

Sermon: Parshat Chayyei Sarah
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Last Saturday night, after we extinguished the flame for Havdalah, I rushed to my cell phone, anticipating to learn about one particular news item, only to learn of another. During Shabbat, a different flame had been extinguished, and this one went out too early. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *zichrono livracha*, had died. The untimely death of the former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom is an incredible loss not only for the Jewish people, but for the world. He was a *gadol b'dor*, one of the greatest Torah scholars of this generation. Lord Rabbi Sacks was admired by Jews of all denominational affiliations, and he was also highly regarded outside of the Jewish world. His passing, after a battle with cancer, is a tremendous loss for his family, for the Jewish people, and for all people of faith in the world.

Many have read a book or two by Rabbi Sacks. Others have at least heard references to his teachings. He was a prolific author, with books that ranged from extensive commentaries on the weekly *parsha* to deep analyses of the relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry to works of Jewish theology and thought. He was passionate, learned, and exemplary. He built bridges with the non-Jewish world, and he embodied the notion of being *or lagoyyim*, a light of inspiration and wisdom unto the nations of the world. He will be sorely missed.

How fitting it is that this *parsha*, *Chayyei Sarah*, the Life of Sarah, is in fact about the deaths of *Sarah Imeinu*, Sarah our Matriarch, and *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our Patriarch. Both are laid to rest in this week's Torah reading, and yet the *parsha* begins by referring to Sarah's life, not to the moment of her death. And that is precisely the point. When someone dies, their passing

from this world is a moment in time. Their life is what we remember. The way in which they approached the world and their mission in it is what we share and what we celebrate.

When Abraham learns that Sarah has died, the Torah tells us, “Abraham proceeded, *וַיֵּלֶךְ לְשָׂרָה וּלְבִתָּהּ*, to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:2). The Talmud draws upon this verse in its discussion about the purpose of a eulogy: Is the eulogy intended to honor the deceased, or to honor the living? Is it about paying tribute to the one who has died, or is it about giving a space for the mourners to grieve, sharing their memories, and processing their emotions with the support of family and friends?

It is really a great question. Unsurprisingly, the Talmud offers evidence to support both sides of the argument. But Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb offers his own answer to the question: “From a psychological perspective, the eulogy does both. It honors the dead and it provides the mourner with the opportunity to give vent to his grief and to achieve a degree of catharsis.”¹ He then explain that this is why Abraham both eulogizes and cries: he wanted to honor Sarah and her life with a eulogy, and he needed space to mourn this incredible loss with tears.

Which brings me to the *hesped*, the eulogy, delivered by Gila Sacks, the daughter of Rabbi Sacks. She reminded us all that, from his perspective, any problem that we face in the world is a solvable one. We are brought into this world with the profound capability to identify and solve the problems set before us. This gives us the opportunity to change the world in significant ways. All problems are solvable, and we are the solvers.

¹ Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, *The Person in the Parsha*, p. 49.

We are living through a perfect example of this. Earlier this week Pfizer announced that they have developed a COVID-19 vaccine that is more than 90% effective. The virus that has caused this devastating pandemic was discovered at the very end of 2019, and reached our shores shortly thereafter. That means that humanity identified a problem, and is well on its way to solving it, in about a year's time. By comparison, the virus that causes polio was identified in 1908, and the vaccine was not created until the 1950s, more than 40 years later. Yes, of course, science and technology have advanced in significant ways during the last century, and that is precisely the point. All problems are solvable, and we are the solvers. Empowered by knowledge, motivated by a commitment to do good in the world, we are able to tackle any and all challenges set before us.

At the end of each of our services, we rise for the ancient words of the Aleinu prayer. Jewish tradition maintains that Aleinu was composed, or at least redacted, by the Babylonian sage Rav approximately 1,700 years ago as an introduction to the Malchuyot section of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah. To this day, we include Aleinu during that part of the service, as well as at the end of all three daily services. *Aleinu l'shabeach la'Adon hakol*, "It is on us, It is our obligation, to praise the Master of Everything, God." It is our duty to praise, to give thanks, and to acknowledge the Creator as the Source of our blessings. It is on us, *Aleinu*.

That is the same message that Rabbi Sacks taught throughout his life, and the one that his daughter used to eulogize him: The problems of the world are ours to solve, they are on us, and we have the God-given ability to solve them. We can do it. We have the capacity to change the

world around in unforeseen ways. The first step is accepting *Aleinu*, it is on us, and the next step is to band together and do something about it.

In one of his many commentaries on this *parsha*, Rabbi Sacks teaches, “*God promises, but we have to act.*”² For weeks now we have been reading about God’s promises to Abraham: that he will have a home in a new land, that he will have children and be the patriarch of a nation. But when this *parsha* begins, Abraham owns no land, and his 37-year-old son, Isaac, is not yet married, let alone a father. What happened to the promises? They are not yet fulfilled because Abraham has yet to act. This *parsha* explains, in great detail, how Abraham acted, how he accepted responsibility for the challenges set before him, and how he brought God’s promises to fruition: he negotiated the sale of a burial plot for his wife, establishing the first settlement of a Jewish family in the Land of Israel, and he orchestrated a matchmaking for Isaac, setting the course for descendants and a future family. God promises, but we have to act. *Aleinu*. It is on us. We are the problem-solvers.

Our nation is currently facing its fair share of problems. We are anticipating a transition of leadership in the White House, but there are hurdles challenging this well-established peaceful tradition. The pandemic is only getting worse, with rising numbers of infections each day. The ray of light is that we may have a vaccine, but how it is to be delivered and administered remains a significant logistical challenge. It would be entirely human to throw up our hands in despair and walk away—these problems seem too great for us to address. But that is not the Jewish response. The Jewish response is to stand up and say *Aleinu*. It is on us. We are capable.

² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*, p. 25.

We can do it. That is the charge that Rabbi Sacks, *zichrono livracha*, may his memory be for a blessing, leaves us with on this day. All problems are solvable, and *Aleinu*, we are the solvers.