

# Avraham's Response to Tragedy

Chayyei Sarah 5779

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## I.

OUR PARASHAH THIS MORNING began with a tragedy:

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הָיָא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

Sarah died in Kiryat Arba – this is Hebron – in the Land of Canaan (Gen. 23:2a).

We, too, are still reeling from a tragedy to have struck our brethren last week. Jews who, like us, had gathered on a Shabbat morning to *daven*, were attacked and murdered by an anti-Semite. How should we react? What are we supposed to do? I think the answer lies in the continuation of the verse describing Sarah's death:

וַיְבֹא אַבְרָהָם לְסַפֵּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכּוֹתָהּ:

Avraham went there to eulogize for Sarah and to cry (23:2b).

This verse describes three things done by Avraham which, when analysed, describe the three things we must do in the wake of last Shabbat's horror:

1. *Vayavo Avraham* – Avraham goes to the place Sarah died.
2. *Lispod le-Sarah* – to eulogize her.
3. *Ve-Livkota* – to cry.

## II.

The very first thing Avraham does is head to Chevron where Sarah passed away. It obviously raises questions about why Avraham was not with Sarah on her deathbed, but I want to put those aside and focus on his travel; because that is what we must do, too. I don't mean that we must literally travel down to Pittsburgh, but there is a need for us to see ourselves there: to identify with those who are suffering; not just emotionally, but also practically.

Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried, the 19th-century halakhist and author of *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*, delineates the different obligations of *tzedakah* (34:6). We should always prioritize those in our family and then local community before anyone else. In other words, our greatest obligation of *tzedakah* is to those closest to us. But Rabbi Herschel Schachter, the most prominent of the *Roshei Yeshiva* of YU, expands this halakhah. He argues that this obligation is not just a local one, it includes ideological affiliation: it's not just your family or local community to which you have an obligation, it's towards those with whom you identify. An organization in Israel, for example, with which you identify, has as much priority as a local organization even though it's half way around the world.

We must follow Avraham's lead and identify with those in Pittsburgh who have suffered. And this means we have an obligation to them: *tzedakah*. There are people needing medical

bills paid for, the *shul* itself has damage that needs repairing, and it is incumbent upon us to help alleviate that burden.

### III.

The second thing Avraham does is eulogize. Rabbenu Asher, the Rosh, the 14th-century German rabbi and one of the most influential *Rishonim*, Talmudic commentators and halakhists, describes two important principles that must govern every eulogy. We should exaggerate the good in the person we are eulogizing but, at the same time, don't lie; don't elaborate to such an extent that you end up describing a different person than the one before you (*Moed Kattan* III §63).

One of the most frustrating aspects of this past week has been the reaction of people to the tragedy. I cannot tell you the infuriating number of think-pieces, social media posts, and op-eds that have begun with "Conservatives need to realize that this happens because of them." Or, "Liberals need to realize that this proves they are wrong." No. This is not how we react to tragedy.

I want to be clear on something. I am not saying that we need not have serious, discussions about politics and rhetoric in our society – especially in the wake of a tragedy that places these questions front-and-centre. But, if the most compelling thing you can think to say in the wake of this tragedy, or the view you find most appealing, only reinforces why those with whom you disagree are wrong – then you need to internalize the Rosh's principles of *hesped*.

Tragedy struck last Shabbat because of one simple fact: someone hated Jews. How do we solve it? Do we continue to sow divide? Do we continue to highlight why those with whom we disagree are terrible and bad for our country? No! We do not respond to the most horrific anti-Semitic attack here by further dividing between us and them. We do not respond to this tragedy by increasing our hate. We respond to this tragedy by seeing the good in people. As the Rosh notes, sometimes we have to exaggerate a bit, sometimes we have to take a small positive we find within those with whom we disagree, and we have to magnify it – because that's what you do at a *hesped*.

What you don't do is lie. You don't describe someone different to who is before you. Those who disagree with you politically are not evil people. They are not stupid. They are not bad. They are like you, just with a different opinion, which is, more often than not, as legitimate or at least as flawed as yours. As I've mentioned for the last few weeks, one of the most important things we learn from Avraham is his willingness to see the good, and demand mercy, for even those who are objectively evil. It is Avraham, not Twitter or partisan blogs or radio shows, from which we must take our cue.

### IV.

The final thing Avraham does is cry. Which prompts many commentators to ask the same question: why is this not the first thing he does? Among the various answers offered, I'd like to highlight the one by Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, the 16th-century Torah commentator and rabbi of Prague, in his work *Kli Yakar*: שלה ביום ויום הרגישו ביותר בהעדר שלה, "every day Avraham felt her absence more than the last." It's not that Avraham only cried at the end. Rather, after eulogizing her, after processing all that happened, after the initial shock faded, the true mourning began: the realization of what her death meant for him.

We, too, are at a point where the initial shock has faded. We have had almost a full week to process what happened and, as the routine of life continued for us, it numbed some of the pain first felt. But this is where the *bekhiyah*, the true crying, begins.

That a *shul* was attacked by an anti-Semite in the United States should strike us. For those of us who felt that such things happened in other countries but not here, this was a jolt. I try to avoid catastrophizing, I do not think that this is the beginning of some dark future for us Jews in America. But I do think it reminds us that Jews have always been the Other in society. However well we think we have assimilated, however much we may look at others who have come to this country with disdain for not adapting like us, there are those who still view us as the Other. We are a minority threatened by things many others in our society – with whom we think we share a lot – cannot even contemplate. And that should reduce us to tears.

## V.

There's one final reaction to Sarah's death I wish to highlight. It's not from Avraham but Yitzchak. Later in the *parashah*, the scene turns to Yitzchak who, *al pi peshat*, according to the literal understanding of the verses, is pacing anxiously:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לָשׁוּחַ בְּשָׂדֵהָ לַפְּנוֹת עָרֶב

And Yitzchak went out walking [aimlessly] in the field toward evening (24:63a).

Unable to process his mother's death, he's resorted to walking around in the evening without purpose. But *Chazal* see this as evidence for prayer. I mentioned a few weeks ago the idea the the *Avot* – Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov – created our *tefillot*. And this verse is used to teach that Yitzchak was *davening*.

How do we process this tragedy? We turn in prayer to God. We reach out and open our hearts to Him.

This is how Jews react to tragedy. We help those in need, with our *tzedakah*. We refuse to paint the world black-and-white and realize that we must emphasize the good in those with whom we disagree, and not magnify the bad. We cry: not just for the tragedy that happened but because of what it means. And finally, we pray. We pray for those suffering. We pray for comfort and for answers. But, most of all, we pray because that is what we do as Jews: in our darkest hours we open our hearts and *daven* to *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*.

The *Mussaf Amidah* will begin on page 500.