

**Inside and Out: Reflections One Week after Pittsburgh**  
**Parshat Chayeh Sarah 5779**  
**Rabbi Dovid Zirkind**

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Mincha throughout this past week was at 5:40PM and Sunday's vigil at Congregation Anshe Chesed was at 6:30PM. I left maariv a few minutes early to walk north, as a sign of appreciation for my rabbinic colleagues who worked so hard to put the event together, and I arrived at about 6:18PM, which by Jewish time, is an hour early. I thought I would be first, but when I got to Anshe it felt like I was last. The line into Anshei was already snaking around to Broadway and 100<sup>th</sup> st, and in fact, I was not last. I stood with some of our members and some strangers as the line continued to back up around us a full square block, not once but twice. We were all waiting to get inside.

I overheard the woman behind me on line grumbling that she is actually an *Anshei Member*, "shouldn't they have some plan to get their members in first?". [That's when I invited her to join our shul - she would be perfect...] Everyone who knew me asked if I had some rabbinic dispensation that I could skip the line, which I did not. We waited until the inevitable happened and we were told it was too crowded inside; we would congregate on West End Ave which was now closed and surrounded with NYPD, the block completely flooded with people. And I will tell you what I felt at the moment. Surrounded by members, friends, strangers, Jews of all kinds, and non-Jews as well - as I stood **outside**, I never felt more **in**, than at that moment. I hadn't missed a thing, as we sang, and cheered and davened together, I was outside but I felt very much like I belonged.

It's been one week, since the horrific events in Tree of Life Synagogue that took eleven innocent lives and shook our community to its core. Vigils, funerals, rallies, meetings, so much has happened in the last seven days it still feels too early to process. I won't speculate on what these events mean, I just want to share this morning, what I've been feeling: **the tension of being both inside and out.**

As Avraham ages in our Parsha this morning, he sends Eliezer out on a mission to find a wife for Yitzchak. The rules of the search are pretty simple. Return to my homeland and bring back a woman fit to serve as the next matriarch of our family. Only if no such woman can be found, should you begin to search elsewhere. However, these guidelines, despite how simple they are, should strike us very surprising! Avraham's first mitzvah, the first instruction he was ever given by Hashem was *Lech Licha* - leave! Avraham was told if he wanted to dedicate his life to Hashem he would have to abandon his hometown, the place of his birth. Indeed he tells Eliezer - *rak et bini lo tasheiv shama* - Yitzchak has to marry a woman from my homeland but on the condition that he may never go back. So the question is simple. If Avraham knows Ohr Kasdim is not the place for Yitzchak, why must his wife come from that very place? If Canaan was their future, why couldn't a wife be found there to build the next generation?

Chazal suggest a number of different approaches to this question, but this morning, I'd like to share my own. Perhaps the search for Rivkah in Ohr Kasdim can only be understood in context, as the first act to follow the burial of Sarah.

When Sarah dies, Avraham loses his partner in life, but the tragedy of her loss is compounded by their status as foreigners in the land of Canaan. *Ger V'toshav anochi imachem* - Avraham turns to the Bnei Cheit and pleads for a burial plot for Sarah and in doing so he acknowledges that despite living alongside them for years, as a *Toshav*, he was still but a *Ger* - he had no property of his own when he needed it most. The Bnei Cheit respect Avraham, they promise to help him, but ultimately he gets swindled by Efron in purchasing M'arat HaMachpeila. After years of serving in a divine career, Avraham stops to care for his family and only then does realize how little they have. They are strangers in a land that does not belong to them. Their family is far away. They have no cemetery, no chevra kaddisha, and no sense of belonging. Despite successfully providing for Sarah, Avraham's life is never the same. He makes sure that Yitzchak has a wife from Ohr Kasdim, so Yitzchak will maintain that connection to their blood relatives. Then Avraham himself remarries; we hear the news that Milkah has given birth to Avraham's nephews, he reconnected with his brother Nachor! At the time of his passing Yishmael appears; apparently Avraham has reconnected with his son as well!

In times of success Avraham was a man of the world, in times of tragedy he turned inward and became the leader his family needed him to be.

When I returned home from vacation this past Sunday, my doorman greeted me with the sad eyes of greeting someone who just returned from a funeral. The first thing he said was: "I'm sorry Dave..." It took me a second to realize that he was talking about Pittsburgh; I was only beginning to understand how this story had captured the hearts of the entire nation and I am the only shul-going Jew that he knows in his building.

We are *Toshavim* in America, but this week I feel like Avraham the *Ger*. We belong here, we have earned the respect of so many American's but we are still a minority. Sometimes we forget, we are white, upper class, highly educated Americans, most of us don't experience discrimination often at all, but this week, everywhere I went I was reminded I am a minority. I was reminded by hatred from the right, I am reminded by the anti-Zionism on the left, and all the love and support, from Pastors, Ministers, Imams, Mayors, Governors and doormen, just reminded me further, that while I am loved and respected by the society around me, at my core, I am different. I am inside but I am out.

There is a professor of Psychology at Stern College named Dr. Aharon Fried, who is a terrific mental health expert and a also happens to be a Chassideshe Yid from Brooklyn. I had the privilege of meeting him at a Shabbaton in midtown almost exactly ten years ago this Shabbat, which was November 1<sup>st</sup>. When he opened his talk, he described walking to minyan from his Hotel that morning, in his full bigdei Shabbos - shtreimel, bekeshe, long payis, knee socks, right down 34<sup>th</sup> st. And because it was November 1<sup>st</sup>, many of midtowns young people were stumbling home from a night of Halloween parties just ending. Dr. Fried described his disappointment, as he watched grown men and women dressed in ridiculous costumes stumbling down the street, hung over and exhausted, when suddenly one of them didn't see him, and slammed right into him. This drunk, tired young adult looks up at the 60 year old Chassid dressed for Shabbos, pats him on the back and says: "righteous custom my friend..."

It is no costume", said Dr. Fried, "this is me and I am different". And he said to us: "So are each and every one of you."

Avraham Avinu is confronted with his own minority status in our Parsha, but he does not run away. He demands a seat at the table, he seeks equal rights because he is an equal contributor, but he also does double down on family. We are in the same spot today. We are proud Americans, we have earned our right to be here and we need not run. But at the same time, especially my generation who are so prone to forget, need to

be reminded this week that we are Jews as well. Its #ShowUpForShul Shabbat – meaning - even though it's obvious - we need to come to shul. Avraham dedicates more time to his son's marital prospects and we have an intermarriage crisis on our hands. Avraham repairs broken relationships within his family, we have severed ties to mend with Jews of other communities and other denominations. We can do better than just get together for vigils and *tehillim* rallies. We are a country thinking about immigration and no Jew, regardless of party or policy, can ever forget that we too were immigrants here when we were lucky enough to arrive.

The cover of the Pittsburg Post-Gazette yesterday read with a large headline in Hebrew, Yitgadal v'yitkadash shmei rabbah – indeed it is a time to mourn. But when the mourning comes to an end, let us follow Avraham's legacy and his commitment to perpetuating all he had worked for. Let us celebrate the uniqueness of our heritage and our ancestors. With Kislev beginning this week and Chanuka around the corner, let us remember that if we can strengthen ourselves from within, we can begin once again to shine a bright ray of hope on a world that so desperately needs one.