



Weekly News & Drash: 22/23 November 2019

Support for bushfire victims
At its recent meeting in Adelaide, Rabbi David Kunin advised that the Moetzah made a donation in memory of bushfire victims in New South Wales Queensland and South Australia, and encouraged the UPJ community to provide support.

[Click here](#) to read the Moetzah resolution

[Click here](#) to make a donation to the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies Appeal for NSW Bushfire Victims

Parashat Hashavua for Parashat Chayei Sarah



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In a “double” hospital room in Cincinnati, Ohio, 2012, I sat as student chaplain beside a patient named Kayla. This was the most chaotic hospital room imaginable. For anyone who imagines hospitals as quiet, restful places of comfort, peacefulness, and uninterrupted healing, well... may you never learn the real truth! This room was mayhem. Here I was, trying to help Kayla process what had been a horrific trauma, while every five minutes an alarm would sound because she’d bent her arm too far and cut off the IV flow. Our conversation was further interrupted by: an annoyingly gregarious cleaning-woman, whistling loudly as she swept up the floors; the food service staff delivering lunch; nurses scanning Kayla’s wristband and taking blood pressure readings; and then, by a whole team of medics who came in to address a catheter situation gone awry on the other side of the curtain, clearly very painful to fix, judging by the expletives that now filled the air. But Kayla, needed a safe space to talk, and my job was to help her through crisis—so what do you do? How do you create a sanctuary out of thin air, or carve one out of air so thick with clutter?

On this day, I learned to create a ‘sanctuary without walls.’ Locking my eyes on Kayla’s, I gave her everything that remained of my full attention. Every time she got distracted, I would steer the conversation back into the space between us. I reminded myself constantly that this was a sacred encounter, just like any that might occur in a less chaotic room with fewer mundane intrusions (incursions?). It was an exhausting effort, and when I left I wanted to curl up in a tiny ball and hide in the recesses of the serene hospital library. But I left knowing that Kayla had felt heard amid all the noise; that she felt valued and cared for amid a dehumanizing healthcare and legal system; and that the wall-less sanctuary we had created between us was currently her only refuge amid a world and family that had done her wrong. In this makeshift, invisible, sacred space, she was able to begin the process of spiritual healing.

Creating sanctuaries without walls is an age old Jewish practice, dating back to our patriarch, Isaac, in this week's parashah. In Chayei Sarah, we read vaye'tzei Yitzchak la'suach ba'sadeh lifnot arev [1]—that Isaac went out walking in the field just before evening. From the ambiguity of the word la'suach, which more often means talking than walking, the sages of the Talmud concluded that Isaac was communing with God in some way, there, out in the field. That he was either meditating or conversing with God, and from this they derive the idea that Yitzchak tiken tefilat mincha [2]—that Isaac instituted the Mincha prayer, the service that we pray just before evening falls. For all the centuries it's been prayed inside the walls of the synagogue, the Mincha “service” first took place out in the field—Isaac's sanctuary without walls.

One needn't be Jewish, of course, to experience a sense of the sacred outside the walls of a physical structure. Many feel God's presence or sense God's nearness when gardening, walking the dog, practicing yoga on the beach, surfing, or bushwalking. But Jews commune with the Divine in “commun-al” ways too, not just in solitude, and there is an art to creating a shared sanctuary in a place not built for one. Our people has learnt this art by necessity, and we've grown quite good at it. The Jewish experience has taught us how to offer one another sanctuary.

A year after that chaotic hospital encounter, my husband and I experienced one of our own, some 16,000 km from Cincinnati, Ohio. The morning had been filled with paramedics in our home, an ambulance ride to the ED, waiting around for results in shared bays of patients separated only by a curtain – all after only just moving to Sydney. We soon discovered sanctuary in a soup that someone from our synagogue made for us, in generous offers to bring us whatever we needed, and in a text message received during a time of crisis saying simply, “I am standing by, at your service, sending love.” This is sanctuary. It transcends walls. We make it for one another through attentiveness and care. By helping another soul in our midst feel valued, loved, and safe. By welcoming each other and each “other” as an honoured presence in our midst. Wherever we may find ourselves.

Shabbat shalom.

1 Gen. 24:63

2 B. Berachot 26b