

Torah Thoughts Chayei Sarah

5779:

In this election season, members of Congress and the White House continue to wrangle over the issue of immigration and its implications for the country. As in previous generations, we once again face vexing questions about how to craft a sensible approach to those who come to America seeking a better life. What rights and responsibilities do immigrants have, and what does our society owe them?

At the beginning of this week's parshah, Chayei Sarah, we see an illustration of the immigration issue as it played out in ancient Canaan. Abraham must find burial ground for his wife Sarah, but he has a problem: He is not a part of the larger society, only a resident alien. As an immigrant, he has no burial rights for himself or his family. The response of the local people is instructive. They engage Abraham in what appears to be a highly formalized negotiation over the right to bury his dead: First they praise him, then offer to give him a cave and the land surrounding it for free, then they point out that the value of the land, 400 shekels, is really not the kind of thing that should cause dispute between Abraham and the landowner. Abraham accepts their praise and their broad hint about compensating the owner of the land. They pretend to give the land to Abraham, and he pretends to accept it, while giving them the suggested price.

On the one hand, you might think this is a shakedown, a predatory sale to a man who is in emotional distress, alone in a land he does not know well and with a wife to bury. On the other hand, Abraham has already shown himself to be a man who is capable of responding to the needs of the moment. He has bargained with God, he has let Ishmael and Hagar be banished to the wilderness, he has shown himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, and has undertaken a long journey in order to reach this land. God's promise to Abraham can only be fulfilled if Abraham transitions from being an immigrant to being a resident, a citizen in our parlance. If the price he has to pay is to have a burial price set by the locals, then so be it. As in so many instances in the Torah, God's will is established through the actions of an individual, someone whose personal interests will eventually blossom into national destiny.

As Americans, we can't know now how any individual immigrant will contribute to our nation, but we do know that we are a nation of immigrants. Practically every U.S. citizen traces their roots back to an immigrant ancestor, and our status as the leader in so many of the world's activities points to a successful integration of our immigrants. Jews are certainly the beneficiaries of that integration. Long ago, the local people of Canaan were willing to take a chance on Abraham, allowing him a landholding among them. As our national leaders continue to address this issue, I hope that as Jews we take the long view on immigration, and consider the blessings that future Abrahams might bring to America.

5780:

At least once a week, Iran is in the news. We hear about its nuclear capabilities, its support for Hezbollah and its open threats against Israel. One of the accusations that Iran makes against Israel is that it is an illegitimate state, that those Jews who immigrated there had no right to do so. While that accusation is totally without merit – the international community supported the founding of the state through the U.N. – we should keep in mind why it is that Jews feel a right to that land and how Jews have turned that feeling into reality.

This week's Torah portion includes the account of Abraham purchasing land in ancient Canaan – modern Israel – in order to bury his wife Sarah. That was the first time that Jews owned part of the land that God had promised to Abraham and would continue to promise his descendants. It was the divine promise that predisposed the land to be ours, but it was the actions of Abraham that brought the promise into being. From the time of Abraham through the first century of the Common Era, that land was controlled and inhabited by Jews. Sometimes that control was established by purchase and treaty, as in the case of Abraham. Other times, it was through military conquest, such as that of Joshua. After the destruction of the 2nd Temple in the first century and a long period of statelessness, Jews in the 19th century began to purchase large tracts of land in what was then called Palestine, and in 1948 modern Israel was born, following the agreement of the members of the U.N. and Israel's success in its war of independence. Since that time, the land of Israel has once again been controlled and inhabited by Jews.

Like Abraham and Joshua, Jews in the modern period continue to feel the divine promise of the land, and have turned that feeling into a reality through purchase, treaty, and conquest. Israelis continue to build up the land, making it a safe, beautiful, prosperous place. The Torah may have recorded God's promises to us, but we are the ones who have made good on those promises.