

From Resident Alien to Neighbor

In the depth of his grief, Abraham never felt so alone. All his life he courageously tried to build a new world. He left the land of his birth to establish his family in the Promised Land only to have a drought force him to find refuge in Egypt. He returned with the plan of peacefully raising his flocks, only to be forced into battles with foes great and small. He hoped to teach all he encountered about the oneness of God but his monotheism struggled in the world of idolatry. He wanted a loving family with children and grandchildren and the hope for a brighter future, but there was estrangement in his family and even his son, Isaac, seemed to be drifting and directionless after the traumatic events at Mount Moriah. And then, Abraham's beloved wife, Sarah, died and he didn't even have a place to lay her to rest. At every turn he seemed to be a failure.

In the beginning of this week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah* (Genesis 23:1-25:18), we find Abraham mourning and crying over the death of Sarah and expressing an anguished plea to the Hittites, the people who were the dominant culture in the Land of Canaan at that time. He simply wants a worthy place to bury her:

I am a resident alien among you (ger-toshav); sell me a burial site among you that I may remove my dead for burial (Genesis 23:4).

What ensues is a record of the ancient negotiation for the sale of the cave of Machpelah in what is present day Hebron. The cave and its field belonged to a Hittite named Ephron. While some commentators focus on the fact that Ephron drove a hard bargain and raised the price beyond

market value, an ancient midrash took a different point of view and noted how remarkable it was that Ephron was mentioned by name so many times along with his tribe, the Hittites. It concluded that the repetition of their names must indicate that Ephron and the Hittites are deserving of praise because they helped Abraham (*Beresheet Rabbah, Chayei Sarah 48.8*).

As you know, in time Abraham was privileged to see his son Isaac marry Rebecca and the story of his family unfold with grandchildren. Despair faded and he found renewed hope and fulfillment . . . in large part due to the kindness of strangers.

Some 52 years ago, Temple Sinai was created by Rabbi Ray Zwerin and a small but enthusiastic group of families. They had the dream of establishing a modern Jewish community that combined both the open, progressive and egalitarian spirit of Reform Judaism with the *heimesche* warmth, wisdom and faith of tradition. They had a dream . . . but no home. But they were offered rental space at First Plymouth church on Hampden and soon found a place to grow and quickly flourish. Our congregation was welcomed and nurtured by our Christian neighbors and ever since, we have been good friends. Our joint Interfaith Thanksgiving service is one of this nation's oldest continuous partnerships between a synagogue and a church.

How fitting it is that we usher in Thanksgiving together! Our Interfaith Thanksgiving service will be this Sunday, November 24 (7:00-8:00pm) at Temple Sinai. The new spiritual leader of First Plymouth, Reverend Jenny Shultz-Thomas, will deliver the sermon, Rabbi Jordy will offer words of Torah, choirs from both congregations will fill the Zwerin Sanctuary with uplifting music and I will have the honor of welcoming all to our home and leading us in prayer.

This short but powerful and meaningful service is the perfect way to help us fully experience and express the blessed purpose of Thanksgiving. Please make it a point to attend . . . and be sure to invite others to join you!

B'vrakhah,

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins