

Parashat Chayeh Sarah 5772, 2011

Rabbi David Etengoff

*Of Strangers and Residents*

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

This week's *parasha* recounts the pathos and misery that befell *Avraham Avinu* with the passing of his beloved wife Sarah. My rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), poignantly described the initial feelings that one encounters at the loss, G-d forbid, of a beloved family member (*Aninut*):

*Aninut* represents the spontaneous human reaction to death. It is an outcry, a shout, or a howl of grisly horror and disgust. Man responds to his defeat at the hands of death with total resignation and with an all-consuming, masochistic, self-devastating black despair. Beaten by the fiend, his prayers rejected, enveloped by a hideous darkness, forsaken and lonely, man begins to question his own human singular reality. Doubt develops quickly into a cruel conviction, and doubting man turns into mocking man... In a word, man's initial response to death is saturated with malice and ridicule toward himself. He tells himself: If death is the final destiny of all men, if everything human terminates in the narrow, dark grave, then why be a man at all? (*Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering, and the Human Condition*, pages 1-2.)

Surely these feelings must have enveloped Avraham's consciousness when Sarah died. His best friend, his beloved wife and companion with whom he had begun the greatest religious revolution in all of human history, was no more. How could he go on? How could he continue to forge new and vital paths toward understanding *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*? His life must have seemed to be filled with nothing but black despair and hope must have seemed to be nothing but a phantom image of the past - something that he could pursue perhaps, but never feel again. This is probably how Avraham felt at the moment of his bitter loss.

*Aninut* continues until the beloved family member is buried. Avraham's *aninut*, however, was complicated by one more shattering detail: He had no place to bury Sarah. He was a landless immigrant, a stranger in a strange land. True, he was recognized by the local inhabitants as a Prince of G-d (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:6). Nonetheless, he had no place to bury his beloved wife. Thus, in the midst of the darkest desolation and depths of despair, he was forced to enter into financial negotiations in order to purchase a final resting place for Sarah from the *b'nai Chate* (the people of Chate).

Avraham began his request for a burial place with the *b'nai Chate* with the following words: "I am a stranger (*ger*) and a resident (*toshav*) among you. Give me a permanent burial place among you and I will bury my dead from before me." (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:4) The verse immediately presents us with a seeming contradiction: How can one simultaneously be a stranger and a resident? In a lecture that he delivered in 1964, Rabbi Soloveitchik formulated this problem in the following fashion: "Are not these two terms mutually exclusive? One is either a stranger, an alien, *or* one is a resident, a citizen. How could Abraham claim both identities for himself?" (Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought Adopted from the Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, page 169)

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin *zatzal* (known as the *Netziv*, 1817-1893) was a world-renowned Talmudic scholar who headed the Volozhin Yeshiva for 40 years. His commentary on the Torah entitled, "*Ha'amek Davar*," dealt with Avraham's dual identity claim in this manner:

Since Avraham had already left his dwelling place in Chevron, he was a stranger among the *b'nai Chate*. And since he had already dwelt among them for 25 years and he now

wanted to establish a permanent burial place among them for himself, he was now considered to be like a “resident.” He stated that he was a “stranger” first to give a reason as to why he had not as of yet prepared a permanent and specific burial place for himself as was customary for all men of means to do for themselves and their children. This was in addition to the cemetery that included places for the poor and the visitors...Now, he asked for permission to establish such a burial place and with such a request he declared himself to be a “resident.”

The Netziv, therefore, took a direct approach to Avraham’s claim of dual identity. In regards to being an immigrant, he was indeed a stranger. Since, however, he had already dwelt among the *b’nai Chate* for 25 years, he was for all intents and purposes a resident.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, however, took a very different approach to Avraham’s statement of dual identity: “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.” (Besdin, op. cit.) In other words, Avraham’s declaration of simultaneously being a “stranger” and a “resident” was an existential statement reflecting who and what he was, and what his approach to living in a non-Jewish world had to be. In a different address, Rabbi Soloveitchik described Avraham as a model citizen, a model resident: “He erected tents, raised sheep, involved himself in business deals with kings and princes and established treaties with them. He learned their language and paid taxes – and when called upon, went to war to protect the land.” Yet, at one and the same time: “...he lived as well on the other side of the river...from those distances Avraham took something with him, in a word, the vision of the Master of the Universe, of the new world order and new ethical system. This vision of the other side of the river never left Avraham’s sight.” Avraham’s vision has always been with us. It is part and parcel of who we are, no matter where we have wandered since the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple). Thus Rabbi Soloveitchik states:

We Jews have crossed many rivers. We have lived in many lands. We remain, however, spiritually, ideologically, and religiously firmly rooted on the other side of the river. We view this inheritance of the other side of the river, this inheritance of holiness, of purity, and specifically the life of the heroic gesture as found in the blessing “*ozar Yisrael b’gevurah*” (Who girds the Jewish people with mighty strength) as the center point of our being. (Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Chamash Drashot*, “*Avraham Haivri*,” page, 75)

Avraham’s dual identity is something that he conferred upon all Jews for all time. Thus, like Avraham: “Where the freedom, dignity, and security of human life are at stake, all people – irrespective of ethnic diversity – are expected to join as brothers in shouldering their responsibilities.” (Besdin, op. cit. page 170) Yet, as Rav Soloveitchik so clearly states, our universal responsibilities may never obscure our unique and particularistic Jewish identity:

The Jew, however, has another identity which he does not share with the rest of mankind: the covenant with G-d which was established at Mt. Sinai over 3,000 years ago. All of Jewish history only makes sense in terms of the validity of this covenant, which entrusted the Jewish people of all generations with a particular national destiny and a distinctive religious heritage. This identity involves responsibilities and a way of life which are uniquely Jewish and which, inevitably, set the Jew apart from non-Jews. It is particularistic rather than universalistic. (Besdin, *ibid.*)

May the Master of the Universe grant us the spiritual strength and understanding to emulate Avraham’s *derech hachaim* (way of life) so that we, too, may fulfill our dual role in this world. In that way, we will be a beacon of truth, honesty, and kindness to one another, and a light unto all of the nations of the world. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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