

Sermon
Parshat Chayei Sarah
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Our Sacred Errand

Wednesday is my day off, or what I like to call “my day out of the office,” because rarely does it amount to what you might have in mind when you think about a day off. Of course I am available for lifecycle and pastoral emergencies, but I do try to avoid my desk at 6301 Montrose Road on Wednesdays. On those Wednesdays, I am probably reading, writing, answering emails, or working on something B’nai-related at home or at a local coffee shop. And even on those rare occasions when I really do try to “take the day,” I typically have a list of things that just need to get done. These are the tasks and chores of Wednesdays. These are the mundane but ever-important errands: food shopping, dry cleaning, laundry folding, etc. You have all the same things on your list, but perhaps assigned to a different day. Errands often feel like chores. They are not terribly meaningful or fulfilling, but they are absolutely necessary. And yet there are other times when a task or an obligation is much more than *just* an errand, when the matter in which you are engaged is critically significant.

After Abraham mourns for his late wife, Sarah, he returns his attention to his son, Isaac. Recognizing that he is advanced in years, and now Isaac’s only surviving parent, Abraham remembers that he has a certain obligation to his son. He calls upon his servant and asks him to take a vow, to promise that he will not allow Isaac to marry amongst the Canaanites but that he should instead marry someone from Abraham and Sarah’s birthplace.¹ Abraham’s servant,

¹ Genesis 24:3-4.

Eliezer, has trepidations. What if the intended wife does not want to return to Canaan to meet Isaac and instead asks that Isaac comes to her? Abraham reassures him: If she refuses to return, then you are released from this vow. Although he does not say it explicitly, it sounds like Abraham's message to Eliezer is, "Please, just do your best."

So off Eliezer goes with ten camels and impressive gifts to bestow upon this yet-to-be-identified future wife of Isaac. Upon his arrival, his prayers are answered almost immediately when Rebecca comes to offer him and his camels water to drink. He then meets her brother, Lavan, to whom he says, "I came today to the spring, and I said: 'O Adonai, God of my master Abraham's [house], אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁרָאֵל מַצְלִיחַ דְּרָכָי, if You would indeed grant success to the errand on which I am engaged!'"² Recounting his journey to Lavan, Eliezer tells him that he prayed to God that he would be successful on this errand. But this is no ordinary errand. This is not picking up the dry-cleaning or doing the dishes, this is about finding a wife for Isaac, finding a partner for the progeny of Abraham and Sarah, ensuring that there will be a future for this family that has been blessed by God and commanded to bring light to the world. This is no mere errand; it is a critical endeavor to guarantee our future. Eliezer is not just a matchmaker; he swore to Abraham that he would be the guarantor for the future of the Jewish people.

Eliezer's words echo through time. You have heard them before, and not just in prior years when you heard the chanting of Parshat Chayei Sarah. These words, אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁרָאֵל מַצְלִיחַ דְּרָכָי, are slightly reworded and included in the *Hin'ni*, the prayer that the cantor recites before the repetition of the Musaf Amidah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There it says הִיָּה נָא מַצְלִיחַ הוּא, "I pray that I might be successful on this errand (literally "on this journey")

² Genesis 24:42.

upon which I endeavor.” In its original place, Eliezer’s prayer is about finding a wife for Isaac, finding the next matriarch of the Jewish people. And here, in *Hin’ni*, it is repurposed as a prayer that the leader recites hoping to *daven* the *tefillot* accurately and with proper intention, to properly execute their responsibilities to lead the congregation in prayer on the most sacred days of the year. For years, many of us have heard Cantor Josh and Cantor Bolts recite these words before Musaf on the High Holidays. Their prayer is long, and its tone solemn, because it is offered in the same spirit that Eliezer offered his prayer: a sincere plea to God that we succeed in our sacred mission.

All of us have been called forward to a sacred mission, a mission that, like Eliezer’s, has impact and import upon the future of the Jewish people here, in Israel, and around the world. Next Tuesday at 1:00 PM on the National Mall in Washington, DC, we will gather for the March for Israel. In the words of the organizers, “The March for Israel will be an opportunity for all Americans to come together in solidarity with the people of Israel, to demonstrate our commitment to America’s most important ally in the Middle East, to condemn the rising trend of antisemitic violence and harassment, and to demand that every hostage be immediately and safely released.” We will march for Israel, march to free the hostages, and march against antisemitism.

This is not the first time that the Jewish people have gathered en masse in Washington. On December 6, 1987, 250,000 people marched on Washington in the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews. On April 16, 2002, 100,000 people marched on Washington to support Israel in response to the heinous violence of the Second Intifada. And next Tuesday, November 14, we have no choice but to march again. The hope is that hundreds of thousands of us will attend,

that this will be the largest rally of the Jewish community in our history because this is the moment when we need to make a statement to our community, to our country, to Israel, and to the world: *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives, we will always endure.

Like Eliezer, we have our concerns. Will we be safe? Will anyone listen to what we have to say? Will we succeed in sending our message? I have these questions, too. And I also recognize that this is a moment where we must not allow those questions to stop us from participating in what will hopefully be the largest gathering of the American Jewish community in decades. I know that some people will not be able to participate for a very many good reasons. But if you can be there, then you should be there.

On Thursday, I was part of a conversation for rabbis in the DMV with Rakefet Ginsberg, CEO of Masorti, our movement in Israel. She told us about how Masorti communities have been supporting Israelis during this moment of incredible need: providing tents for shade at funerals, chairs for bereaved family members sitting shiva, and doing so much more to support Israelis at this time. In her message was pain and sorrow, but also a glimmer of hope. In what can only be described as the incredible optimism of the Israeli psyche even at an hour of despair like this one, Rakefet reminded us of the following: Three years after the horrors of the gas chambers and the firing squads, the modern State of Israel was founded. Four years after the Yom Kippur War, Anwar Sadat touched down in Israel to advance Middle East peace. With these realities in mind, Rakefet said that a few years from now, something good, something very good will happen for Israel, for the Jewish people, and for the world. It should not have taken thousands of innocent lives. It should not have taken hundreds of hostages. But history teaches us that something good will come, something good *must* come from all of this horror and despair.

As hard as it is to believe that, I believe that we must. We must still have hope, *tikvah*, that the Israel's future is bright, that our future as a Jewish people is promising, and that our future as a civilized world is secure. To do that, we must take on this mission and join the hundreds of thousands who will march on Tuesday in Washington. We pray that our voices and prayers will be heard, not only by decision-makers but also by citizens of the world. We pray that God will attune the ears of the world to our cries and our pleas and our demands. The world must remember that more than 240 Israelis are still held captive in Gaza. The world must remember that there was a ceasefire on October 6, which Hamas violated when it launched a horrific attack upon cities and civilians on October 7. The world must remember that Israel, like any other sovereign nation, has an inalienable right to protect its inhabitants. This is what we hope to communicate to the world when we stand with one another at next week's March for Israel. היה נא מצליח דרכי אשר אני הולך, May we all be successful on this sacred journey upon which we endeavor.