

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

I'll never forget my first trip to Israel. I was in 10th grade, and I went on the Ramah High School program for a semester. I remember landing in Israel and feeling a rush of emotions as I realized the history of the land I had just entered. I had always been told that this was my land, the land of the Jewish people. I wondered if it would feel like it was mine. Shortly after I arrived, we settled into our dorm and began classes, trips and exploring. As I soaked it all in, the land did feel like mine and I had an instant connection, but at the same time, I still felt a little out of place. I wasn't Israeli and I had no family there, so on weekends when other kids would visit their family, I would feel left out, like this wasn't my land at all.

I imagine that this feeling of being at home and yet not being settled is a common one. These days people are constantly on the move and settling in new places. The same holds true for the patriarchs and matriarchs in our *Torah*. In this week's *parshah*, *Chayei Sarah*, we find Abraham in this same predicament. The narrative continues with Abraham finding a wife for Isaac, Isaac marrying Rebekah, and Abraham's death. But what happens at the very beginning of the text is the death of Sarah and Abraham needing to find a place to bury her.

Abraham and Sarah are living in the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised him, but they are not native to this land and are living as liminal people. Abraham recognizes this as he proclaims in chapter 23, verses 3-4. "Then Abraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, 'I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.'" Abraham is described as *ger v'toshav*, literally, a "stranger and a dweller." These are two opposite identities that come together in this moment for a singular notion. The underlying reason that Abraham mentions this is because as a non-resident, he cannot purchase land.

What lurks behind Abraham's statement is his own uncertainty about his standing in the community. At this moment he makes a jarring transition from being a husband and part of a couple to being on his own. For the first time in the *Torah*, Abraham is without his partner, and the land that he is living in feels foreign to him. Abraham is fearful that with this new status, those who've known him all along will see him as other, alien and different.

The people of Abraham's community had a choice. They could have pushed him aside or left him on the outside because he was different. Instead, they chose to welcome him and accept him as a fellow resident. They respond in verse 6 by telling him that they admire him, saying "You are the elect of God among us." The people with whom Abraham was living didn't see him as a stranger, they saw him as one of their own. Their eyes saw what Abraham couldn't see himself. Abraham was the one who called himself a stranger and alien, he saw *them* as different from him, while they saw him as part of their community.

As we move through our lives, we each end up in different positions and hold different statuses. We can't expect every place we go to feel as familiar and comfortable as Norm's bar stool at Cheers. We might find ourselves in a place of radical change and feel very different from everyone else around us. Or, we might feel like this is our place, but everyone else has changed. *Parshat Chayei Sarah* stands as a model where all people were accepted. When vulnerability was not only recognized, but embraced. It's easy to obsess about an uncomfortable situation or about being in a new environment, but consider the example in this week's *parshah*, and let us aspire to embrace each other in our vulnerable times.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** this week we learn about the immediacy of burial after the death of a loved one. The text teaches in chapter 23, verses 3-4 that Avraham did not waste a minute in his grief focusing on himself; rather he immediately focused on finding an appropriate burial ground for Sarah, his wife. This text teaches us that the human dignity extends not only to the living, but to the dead. That even in our moments of deepest grief, we must seek to comfort all in our presence. For more information check out different books on Judaism and mourning such as [A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort](#) by Ron Wolfson.

לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** Too often we shy away from talking about what makes us uncomfortable and how we can make sure others don't feel the same discomfort. Discuss with your kids the criteria for creating a welcoming and inviting space? Also for discussion: when you're in a place that doesn't feel comfortable but needs to, how might you change the feeling of the space?