachings of Proverbs with us. Let's join together to sing it in a beautiful musical rendition. The words and notes are in today's flyers. If you know it already, please join in singing with Cantor Mayer and me; if it's new to you, please use the English transliteration and the musical notation.

MI HO-ISH

Baruch Chait

Slowly with feeling

Fm Cm Fm Cm
 Mi ho - ish he - cho - fétz cha - yim
 Fm Cm G7 1. Cm
 o - hév yo - mim o - hév yo - mim lir - os tov
 2. Cm Fm Cm G Cm
 tov n' - tsor l' - shon - cho mé - ro u - s'fo - se - cho mi - da - bér mir - mo
 Fm Cm G 1. Cm 2. Cm
 sur mé - ro va - a - sé tov ba - késh sho - lom v' - rod - fé - hu n' - hu

We have faith that God will bring peace, as we pray in the last line of Kaddish, the prayer we recite in memory of loved ones:

עושה שלום במרומיו, הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל ועל כל יושבי תבל, ואמרו אמן.

We are confident that the One who creates peace throughout the world, will bring peace to us, to all Israel, and to all who dwell on earth, and let us all say:

Amen.