

One week ago a man, armed with hate and four guns, walked into the Tree of Life synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and killed eleven Jews, in the most deathly act of antisemitism ever committed on American soil.

But we don't mourn in public on Shabbat. Instead, we talk about the Parsha.

וַתָּמָת שָׂרָה, בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבֶּע הוּא הַקְּבוּרָה--בְּאַרְצָא פְּנֵעוֹ; וַיָּבֵא, אַבְרָהָם, לְסִפְדַּ לְשָׂרָה, וְלִבְכָתָהּ.

And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.

When Sarah died, that was a third of the Jewish population of the world. The first Jewish death in our history, in a time when there were three Jews.

Every Jewish death is the death of Sarah. A death that feels like extinction. Even after one hundred and twenty-seven years, a long and fruitful life-- a death feels like extinction, because every Jewish life is precious.

What's astounding about the death of Sarah is that Abraham never finds comfort. He mourns her and weeps for her. He rises from her side *מֵעַל, פְּנֵי מֶתוֹ*, he purchases an appropriate burial plot, and he finds no comfort. Our Parsha tells us that Abraham was blessed in all things *בְּכֹל*, and he finds no comfort. He sends his servant away on a long and complex journey to find his son a wife, the perfect wife is found, and Abraham is not comforted. Abraham takes another wife, has more children, disinherits all of them besides Isaac, and the Torah still does not tell us that he was comforted after Sarah's death.

Sometimes you don't find comfort. Life keeps going, you do all the things, blessings come your way, and you don't find comfort.

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In this week's parasha, beyond the major tragedy that is Sarah's death, Abraham gives voice to a secondary vulnerability.

Abraham needs to bury his wife, and he doesn't own land. The whole of Canaan had been promised to him-- but that promise was not yet sufficient to ensure a perpetual, safe resting-place for Sarah. He turns to his neighbors, the Bnei Chet, and with honesty and vulnerability he says, *גֵּר-וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי, עִמָּכֶם* "I am a stranger and a sojourner in your midst. You know me, I am here-- but I don't fully belong. Allow me to buy a plot of your property-- I live here but I don't yet have a permanent place. A stranger and sojourner.

As Rav Soloveitchik writes in his famous essay *Confrontation*: "Is it possible to be both - stranger and sojourner- at the same time? Is not this definition absurd since it contravenes the central principle of classical logic that no cognitive judgment may contain two mutually exclusive terms? And yet, the Jew of old defied this time-honored principle and did think of himself in contradictory terms." The death of Sarah brings Abraham to a point of articulation: I am here AND I am different. I am **in** Chevron but I am not **of** Chevron. Stranger and Sojourner.

The Rav wrote that this was the “Jew of old.” But this is the Jew of today, right now.

We don't always feel this way. American Jews usually feel exceptionally safe in this country. This isn't Europe, you don't have to send in your passport in advance in order to go to shul. As a Jew you can hold any position in any organization. You can be an activist or a Fortune 500 CEO. No Jew yet has been President, but the President has been a Shabbos Goy. America invented religious freedom, and our people have taken advantage of that liberty from the very, very beginning. Sojourners.

My family were sojourners in the great city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They first arrived in the 1850s and 60s, and they were there to stay. My great-great-great grandfather, Louis Israel Aaron, in the late 1800s, was among the founders of Pittsburgh's Hebrew Benevolent Society, and United Hebrew Relief Association. He was a director of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, the orphanage and the Jewish Free Loan Society. He was a founder of the Hebrew Institute of Pittsburgh, which created Hebrew schools in the city. His son carried that work forward, supporting those institutions-- but also ingrained himself into Pittsburgh more generally. He, a Jew, in 1911, was appointed by the judiciary to serve on the school board. He continued that service for 36 years, followed by his daughter-in-law who served for another 27 before my grandmother took over the post. My grandmother, a deep-rooted, fifth generation Pittsburgh Jew, was president of the school board and oversaw the peaceful desegregation of Pittsburgh's public schools.

Abraham was in Chevron but not of Chevron. Growing up in Boston, I was of Pittsburgh but not in Pittsburgh. We stored our glasses upside down in the cupboard because-- in Pittsburgh, the soot from the steel mills would get into your cups. When my brother and I wanted to eat the freshly fallen New England snow, as children, our mother never said “yes” because, in Pittsburgh, the snow would turn black soon after it fell. Again, the steel mills. We were no longer in Pittsburgh, but we were of Pittsburgh. Sojourners, not strangers. Abraham needed to buy a burial plot, so that four generations could be buried in Hebron. Well. Five generations of my family are buried in one plot in Pittsburgh. Sojourners.

Until last Shabbat. My grandparents remember when Tree of Life's building went up, in 1953. The massive public funerals this week were held in a reform synagogue that my family belonged to and led for five generations. You can be a sojourner, until someone shows up at your home, in the place where you had roots one hundred and fifty years deep, and shoots up your family, and reminds you that you will always, always be a stranger. You can serve and you can build and you can support and at the end of the day you are still the other and you are not safe. Stranger.

I wanted to stand up here today and give comfort. I think people came here today looking for comfort. I can't give it to you right now. I don't feel comfort, so I can't share it with you. I feel outraged and broken and uprooted. Grief. The comfort that is meant to be Shul and Shabbat and Community and Connectedness was broken last week. Eleven lives were taken in an act of evil. On Shabbat. In a shul. At a bris.

Like Abraham, we have suffered two losses: first and foremost, the loss of eleven beautiful souls-- martyred. Eleven individuals created in the image of God and killed in the shadow of evil. And secondarily, along with that first loss, came a second: a loss of identity. A moment of reckoning: in this place, as a seventh generation American, I am not a sojourner. I am a stranger.

So, what happens now? It is impossible to know.

Our Parsha lays out two paths. These aren't all of the possible paths, but two. We might each find ourselves on different ones, or events in the upcoming days or years will determine some collective future. We can't tell yet. But here are two.

First is Abraham: When Sarah died, a third of the Jewish people were gone, and Abraham was never comforted. He did lots of valuable, important things, but the Torah never tells us that he found comfort in them. It was even pretty good. The verses at the end of the Parsha tell us that Abraham died at a good ripe age, old and contented. *וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה, זָקֵן וְשָׂבֵעַ.* That's just about what anyone can hope for. But he was never comforted for Sarah's death. He felt it until the end.

There's also another way though, another person. We don't see him doing very much in this week's parasha. We don't know how he mourned for Sarah, or where he was, or what he was feeling. But towards the end of the Parsha, we meet Isaac again. Three years after his mother's death, he is out for a walk in the fields towards evening. And he sees a caravan of camels. Abraham's servant brings Rebecca, and Isaac takes her into his mother's tent, *וַיִּבְרָא יִצְחָק, הָאֵלֶּלֶה שָׂרָה אִמּוֹ,* and he married her, *וַיִּקַּח אֶת-רֵבֶקָה וַתְּהִי-לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה,* and he loves her, *וַיֶּאֱהָבָהּ,*

And, unlike his father, Isaac then does find comfort after his mother's death. *וַיִּנְחָם יִצְחָק, אֶת־רֵי אִמּוֹ.*

Isaac was not expecting to find comfort. As far as the Torah tells us, he didn't know any of this was coming. He went out for a walk in the fields one day late in the afternoon, and, it just came to him. Love, and in love, comfort.

We don't know what happens now. Will our lives continue as usual? We hope so. Will we find comfort in that? Abraham didn't.

But, with Isaac, we see a glimmer of hope. Comfort is a possibility. It won't be today or tomorrow. It will take years. First we will sit shiva. First we will mourn. First we will do all of the things that we need to do the process this event.

Many of us have already started to take those steps. We have spoken about this massacre with friends, family or perhaps professional therapists. We gather in community-- like we are doing right now, like many of us did on Thursday at the JUF solidarity gathering. We reassess our security. We sit in silence. We study Torah. We pray. We read. We hold our loved ones close. We light candles. We write letters. We make donations.

We don't run away from our emotions, we look them in the face and we feel them fully. It's not yet the time for comfort.

But comfort may yet come. Isaac shows us that comfort may yet come. With years, and love, and long walks -- Isaac shows us that we can hope for comfort.

There's room for hope.