

SERMON - CHAYEI SARAH 2018

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Tonight, I would love to do a beautifully crafted sermon, in which all the threads and ideas weave into a single message that inspires. Sadly, this has been a broken week, when we are feeling broken, and my sermon is also broken. So I want to offer some thoughts on Pittsburgh, on anti-Semitism, on resistance, and on resilience.

This week's Torah Portion is Chayei Sara, the life of Sarah, but the portion actually begins not with Sarah's life, but with her death:

Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her.

Sarah's death is the first thing that happens in the Torah after the Akedah, the near-sacrifice of Isaac. There are many midrash that connect the Binding of Isaac with Sarah's death. One is that at the very moment that Abraham was lifting his hand to slaughter Isaac, Satan, the trickster, appeared to Sarah and told her that Abraham had taken Isaac to offer as a sacrifice, and Sarah began to wail and moan, and her cries turned into the three sounds of the Shofar, and her cry was the Shofar that stopped Abraham, making him drop the knife.

If only our cries could have stopped what happened in Pittsburgh, made the shooter drop the gun. Instead, it is we who have lived to sound the alarm and the pain.

Remember, that Sarah was a refugee, an immigrant from Haran, who had left everything behind to make a new land with her husband in the Promised Land. So many of our people have done the same, leaving war, pogroms, genocide to make new lives here, or in Israel, or around the world.

And like so many survivors of our people, Sarah made a new life, had a child to carry on her family line, and not only her family line, but the Jewish people. Think of the baby boom in the Displaced Person's Camps after WWII! Children represented a refusal to give up, a refusal to die, and defiance of those who had sought to slaughter them.

But here, when Sarah heard that Abraham had sacrificed Isaac was not just the loss of her only child, but the loss of her descendants, her entire life's work. Her heartbreak so was profound, that her soul fled her body rather than face such a loss.

I can imagine that for the people of Tree of Life Congregation, their heartbreak is unbearable. Their cries open our hearts, if not the hearts of those who hate us just for being Jews.

And there is another version of the midrash on Sarah's death, that it wasn't Satan who told her about the Akedah, but it was actually Isaac himself who came to see her and told her what Abraham had done. And even seeing Isaac alive before her, all Sarah could think of was that if not for a cry from heaven, Abraham would have slaughtered Isaac, their son, and this realization, that only a moment, an unpredictable event, was the difference between Isaac living and the Jewish people living, and the entire line being wiped out. This for her was too much. It was "the unbearable lightness of being," that life is so precarious and only a knife's edge separates life and death.

Pittsburgh reminds us of this knife's edge of life that we all live upon, and so
TONIGHT WE COME TOGETHER, JEWS AND GENTILES, GAY AND STRAIGHT, WHITE
AND BLACK, TRANS AND CISGENDERED, RICH AND POOR, CITIZEN AND REFUGEE,
TO SAY THAT LIFE IS SACRED. All LIFE!

The TORAH teaches us that when human beings were created, we were created in the image of the Divine.

If only we could all try to see the Divine in the faces of all people, and especially those we don't agree with. In Judaism, we believe that people are created GOOD, VERY GOOD, but that we also have the free will to do very bad things. Tonight we come together to remember that we are good, and to hold one another in the face of tragedy.

Did you know that last night, at a large synagogue in Brooklyn, right at Grand Army Plaza, at Union Temple, a Reform Congregation, someone came in and spray painted "Kill All Jews" and "All Jews Must Die" on the doors.

In our tradition, we are taught that “to save a single life is to save an entire world.’ To take a life is to destroy an entire world. As Jews, we have had millions of worlds destroyed.

And so our mother Sarah cries out in the wailing voice of a mother’s pain for those lost worlds, her voice becomes the voice of the Shofar, and our voices cry out with her. ***But in the midst of our cries, we also hear something else – silence.***

Silence from many of those who usually speak out against prejudice and violence against minorities and people of color, but while many have spoken up, more have not.

I noticed on my Facebook that almost all the posts about Pittsburgh were from Jewish friends.

Yesterday, when I was talking to the older students in our Hebrew School, several students mentioned how odd it was to them that none of their teachers said anything about Pittsburgh. They said that after the shootings in Las Vegas, they talked about it, but after Pittsburgh – silence.

And these 10 and 11 year olds added this: “And what happened in Pittsburgh is really worse in many ways because it was aimed at one group, at us. “ I asked them how that felt – “they said they felt like what they were going through was invisible to others.”

Isn’t that the very nature of bigotry? To make another’s experience invisible, silent? ***We come here together tonight to fight against such silence.***

And In some ways, silence is preferable to the other comments I’ve heard from those on my side of the political aisle. I have seen more than a few posts saying that we need to “stand up against white supremacy and Zionism.”

That this shooter was a right-wing white nationalist in many ways makes this easier for those of us on the liberal side. We can say, “See, what the right is doing? This is what Trump has done.”

While there is some truth to that, it is also true that anti-Semitism has always been there, just under the surface, and it is there, as it has always been, on both the left and the right.

We remember that the Jews were blamed by Communists for being filthy Capitalists, and blamed by Capitalists for being a mob of Communists. This has not changed.

Even as many of us are increasingly worried, and, yes, scared about the growing hate in our nation, the hateful rhetoric, the dehumanizing of people who disagree, we need to be aware that anti-Semitism wearing the Halloween Mask of anti-Zionism is every bit as big a danger and threat to us as the people who marched in Charlottesville and the man that killed 11 people at Tree of Life. And those are people we know, we have dinner with, we see at parties – and here, it is often we who are silent.

WE cannot continue to do so. WE must together find our voice.

In this week's Torah portion, just after Sarah's death, Abraham says “

Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying,

גַּר־וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם תְּנוּ לִי אֶחְזוֹת־קֶבֶר עִמָּכֶם וְאֶקְבְּרָהּ מִתִּי מִלְפָּנֶיךָ:

“I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.”

It is here that he arranges to purchase the cave and the fields called *Machpelah*, in Hebron, all described in very legalistic terms from the laws of 2500 BCE, establishing our peoples legitimate place no longer as aliens in that land, but as residents.

Anyone who has ever attended Jewish services knows, the land of Israel and the holy city of Jerusalem is everywhere in our prayers that observant Jews say three times a day.

And yet the propaganda of the left would say that Jews have no historical connection to Hebron or the Temple Mount, that modern Israel is nothing but a white European Colonialist occupation, and that it must be removed entirely for justice to be restored. Today people on the left are beginning to speak of a one-state solution, which is simply another way of saying that Jews, of all the peoples of the earth, do not have a right to self-determination, to sovereignty.

As many of you know, I am highly critical of Israel's current administration, and of the way that occupation is handled. I am concerned at the rhetoric in Israel that dehumanizes Palestinians.

But whenever legitimate criticism of Israel turns to DELEGITIMIZATION, DOUBLE STANDARDS, AND DEMONIZATION OF Israel and Israelis, it is anti-Semitism. And the Boycott, Divest and Sanction movement against Israel that right now, the Peace and Justice Center in Vermont is debating joining, is rooted in delegitimization, double-standards, and demonization. If you want to know what you can do about anti-Semitism, talk to your friends.

And I am honored that the President of the Islamic Center is with us tonight, Br. Taysir Al-Khatib. Even though we likely disagree about the Israel- Arab conflict and the details of its history, we also know that Jews and Muslims are the two most likely targets of religious hate in this nation, and that we must support one another and protect one another even when we disagree. We know that in some cities, Muslims are volunteering to protect synagogues for the near future. We also know that your people are the targets of delegitimization, double-standards, and demonization, and that you have lost far too many worlds in the wars our nation has led. Our two religions are so close – we are more alike than we are different in religious terms, and so it particularly moving that you have come, Brother Al-Khatib. Thank you.

The rabbis ask why this portion is called Chayei Sarah, the Life of Sarah, when it only deals with her death.

I believe it is because Sarah still lives. Because WE still live.

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

We were slaves in Egypt but escaped to freedom, and even after wandering 40 years in the desert –

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after one of the largest, most vibrant and culturally advance Jewish civilizations, the one in Spain in the early middle-ages, the Golden Age of Judaism that gave us Maimonides, Yehuda haLevi, Nachmanides, and so many of the great

rabbis and poets – even after the Jews were expelled, killed, or forced to convert

–

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after the crusades where Christian soldiers from Europe on their way to slaughter Muslims in Jerusalem, also slaughtered entire Jewish towns on their way –

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after the Programs my grandfather fled, even after Babiya –

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after the camps, the furnaces that burned millions of our people to ash, and destroyed an entire way of life –

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after large Jewish communities in many Muslim nations were kicked out and made refugees in 1948, the same number of refugees as Palestinian refugees created at the same time from Israel's independence

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

Even after the slaughter of Israeli athletes at the Olympics, and in so many terrorist attacks and wars

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives and Sarah Lives

And after the massacre at the Tree of Life,

AM YISRAEL CHAI The People Israel Lives.

AND SARAH LIVES IN US.

We are a miracle people, that over and over again, rise from the ashes of anti-Semitism, the oldest and most virulent hate on earth, and we not only survive, we thrive.

We are a people of artists, and writers, scientists and thinkers.

We are a people that have given the world a ridiculous number of Nobel prize winners.

We are a miracle people, that after the Holocaust, we not only managed to survive, but created a Jewish nation that thrives and offers a safe home to Jews who are still being oppressed for no reason other than that they are Jews.

We are a miracle people, who have made here in the US perhaps the most vibrant, intellectually vibrant and diverse Jewish communities since the Babylonian academies that wrote the Talmud.

Mah tovu ohalecha yaakov, mishkenotecha yisrael

How good are the homes and communities and synagogues we create, and Sarah still dwells with us, cries through us, and laughs with us.

Tonight, we are thankful for one another, thankful just to be together to cry and worship together, Jews and Gentiles, as simply human beings, because we know that it is only through working together, through being visible vocal allies for one another, through standing together - only through recognizing that we are all made in God's image and that we are one human family – only that can create enough light to push away the darkness.

We are given fire to see against the dark,
 To think, to read, to study how we are to live,
 To bank in ourselves against defeat and despair
 That cool and muddy our resolves, that make us forget
 What we saw we must do. We are given passion
 To rise like the sun in our minds with the new day
 And burn the debris of habit and greed and fear.

We stand in the midst of the burning world,
 Primed to burn with compassionate love and justice,
 To turn inward and find holy fire at the core,
 To turn outward and see the world that is all
 Of one flesh with us, see under the trash, through

The smog, to see the furry bee in the apple blossom,
The trout leaping, the candles our ancestors lit for us.

(from NISHMAT Marge Piercy)

Tonight, may God help us to see those candles, to see that light that burns for justice within each of us, the light of God in the faces of all human beings. May Sarah live in us, may her cry and her laughter find voice in us, and together, may our voices rise like a SHOFAR to prevent another sacrifice on the altar of hate.
SHOFAR