

Drasha for Chaye Sarah – November 11, 2023

This week's parasha, Chaye Sarah ("The Life of Sarah") opens as Sarah dies and Abraham buys the Cave of Machpelah to bury her. Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant meets Rebecca at a well, and Rebecca returns with the servant to marry Isaac. Abraham remarries, has more children, and dies at age 175. The part we read today was all about Rebecca, her qualities to be Isaac's wife and to carry on the tradition as Abraham's true heir. She deserves to have an entire drash dedicated to expounding on this, and that is what Cynthia expected me to talk about when she asked me to speak. But with apologies to Cynthia, I find that I cannot talk about that today.

It is Abraham and his sons, who bookend this parashah that speak to what is on my mind and in my heart at this moment, in this time of massacre and war.

At the beginning of this parashah, we read that Sarah has died and Abraham grieves. Until this time, he has been a Ger vToshav, a foreigner who has lived in the land, and now he has decided that he needs to put down roots in this land that God has promised his descendants. He makes a point of purchasing property for a permanent family gravesite, and thereby claimed ownership of the land for all posterity. Of note, this way of establishing legal residency is common even today, as many countries will allow legal immigration if someone buys property or invests a certain amount of money in that country.

Abraham then buries his wife Sarah, in Kiriath Arba, Hebron, where she had died. But where is Isaac? Isaac is not stated to be present when his mother is buried, and, in fact, has not been heard from since the Akedah when Abraham was noted to return with his servants and to settle in Beersheba. There have been many midrashot about where Isaac went after the Akedah, but the first time we hear about him in the text is when he went to meet Rebecca, and he was coming from the approach to Be'er Lachai-Roi. Why Be'er Lachai-Roi? This is the place where Hagar encounters an angel of God after she fled from Sarah's ill treatment during her pregnancy and where she is promised that her descendants, through her son Ishmael, will be numerous.

Rabbi Shai Held suggests that Isaac, reacting to the trauma of nearly being killed by his father, has sought refuge in the place and in the company of Ishmael and Hagar who have also been traumatized by nearly being killed due to actions of his father and mother. Rabbi Held also suggests that Isaac is seeking a different experience of God – not the God who demands harsh sacrifice, but a God who sees and hears those who have been cast out, not a God of stern judgment, but a God of mercy and compassion. Isaac goes to Be'er Lachai-Roi to console and be consoled and he seems to have reconciled with his brother in the process, as, at the end of this parashah, we are told that Isaac and Ishmael together bury their father, Abraham.

And, with Abraham's death, the issue which is so relevant to our lives today becomes apparent. Abraham purchased land which could be passed down through future generations. Abraham gave all that he owned to Isaac, but Abraham gave gifts to the sons he had with his concubines, Hagar and Keturah, while he was still alive, and sent them away. The parashah ends with a naming of Ishmael's lineage – sons who are identified with semi-nomadic tribes who lived on wide swatches of land on the fringes of the land of Israel.

So now we get to the crux of the matter. Who gets to live in the land? In our tradition, God owns all the land, and God gave this land to the descendants of Abraham through Isaac. Abraham made that promise real when he purchased the cave of Machpelah. But Abraham's other son also became a great nation and a father of twelve chiefdoms. Being seminomadic does not mean that people have no connection to the land. It means a different connection to the land – ranging over a wide territory according to the cycles of weather and growth of native plants. They also settle in certain areas for long periods of time. These differing attitudes to the land are humorously evoked in the musical Oklahoma – The Cowman and the Farmer can be friends; Territory folk should stick together.

On a more serious note, the issue of Abraham's unequal legacy haunts us to this day. And it doesn't help that the descendants of Ishmael were and are more numerous than the descendants of Isaac.

We know that the children of Abraham have much in common, and that we can, like Isaac and Ishmael, look beyond our grievances. Witness the many organizations which bring Israelis and Palestinians together in common cause;

sticking together as the song says: Organizations such as the Arava Institute and the Hand-in Hand schools; other groups that work for peace and cooperation, many of which are funded by the JCRC's invest in Peace initiative and the New Israel Fund. Organizations such as Combatants for Peace are, even now, trying to find ways for Israelis and Palestinians to share the land and stop killing each other.

But it seems so hard now. Hamas's attack, in line with its stated goal of getting rid of all the Jews, is heinous. Yet most Palestinians just want a place to live safely and in peace in the land of their fathers. As do the majority of Israeli Jews. And the violence continues.

We are caught in a war, with daily reports of the dead and dispossessed. At this time, I can't see the path forward.

I regularly attend the Wednesday minyan, which is now on zoom. Every Wednesday, we recite psalm 94, which begins: *El Nekamot, Adonai; El Nekamot Hofiyah. God of retribution, Adonai; God of Retribution, appear. Judge of the earth, punish the arrogant as they deserve. Ad matai, Adonai, how long shall the wicked exult?*

And I have hated this psalm, even as I now understand it. I, like Isaac, long for the God of mercy and compassion.

I will close with a poem and a prayer. The poem was written fifteen years ago by Laurie Patton and imagines a conversation between Ishmael and Isaac:

*Ishmael: I was thirteen, and I remember the music and my mother whispering,
"Why such a party when it is only a weaning?"*

And the smell of lamb and the hand-drums;

And the involuntary sound coming from my own throat-half laughter, half-sob-

After I saw my mother's face in the firelight and I knew

My little brother was now my rival.

But God was still good to us---

Isaac: ---and I was three, and I remember staring out in the dark of the morning

And seeing two shadows and then a clear outline of your mother

Clutching a water bottle and waving it in the air,

As if she was talking to Someone.

But God was still good to us---

Ishmael: ---and now we stare together into the cave that holds our father---

Isaac: our father's bones and his memory in the place before Mamre---

Ishmael: ---and yet I fear for the future---

Isaac: ---since perhaps the only thing we can do together---

Ishmael and Isaac: is to bury and mourn our dead.

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God of Ishmael and Isaac, God of Sacrifice and Retribution – Ad matai – when will we break the cycle of expulsion and death? God of Isaac and Ishmael, God of Mercy and Compassion, raise up the voices of the peacemakers and teach us how to share the land. Then, in the words of Psalm 30, which we recite daily, cause us to transform our mourning into dancing and our sackcloth into robes of joy.