

Words To Ari Hicks on Shabbat “Chayei Sarah”  
Rabbi Tom Gutherz  
November 3, 2018

Ari: I wanted to thank you for sharing your thoughts on our Torah portion this morning. You write about our ancestor Abraham wanting to set down roots and to find a home after years of wandering. And to purchase a place to bury his wife Sarah. You picked up on the tension in this story between the desire of Ephron and the Hittites to be hospitable to these strangers among them, but also the reluctance to share the neighborhood with another people, different than his.

Abraham did not know it, but it turns out that this is a story that somehow was repeated in many generations of our history. The same reticence to accept Abraham that we find in the Torah portion--and the same insistence on his part that he means to be a good neighbor and a good citizen, to pay his fair share and to do his part--these are some of the ongoing dynamics, in all societies and in all times, between immigrants or refugees and the people they come to live among. It is the tension between those who land in another place because life has become unsafe for them at home, and the people who agree to accept them as neighbors.

There are no simple answers here to the large questions of immigration we face today. But the Torah's example shows that these things can be negotiated and discussed in a spirit of respect and honesty. They speak to the need to **overcome** hostility, and fear, and misunderstanding that is all too often directed at those who are different from us.

The man who just last Shabbat murdered eleven Jews at a synagogue in Pittsburgh was inflamed by a deliberate and calculated rhetoric of fear-mongering. He was persuaded by those who should know better that those who want to come and live among us are a mortal threat. And he mixed that hatred in with hatred of another kind—the hatred of Jews. He attacked the synagogue because he had read that HIAS--The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society--is a leader in providing help to refugees who come to this country.

I want you to know that this is a personal story for me.

My own father, after losing every member of his family to the Nazis--his parents and grandparents, his five brothers and sisters--was brought to this country after the war by HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They helped him get settled when he came here, matching him up with a family in the Jewish community of Cleveland. They helped him to learn English, they found him a job.

It is on account of HIAS and their work that I am standing here today. I can only wonder where I would now be, or *if* I would be, if those in power at the time in this country would have incited hatred against people like

my father, calling him an enemy for wanting a chance at a new life.

And I also have no doubt that my father was helped, not only by the people who *worked* for HIAS, but also by someone like you, someone who volunteered and reached out to lend a hand to help a refugee put down some roots. So on behalf of my father and many more like him, I want to thank you for your work.

And for being true to the values of our tradition. As the director of HIAS said in a recent article : *Then we welcomed them because **they** were Jews; Now we welcome them because **we** are Jews.*

When our ancestor Abraham sent a servant to a foreign land to find a wife for Isaac, the servant wonders out loud how he will know that he has found the right woman. When he sees our ancestor Rebecca at the well, he notices how she welcomes him: how she cares for him, offering to draw water for him, and even going back to draw more water for his camels who are also thirsty. From these acts of kindness to a stranger, he sees that Rebecca has a heart of compassion. And this is the sign – the only sign he needs--that she will be the right one to be a wife for Isaac and a mother of our people.

The descendants Rebecca and Isaac, like you, like me, and like the Jews of today, including those who lost their lives in Pittsburgh about whom we have been learning this week, are the inheritors of this quality of compassion. And they practiced it in their lives

I hope you will always be proud of this strain in our tradition. The commandment of the Torah to love the stranger. And also the obligation to learn from our **own** history what our Rabbi Hillel taught us: *What is hateful to you, do not do to another person.*

You told us something that you learned about roots. That we put down roots not just by acquiring property, but by the connections we make with one another. That it is not so much where you were born or lived or own a home, but your connection to the people around you, and what we give to one another; these are the true roots that create healthy communities.

I pray that you continue to grow and to develop roots such as these.  
Roots of showing generosity to those less fortunate.  
Extending the hand of friendship to a stranger.  
And cultivating a heart of compassion.