

Sermon | Parshat Chayei Sarah
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Alert, Not Afraid

"No mercy for Jews," written in bright red spray paint along a white fence on the Bethesda Trolley Trail, alongside abhorrent images of swastikas and hangmen. This is what some people in our community saw when they arrived with their children at their bus stop on Monday morning, just four miles from where we are right now. It was troublesome, but not terribly surprising, to hear that Kanye West was spouting nonsensical antisemitic vitriol on Twitter a few weeks ago. It was troublesome, but not terribly surprising, that in the weeks since then a few other celebrities have made similarly disturbing and antisemitic comments. It was troublesome *and* surprising that such graphic antisemitic graffiti appeared here in our very own Montgomery County. Fortunately, the response from law enforcement, from our county's elected officials, and from other leaders in our community was swift and unequivocal: Antisemitism has no place in our community, and they would do everything that they can to find the perpetrators, and to prevent this from happening again. But this did not mitigate what I felt and what I heard from many of our families, especially those who were there on Monday morning. They were scared. Their children wanted to hide their Judaism. Parents did not know how to respond to the difficult questions being asked by children who experienced overt antisemitism for the first time in their lives. What are we to do in the face of antisemitism?

To begin to answer the question, I turn our attention to the beginning of Parshat Chayei Sarah. Sarah dies at the age of 127 in Kiryat Arba, and Abraham wishes to bury her nearby. He offers to purchase a burial plot from the Hittites, but they offer to allow him to bury Sarah

wherever he chooses, without paying for the land. Abraham insists, he wants to buy the land, to purchase the Cave of Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah. The back-and-forth between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite is strange. If you own property and someone is willing to purchase it from you, why offer it to them for free? It appears to me that Ephron's offer to gift Abraham a small plot of land is his way of sending a message to Abraham: *We live here, not you.* But Abraham is unwavering; he will only accept the land if he rightfully purchases it, sending a message back to Ephron: *This land will be mine, I will have a stake in this place, and I will dwell here, too.*

Although it goes unsaid, it appears to me that Abraham and Ephron are having a debate about whether Abraham belongs. Is he truly what he calls himself at the outset of their negotiation, a *ger toshav*, a foreigner who dwells temporarily in this place? Or is this the land promised by God to Abraham? Abraham demonstrates that reality by purchasing land, investing in this place, and affirming that this is where he belongs.

This passage is often celebrated as the account of the first time land was owned by a Jew in the Promised Land. Rabbi Safra emphasized this idea in his letter to the congregation yesterday. But I wish to zoom out from the physical setting of the narrative and focus instead on the values that the negotiation between Abraham and Ephron reveals. Ephron wants to reinforce the idea that Abraham is only passing through; he has no real claim in this place. Abraham insists on the opposite message; he has a stake, he is invested, and he has every right to dwell in this place. As an American Jew, I identify with Abraham's approach. My ancestors chose this place, America, as their home. They did not come here expecting to stay for a few years and return to some other land. They did not arrive on these shores with the assumption

that they are only guests, welcome briefly but not permanently. Rather, most of our ancestors came to America with the expectation that this would be our new home, a place where we would learn the language, where we would contribute meaningfully to society, where we would simultaneously maintain our Jewish values and traditions. This is why antisemitism in America, especially when it arrives in your very own backyard, is so unsettling. It challenges our very notion of what it means to be a Jew in America. Assumptions that we have held for years feel like they are being challenged when we hear celebrities spout antisemitic vitriol, sometimes to the applause of others. This is what is so upsetting to us when we experience antisemitism here in the United States.

But I want to remind you all that there are reasons to be hopeful and not to fear, to never give up on our insistence that we belong here, that we have a place in this country. After the incident on Monday, Rabbi Safra and I spent much of the day talking to our members who were there, checking in with them and seeing how we could help. What started as an idea to gather in a small group to offer pastoral support to these families and especially their kids became a community gathering on Monday night attended by nearly a dozen community rabbis from across the denominational spectrum, standing in solidarity with more than fifty local residents, joined by community leaders from the JCRC, Montgomery County Police Department, neighboring houses of worship, and many others. The media showed up to cover the story, and to show that despite what happened that morning, the Jewish community would not hide. Rather, we would stand proudly as Jews, side by side with community partners, and show that we would not be afraid. We would bring our Judaism from within our homes and synagogues, and carry it outside for all to see.

When this group gathered on Monday night we sang the words written by Rav Nachman of Bratslav: *Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od*, The whole world is a very narrow bridge, *v'ha'ikar lo lefached klal*, but it is essential that we should never be afraid at all. Yes, sometimes the world around us feels like a scary place, like we are trying to traverse a canyon by walking along a narrow, rickety bridge. But we need not be afraid. We need not be afraid because we are not alone in this world, because we have more friends than we have enemies, because we belong in this place and we will not allow others to suggest otherwise. In the days since the graffiti was found, Rabbi Safra and I have heard from many of our local colleagues from outside of the Jewish community: from the Christian community, from the Black community, from other faith communities, like AIM, that all lend us their support and say that antisemitism has no place here, and that we the Jewish community do.

In his commentary on this *parsha*, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that Parshat Chayei Sarah is focused on two primary events: the purchase of land by Abraham and the finding of a wife for Isaac. One event leads to Abraham as landowner in Israel, and the other leads to Abraham as ancestor to many descendants. But both of these were promised to Abraham by God countless times. Repeatedly, Abraham is told that the land of Israel would be his, and that he would be the father of many nations. Why, then, does Abraham need to act himself to turn these promises into realities? Does he lack faith in God's ability to fulfill these promises? "On the contrary," writes Rabbi Sacks, "the covenant is God's challenge to us, not ours to God...Faith does not mean passivity. It means the courage to act and never to be deterred. The future will happen, but it is we...who must bring it about."¹ This, I believe, is a

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Genesis*, p. 126-127.

very Jewish idea. We are God's agents for change in the world. To be a person of faith is not to sit back, relax, and watch the future unfold before you. Rather, to be a person of faith, a person who need not be afraid of the future, is to be a person who acts in the world, who is undeterred by those who might try to intimidate us and stop us. When Rav Nachman says that we should never be afraid, he does *not* mean that we may not experience fear. It is perfectly reasonable and justified to be afraid from time to time. Rather, Rav Nachman is telling us that as long as we remain committed to the covenant with God, to making it a reality in this world by being a person of active faith, then we will ultimately overcome those fears and trepidations.

The past few weeks have made it challenging to be a Jew in the United States. This week's incidents in Montgomery County made us question our place, and that is a terrifying thought. But when we are surrounded by those who support us, when we hear from our allies and our friends, then in those words and interactions we also hear the echo of Abraham's insistence that we have a place here, Rabbi Sacks' assertion that we will act to make it a reality, and Rav Nachman's reminder that we need not be afraid. Shabbat shalom.