Living with Others in Hope and Fear
Chayei Sarah, 5783

The Jewish People have often been called the People of the Book for our connection with the vast library of sacred texts throughout our history and the value traditionally placed on formal learning. But I personally have often thought of us as the People of Memory, for how often we are told, or tell one another, to recall elements of our collective past.

We are called to remember good and beautiful things in our lives:

1. “Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it.”(Exodus 20:8)

2. “. . .[Y]ou shall remember the day when you went out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life.” (Deuteronomy 16:3)

We are called to remember the kind of person we should strive to be, the sort of a people we can be in the world:

3. “Remember what Adonai, your G-d, did to Miriam on the way, when you went out of Egypt,” (Deuteronomy 24:9) so that you do not engage in לשון הרע (*lashon hara*, “gossip”).

4. “But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children’s children—the day you stood before the L-rd your G-d at Horeb.” (Deuteronomy 4:9–10)

We are called to remember the ways we have suffered in the past:

5. “Remember, do not forget, how you angered the L-rd, your G-d, in the desert; from the day that you went out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebelling against the L-rd.” (Deuteronomy 9:7)

6. “You shall remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and did not fear G-d...You shall not forget!” (Deuteronomy 25:17–19)

For me, it’s these last few memories that are the most challenging to wrestle with. The idea that we should carry with us the hurts of the past as warnings of the possible dangers in our future has both the reassuring veneer of watching out for danger, while at the same time becoming an easy slide toward suspicion, fear, and distrust of anyone who is, or even seems to be, in some way outside our group, different, or other.

This tension is nothing new; we can see it even in Parshat Chayei Sarah’s two main storylines: when Avraham purchases a burial plot for Sarah, and when he sends Eliezer off to find a wife for his son Isaac.

In the first case, Avraham is insistent that he pay for the Cave of Machpelah, even though the Ephron, the Hittite owner of the land, as well as the rest of the Hittite community, offers Avraham any space he wants for free to bury his wife. So why is he so unable to be swayed by the kindness and generosity of his neighbors in giving him this plot of land in his time of grief?

The Italian sage 15th-16th Century Italian sage, Ovadia ben Yakov Sforno, comments that

> *Avraham wanted complete freedom to do what he wanted to in the property once he had acquired it. This is the privilege granted to anyone owning an ancestral heritage. Avraham wanted it understood that as a result of the sale neither Efron, nor anyone else, would not be able to dictate to him how close to his own property Sarah or other members of his family could be buried.*

In other words, despite the kindness Avraham is being shown in the moment of his deep grief and desperate need, he can already predict a future in which people would not be as kind, a situation where they might see him as an outsider, where they would treat him as less than a full, landowning member of their community. Avraham has clearly taken to heart some idea that he cannot rely on the kindness of strangers, lest one day that kindness turns to cruelty.

It is at once shocking, and yet all too familiar to think about Avraham looking around his world and seeing potential danger. Many of us might feel that way right now. That's the world that I grew up in, a world in which I was safe, by and large, every minute of every day, and yet most of the Jewish adults I knew felt like they always needed to keep a bag packed and an eye out for anti-Jewish hatred that would force them from their homes. So many of us have stories, told directly to us by family and friends, of having to flee hate and persecution in nations around the globe simply because they were Jewish.

These stories were real, and their impacts are still real. We cannot deny that anti-semitism exists and is on the rise. We hear prominent members of our elected leadership, famous entertainers or athletes, as well as far too many teachers, clergy, and everyday citizens, as well as the myriad of online trolls, repeating the same hateful, hurtful, and frightening tropes we have heard for generations uncountable, as well as coming up with some new ones like Jewish space lasers. Incidentally, if a Jewish person had invented space lasers, does anyone believe that person's Jewish mother would be able to keep them secret, that she wouldn't have bragged to everyone she knew?!

But there is another story from Avraham's life in this parashah that complements the first. Avraham looks to the future and realizes that his son is both in need of comfort for the loss of his mother, which he cannot receive from Avraham after the Akeidah, and also a sense of hope for his future. So Avraham sends his servant, Eliezer, out of their home and their

land to the place of Avraham's birth to find a partner for Isaac. He finds Rebecca, brings her back, and Isaac is comforted by her presence.

Not only this, immediately after, we learn that Avraham himself remarries and has more children. These are not the actions of a person who is terrified of their neighbors and fearful of the future. Avraham allies himself with the people around him through marriage and creates another generation of children to both carry his memory into the future and to tie him to the community in which he lived. By his actions, he was staking a claim to the hope that there are people out there in the world who do not hate us for who we are, but who will love, care for, support, and honor us as neighbors, friends, and part of our human family.

Four thousand years of telling the stories that we are eternally persecuted takes a toll. It is a weight that is so heavy. To be vigilant all the time and on the watch for anti-semitism can so easily become an unbearable burden, the only lens through which we relate to the world, and yet we know even still that we must stand up against all forms of hate and anti-semitism, wherever they occur. Dr. Eric Ward, the great thinker and scholar of hate and prejudice throughout American history, summarized the need to call out and fight anti-semitism in all it's forms in his seminal 2017 article entitled "Skin In The Game," saying, "To refuse to deal with any ideology of domination, moreover, is to abet it. Contemporary social justice movements are quite clear that to refuse antiracism is an act of racism; to refuse feminism is an act of sexism. To refuse opposition to antisemitism, likewise, is an act of antisemitism."

But if all we do is point out the offensive words or jokes or acts of others, if all we do is label people as bad or hate-mongers or unforgivable, what we do is close down conversation and the way forward. When asked this week about his take on Dave Chappelle's anti-semitic jokes during his opening monologue on Saturday Night Live, comedian Jon Stewart (who is himself Jewish), compared hate and hurtful words and deeds to a physical wound; if you shut it out and close it off to the outside without treating it, the wound can fester. The only way to heal it is by exposing it, by bringing it into the

light and letting it breathe, by dealing with the causes of prejudice, and by talking about it.

I do think that we have a responsibility to call out anti-semitism when it occurs. But I also think that if we are not just as vigilant about calling out all forms of hate, what we are doing is merely looking out for our own interests and not really working for justice. To be a light unto the nations, as we are called to become by the prophet Isaiah (42:6, 60:3), means that we must take seriously the perils of hate, and instead counter it with the light of a love large enough to create new paths of peace.

I have seen hate turn into love. When I was living in Atlanta, my favorite coffee was made by a company called Land of a Thousand Hills Coffee. The company was founded by clergy and aid workers who went into Rwanda after the 1994 genoside and looked to rebuild. They saw the abundance of coffee there and built a company where at every stage of planting, growing, production, packaging, marketing, and management, there are Hutus and Tutsis working side by side. To hear their testimonials is heart-breaking and awe-inspiring at the same time. To know the person next to you was an active participant in the destruction of your life, and to still work together with them, even to build up a partnership with them, has created a new world in these communities, a world which could not have existed without bringing them together and doing the unbelievably more difficult work of building relationships with one another.

I have heard the speeches of neo-Nazis who came to terms with the hate and evil they perpetuated because of real relationships they made with the very people they were taught to despise, in spite of themselves and what they had thought they knew. I have seen individuals brainwashed by a lifetime of violence become ambassadors of peace and compassion. I have seen people grow and change for the better in innumerable ways, but only when they had people who reached out to them to engage, to talk.

We cannot only point out the hate in our midst because while it may feel just and righteous, it is merely the beginning of the work. Singling out the

hateful words and deeds of individuals does nothing in the long term unless we also work to build new bridges. Looking around our world ONLY through the lens of the fear of anti-Semitism merely serves to keep us afraid and insulated.

Like Avraham, we must walk a tightrope stretched between hope and fear. We must work to protect ourselves from those who would truly do us harm, and we also must redouble our efforts to build more bridges throughout our St. Louis community, and our world, with people who do not look, sound, live, believe, think, or act like us. It is the light of relationship that will banish the shadow cast by hate, and it is upon all of us to be the builders of the world in which we wish to live.

Shabbat Shalom.