

Parashat Chayei Sarah 5782, 2021:

Ger v'Toshav

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Chana bat Sarah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with one of the greatest human tragedies, the death of one's spouse:

“And Sarah died in Kiriat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 23:2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Avraham's beloved wife, confidant and inspiration, was no more. In the midst of his abject misery, it was necessary for Avraham to enter financial negotiations with *b'nai Chate*, the people upon whose land he was living, in order to purchase a permanent burial plot for Sarah, and, ultimately, for the future *Avot* and *Emahot*.

Avraham began his discussion with *b'nai Chate* with these words: “I am a stranger (*ger*) and a resident (*toshav*) with you. Give me burial property with you, so that I may bury my dead from before me.” (23:4) The second part of the *pasuk* is exactly as we would expect; the first part, however, is confusing. After all, how can one simultaneously be both a *ger* and a *toshav*? My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as the Rav by his students and followers, asked this question in a lecture delivered in 1964: “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) The Rav utilized Avraham’s self-description as a lens for examining our identity as Jews, and our role in the world at large: “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.” In other words, Avraham’s declaration of being simultaneously a *ger* and a *toshav* represents an existential statement that bespeaks his very being, and his approach to the non-Jewish world.

On another occasion, the Rav described Avraham as a model citizen, or 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, the Rav pointed out, 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 a large part of who we are, no matter where we have wandered. The Rav describes it as the essence of our being:

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)

For the Rav, Avraham's dual identity is something conferred upon all Jews, for all time: "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, p.170) Yet, as the Rav stresses, these universal responsibilities must never contravene our unique 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, p. 170)

In my estimation, the Sages of the *Anshei Kenesset HaGadolah* had many of these concepts in mind when they formulated the *Aleinu* prayer. A careful reading of this *tefilah* reveals the particularism of the first paragraph in that it emphasizes key theological principles of Judaism. These include the existence and omnipotence of Hashem, Hashem as the ongoing Creator of the Universe, and the uniqueness of the Jewish people regarding *chelkanu* (our portion, the Torah) and *goralanu* (our destiny). Since these essential beliefs constitute our very being as a nation, this paragraph was given precedence of place.

The second paragraph of *Aleinu* is universalistic in nature. It depicts the time of *Mashiach* "...when the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty, when all humanity will call on Your name, to turn the earth's wicked toward you," and proclaims the implications of these great changes for all the nations of the world, when they:

...will kneel and bow down and give honor to Your glorious name. They will accept the yoke of Your kingdom, and You will reign over them soon and forever. For the kingdom is Yours, and to all eternity You will reign in glory, as it is written in Your Torah: "The L-rd will reign forever and ever." And it is said: "Then the L-rd shall be King over all the earth; on that day the L-rd shall be One and His name One." (Translation, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zatzal*, *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Siddur*, page 198)

With Hashem's greatest blessing and our most fervent hope, may this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)