



The Parsha in Practice

The Resident and the Stranger Meet

Seeking a burial plot for his deceased wife Sarah, Avraham is forced to negotiate with Efron the Hittite for a plot of land. In identifying himself, Avraham uses contradictory term to describe his citizenship status:

גֵר־וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם

'I am a stranger and a sojourner with you:

Which is it? Is he a stranger or a resident? A foreigner or a local? In his first explanation, Rashi simply explains that the phrases are sequential. First, Avraham came from another land (Charan) but now, he lives amongst them (in Canaan).



Others treat these two phrases as the contradiction they appear to be, and point to a tension that exists between these two very different identities. Rav Soloveitchik offered a well-known explanation of this tension:

Abraham's definition of his dual status, we believe, describes with profound accuracy the historical position of the Jew who resides in a predominantly non-Jewish society. He was a resident, like other inhabitants of Canaan, sharing with them a concern for the welfare of society, digging wells, and contributing to the progress of the country in loyalty to its government and institutions. Here, Abraham was clearly a fellow citizen, a patriot among compatriots, joining others in advancing the common welfare. However, there was another aspect, the spiritual, in which Abraham regarded himself as a stranger. His identification and solidarity with his fellow citizens in the secular realm did not imply his readiness to relinquish any aspects of his religious uniqueness. His was a different faith and he was governed by perceptions, truths, and observances which set him apart from the larger faith community. In this regard, Abraham and his descendants would always remain "strangers." (Reflections of the Rav, pp. 169)

The tension described here is of one of both belonging to the group, but not necessarily believing as that group. Of respecting local practice while possibly being required to restrain from adopting them ourselves. Of involvement in the outside world, but retaining a measured independence from it. We are reminded by Avraham, the first diaspora Jew of the strain that lies within navigating being both a citizen and a stranger.

This classic idea is often cited to inspire us to check ourselves, and our values, and to ensure that we live in this tension. It's used to remind us to be wary of assimilation and to separate our values from those of the outside.

This week, with the loss of two great leaders of the Jewish people, Rav Dovid Feinstein ztz"l and Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ztz"l, I can't help but think of the *positive* opportunities that this tension creates. I believe that it's a mistake to look at this ger/toshav tension as simply creating accountability to separate, but in fact, we should see it as a charge to integrate. We are not only asked to keep separate from the threats of the outside world, rather the onus on us is to figure out how - where possible - to neutralize those threats. We are not required to keep to ourselves, rather are called upon to share the intellectual, theological and interpersonal gifts we've received with our neighbors.

Take for example, these two great men who passed within a day of one another:

Rabbi Feinstein was a model of middot tovot and concern for others. His devotion to Torah study and his humility were well known. But perhaps most unique in our generation was the similarity he had to his great father, Rav Moshe Feinstein. Like Rav Moshe was to the previous generation, Rav Dovid became the address for those who were looking to integrate halachic propriety into the secular world. How does one manage a complex business deal in the backdrop of the laws of Ribit and the Torah's prohibition of taking interest? How does one navigate the modern medical world while remaining loyal to the ethic of pikuach nefesh that Judaism teaches above all else? How do we adapt technological innovation to ancient insights? Rav Dovid Feinstein answered these questions for our generation with a fealty to integrating the "ger' and the "toshav" together.

We are likely more familiar with the work of Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He has spoken from our pulpit, and we are likely to have read some of his English-language divrei torah. We may have been impressed by his distinguished demeanor, his many doctorates and titles, his kind personality and humble manner. He was an eloquent expositor of Jewish thought with a brilliant mind and a prolific pen. Many have pointed out that he was a fulfillment of the verse in Devarim that describes the Torah as "Your wisdom in the eyes of the nations." He was Torah's quintessential ambassador.

Rabbi Sacks was the one who we turned to for guidance of how to translate the Torah's language - written in its unique dialect of "stranger" - to be understood even by "residents." He would express the Jewish argument with a level of sophistication that was unrivaled. He was quite simply our best spokesman in the world about Judaism's approach to the world.

Being a Jew requires both being a stranger and a resident. These great men reminded us that while holding these two identities requires us to reject some, it allows us to synthesize much.

How did the religious Jew become the doctor, the lawyer or entrepreneur while still retaining his halachic values? We'd turn to Rav Dovid Feinstein for those answers.

How did the philosopher, the ethicist, or the modern thinker become the believing and practicing Jew while still retaining their intellectual sophistication? We'd turn to Rabbi Sacks for those answers.

These two men introduced the stranger to the resident and allowed them to live together and understand one another, bettering the entire neighborhood. Who will make these introductions now?

Yehei Zichram Baruch.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach