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חיי שרה תשפ"ה

"*Ger Vetoshav*": A Lesson on Vulnerabilities and Humility

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When we last left Abraham he had somehow managed to suppress all of his emotions as he virtually sleep-walked through the fearful mission he was sent on with his son Isaac to an altar on Mount Moriah. But in the aftermath, Sarah dies, and the emotions finally pour forth. He hurried to where she had died, and paid tribute to her. And then he cried. "Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to cry for her" (Gen. 23:2). It is interesting to note that it is only the second instance of weeping in the Torah; the first was *caused* by Abraham when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away from his home, and now it is Abraham himself who is brought to grief and tears.

But Abraham rose, as he had to, from his wailing, because there was a necessary and sacred task to perform. And at that moment of needing to bury his dead, an enormity confronted him. Here's how Abraham put it: *"ger ve-toshav anokhi"*—I am merely a stranger (*ger*), come to be an alien resident (*toshav*) here. I have no place; I have no accumulated rights and privileges. Abraham was at the mercy of the locals, who could either give him—actually *sell* him for a pretty penny—the plot of land he needed, or who could deny it to him altogether. He was of no status in this new place. So much so that it did not yet even come into consideration that he might have a place in which to *live*, or to settle. No, he could only imagine a place in which to bury his dead in this land to which he had come. And why had he come there? The Torah, in its typically laconic style, simply told us (Gen. 12) that God had sent him. It presents Abraham's journey as a simple story of destiny. The Rabbis, however, in their own characteristic way of filling in the unstated, imagined something more lifelike in the midrashim that they spun for us. They imagined that Abraham was persecuted, hounded, his life threatened in his birthplace. Thrown into a literal, or metaphorical, fiery furnace for the beliefs that others rejected and hated. And here he was, a refugee, someone who could not go back to a place in which he could not be assured of safety. He was here on a mission of building a family and a life in order to rescue himself.

The precariousness of Abraham's lack of status continued into the next scene, in chapter 24. We are usually taken with Rebecca showing her kindness and her suitability to marry into Abraham's clan. But we forget the essential anxiety that animated the entire tale. Abraham knew that his son Isaac could be swallowed up. His faith could be quashed, nipped in the bud, were he to marry into a local family, if they even allowed him to. As an immigrant, he would have no cultural robustness with which to withstand the majority. He knew—as Jews throughout the centuries have known—that his child needed to partner with someone from the old country, who would speak with the same accent, and who would be both a consort and a safe harbor for him.

So yes, the Torah's story in Hayyei Sarah is about the insecurity and the defenselessness of the immigrant, the refugee. And it should remind us that while our distant ancestor lived the fears and vulnerabilities of the immigrant, and while our more proximate forbears did as well just a few scant generations ago, this is a story that is about more than just us.

There is no greater sense of defenselessness that haunts Jews than the reality of antisemitism. So we remember crimes such as the mass murder of Jews in Pittsburgh six years ago. But we must also remember that that murderer was driven to act after years of wallowing in his hatred of refugees, of immigrants. People who, like Abraham, were

driven on a precarious journey from their birthplace by both extreme danger and a dream. And who, also like Abraham, must wonder where, or whether, they might be able to bury their loved ones who might die along the way, let alone whether and where they might ultimately be welcomed and given the opportunity to see their hopes fulfilled.

Why did that hatred become a rage against Jews? HIAS (formerly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) had around that time adopted the slogan "We used to welcome refugees because *they* were Jewish. Today we welcome refugees because *we* are Jewish." And therefore, just as those who approve of, and aspire to, that compassion point to Jews with *admiration*, those who cast the evil eye on hapless and frightened refugees, and call them invaders, also point to Jews, but with *fury*.

"*Ger vetoshav*"—the descriptor of the stranger and resident alien. This is the vulnerability and exposure that our ancestors knew all too well, and that binds us to those who experience and shudder from it today, as talk of mass deportations and family separations gains traction.

It is good to consider one other aspect of that phrase *ger ve-toshav*. Abraham used it to describe his status of being a mere transient, a visitor, an immigrant in his surroundings. But the phrase appears at another place in the Torah as well. In Leviticus 25, God echoes Abraham's words here by saying to the Israelites, "*gerim vetoshavim atem imadi*"—you are, with me, *gerim* and *toshavim*. The plain meaning there is that God is saying to the Israelites, and indeed to all humans: remember that you are visitors, *merely* resident in my world. You are tenants, not owners. But, looking at the phrase in a hyper-literal way, one notes that a *ger* is a transient, and a *toshav*, coming from a root that means "seated," would seem to denote a settled resident. Taken literally in this way, the two words sound as if they are in *opposition* to one another. How can the Israelites be both?

The 18th-century rabbi Yaakov Krantz, better known as the Maggid—the preacher—of Dubno, read it in that excessively literal way, and by embracing the *opposition* between *ger* and *toshav,* he offered us a remarkably incisive teaching. He taught us that God was saying this: You humans, and I—God—are, taken *together*, *gerim*—transients, and *toshavim*—settled residents. But which one of us is which? That's the crucial question that only humans can answer. If we consider ourselves to be *toshavim*—entitled, settled owners of our world—then God will be the *ger*, the stranger. That is, an awareness of a commanding, obligating Presence will be a mere transient, in and out of our lives in cameo roles. But we can, alternatively, cultivate the deep and abiding conviction that we are, after all, *gerim*—visitors—humbly invited into God's world to offer our skills in improving it, adding to its beauty, and bringing comfort and security to those whose lives are most precarious. If we can internalize and accept that we are not, in Tom Wolfe's immortal phrase, "Masters of the Universe," and know how much God needs us to spread more goodness and compassion, then *our* being *gerim* will cause God to be a *toshav*, a permanent presence in our lives. And in the lives of those who will come after us, and in the life of the world that we will help to create.

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