

Chayei Sarah, 5781
Rabbi Zev Wiener

A number of years ago, I was working as the on-call physician in the hospital on a Sunday. A patient who was unknown to me approached me, and asked me to come into his room to chat. When we closed the door, he told me that he sought my advice on whether he should pursue a high-risk treatment option that his primary treatment team (i.e., the hospital team that treats him during the week) had recommended. I was somewhat surprised by this inquiry, given that the role of the on-call MD is really to cover emergencies, and rarely am I consulted on a decision of this magnitude without knowing the patient. When I explained my reluctance to answer, he pointed to my Kippah, and said, “I don’t believe in G-d, but I want you to answer, because you have that thing on your head. With any other doctor, I know their advice may be based on a million other concerns, consciously or subconsciously. But with that thing on your head, I know you will tell me what you truly believe is best for me.” As this patient reminded me, we all too often forget the remarkable gift that our faith can give to the world.

There is perhaps no greater teacher of this lesson than Avraham Avinu. Upon arriving in Hebron to purchase a burial plot for Sarah, Avraham is greeted most unusually by the resident Hittites:

נשיא אלקים אתה בתוכנו במבחר קברינו קבר את מתך

You are a Prince of G-d in our midst; in the choicest of our graves, bury your dead.

What is so remarkable about this incident is that the Hittites, who obviously did not believe in the existence of Hashem, nonetheless harbored such immense respect for Avraham as a “נשיא אלקים” -- a “*prince of G-d*” -- to the point that they offer him any grave of his choice. This reverence echoes King Avimelech’s observation in last week’s Torah portion that “אלקים עמך בכל אשר אתה עושה” -- “*G-d is with you in all that you do,*” and his resultant desire to secure an alliance with Avraham. Even more strikingly, the Talmud (Bava Batra 91a) teaches us:

אותו היום שנפטר אברהם אבינו מן העולם עמדו כל גדולי אומות העולם בשורה ואמרו אוי לו לעולם
שאבד מנהיגו ואוי לה לספינה שאבד קברינטא

The day that Avraham Avinu left the world, all the leaders of the nations of the world stood in a mourning row and said “woe to the world that has lost its leader; woe to the boat that has lost its helmsman.”

Apparently, there was something so special and beloved about Avraham that the leaders of all the nations -- even those who held diametrically opposed beliefs -- came to deeply admire him and mourn his passing.

Perhaps the source of this universal admiration of Avraham Avinu can be rooted in his self-introduction to the Hittites: “גר ותושב אנכי עמכם” -- “*I am a foreigner and a resident amongst you.*” Commentators have long noticed the ostensible contradiction inherent in this phrase -- if someone is a foreigner, he or she is not a resident, and vice versa. Apparently, in Avraham, the nations sensed someone who could be both fully engaged in the reality of this world -- a “resident” -- and simultaneously fully transcendent beyond this world -- a “foreigner.”¹ A person who could passionately communicate and serve an unknowable G-d, while at the same time feeling a deep-seated love for the common humanity that we all share, praying even for the nefarious sinners of Sodom. Avraham embodied both the holy Tzaddik who lived in the Beit Midrash and the staunch advocate who was not afraid to roll up his sleeves and dirty himself with the challenges of this world to help everyone in need, regardless of race, religion, or culture.

As Avraham’s descendants, we too earn the respect of the world by adhering to the delicate balance that our forefather taught between being a גר and a תושב. Respect of the nations comes not by boasting of how wealthy, accomplished, or smart Jews can be -- if anything, hollow achievements like these only serve to stir up envy and resentment. Rather, we become a נשיא אלקים in the eyes of the world by combining unwavering commitment to the holy Torah and a genuine love and concern for all of humanity. Ideologies that promote universal Tikkun Olam without any sense of sanctity or transcendence ultimately ring hollow, and Torah without a sense of connection and responsibility towards all people is not the Torah of Avraham. In achieving the fusion of גר and תושב, we have the ability to illuminate an entire world.

As has been duly noted, this week, we mourn the overwhelming loss of two most special men who exemplified these two critical roles within the body of our nation. Rabbi Feinstein represented the world of the Beit Midrash, a man whose sanctity and

¹ See Reflections of the Rav II, p. 74-75

humility rendered him a “stranger” to some extent to the “normal” people of the larger world who exist on a vastly different level. He was the concealed and modest Tzaddik, who helped a generation of students enter the transcendent world of Torah, appreciating all the subtleties and nuances of Halacha. Rabbi Sacks represented the “resident,” with an ability to appreciate the big picture of Torah and to utilize it to engage with the world. Versed in a myriad of disciplines, he used the Torah to strengthen the common bonds of humanity that we all share, in a world that has become increasingly divided. In reading the comments of various non-Jewish leaders about Rabbi Sacks, I could not help but think of the aforementioned Gemarah’s description of Avraham Avinu’s passing. Of course, the greatness of both Rabbi Feinstein and Rabbi Sacks went far beyond these specific roles, but the temporal correlation of their passing reminds us of how critical both of these dimensions are for the success of Avraham’s descendants.

May their memory serve as a blessing, and may our recognition of the respective greatness of both of these men allow for a recommitment to the primacy of Torah and a spirit of unity and camaraderie between all people.