

NOVEMBER 6, 2017

Parashat Chayei Sarah

Life Without Fear

And the life of Sarah... (Genesis 23:1)

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה (בראשית כג:א)

On Tuesday October 31st, the day [after IDF forces discovered and subsequently destroyed a terror tunnel](#)— which emanated from the Khan Unis refugee camp in Gaza into Israeli territory towards Kibbutz Kissufim—Kalman Libeskind and Assaf Lieberman, popular morning radio hosts on Israel’s Kan station [spoke with Benni Chason](#), a spokesman and member of the Kibbutz. While the radio personalities expected to hear about communal anxiety, angst and worry over the terror tunnel threat less than two miles to the east, Chason exuded calmness about the situation. “We’re very quiet, calm, just like yesterday,” he said. “Between us and Khan Unis there are very significant IDF forces protecting us, and the proof is that they discovered the tunnel. The army is working very effectively to the satisfaction of the residents of this entire region...we are totally calm from this perspective.” Compare his sense of calm today to the understandable [sense of anxiety and worry](#) the residents of Israel’s south expressed in the wake of the discovery of the dangerous terror tunnels and in the aftermath of the 2014 war in Gaza.

Anxiety and worry about the safety and well-being of your children can be not only nerve-racking, but life-threatening. The Midrash teaches us that just this kind of anxiety caused the death of Sarah recorded in our parashah. Noting the juxtaposition in the text between the binding of Isaac (Genesis chapter 22) and the death of Sarah (chapter 23), the Sages suggest that the two events were directly connected. After Abraham passed the test of the Binding of Isaac, “Satan became enraged when he saw that his great desire to halt the offerings of Abraham had failed. What did he do? He went and said to Sarah: ‘Hey Sarah! Have you not heard what happened in the world?’ ‘No,’ she said. He said to her, ‘Your elderly husband took the young Isaac and offered him as a sacrifice, and the young boy was crying and wailing that he couldn’t be saved!’ Immediately she began to cry and wail...until her soul flew from her body and she died. (*Pirkei D’rabbi Eliezer* p. 72) Sarah dies of worry before she hears that at the end of the story Isaac did in fact survive.

For many months, the people living in Israel’s southern region adjacent to the border with Gaza lived with exactly this kind of worry, both for themselves and for their children. How can anyone sleep at night knowing that terrorists hoping to kidnap you could emerge from tunnels in the ground? It is for this reason that we should take great solace in the discovery of this new tunnel. According to [The Times of Israel](#), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman hailed the IDF for destroying the attack tunnel, with the two leaders attributing its discovery to Israel’s new “breakthrough technology.” In remarks at the weekly Likud faction meeting, the prime minister said the long-rumored advanced technology to locate the attack tunnels had been utilized in the recent operation. American assistance was vital in developing this critical life-saving technology.

Over the past several years, proponents of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship in America helped lobby Congress to allocate more than \$80 million for the development of advanced anti-tunneling technologies, which have proven invaluable as the tunnel threat persists. We sometimes forget that this technology not only saves lives, but dramatically improves the quality of life for residents living within range of these tunnels. Rather than living with fear and anxiety, they can maintain their normal daily lives confident that the IDF has the means to protect them. When asked about life in Kissufim on the morning after the destruction, spokesman Hason said that, “Today regular life continues as usual as if nothing happened yesterday. The children went to school on time, the buses left in an orderly

fashion, and the farmers went out to the fields to work, just like yesterday.” In fact, Kibbutz Kissufim faces a new problem. The [membership is now facing a shortage of housing](#) as the kibbutz is completely full. ■

The Importance of Diplomacy

And he spoke to the children of Heth (Genesis 23:3)

וידבר אל בני חת (בראשית כג:ג)

Exactly one hundred years ago this week on November 9th 1917, the British government publicized a written communication that would dramatically alter the fate of the Jewish people. In the famous Balfour Declaration, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour declared that the English government “views with favour [sic] the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours [sic] to facilitate the achievement of this object...” This declaration represented the first expression of public support for Zionism by a major political power, and played a critical role in generating support for what would eventually become the Jewish State.

While we should rightly celebrate this critical milestone in modern Jewish history, we cannot allow ourselves to forget that the British government did not simply issue this declaration on its own. Undoubtedly, Prime Minister David Lloyd George genuinely believed in the righteousness of Zionism. Nevertheless, he had more practical considerations to consider as well. The British government, mired in the terrible depths of the First World War, also hoped that a public embrace of the Zionist vision would help gain Jewish support for the Allied War effort. The declaration was the result of months of high-level negotiations between the British government and the Zionist leadership, which led to Balfour’s request that Lord Walter Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, and Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann submit a draft of a public declaration. Looked at from this perspective, the document that set the stage for the eventual creation of the state of Israel was the result of geopolitical reality, idealism, need, and high-level negotiations—thus following the precise model established by our forefather Abraham in Parashat Chayei Sarah.

Following the death of Sarah, Abraham finds himself in need of a final resting place for his beloved wife. He also recognizes the significance of this purchase. As a nomad who had never permanently settled in any one place throughout his life, the purchase of an ancestral burial ground not only for his wife, but for himself and ostensibly for his heirs, would finally establish for Abraham a permanent presence in the Promised Land. For this reason, the biblical text records the negotiations between Abraham and the people of Heth in such great detail. While the story in the bible focuses primarily on Abraham’s discussion with Efron, the Midrash (*Pirkei D’rabbi Eliezer*) records an extensive discussion with the residents of Heth that preceded the final negotiations. “He spoke to the Jebusites to purchase from them the Cave of the Machpela...but were they Jebusites? Were they not people of Heth? Rather, [he originally spoke to the people of Jebus (Jerusalem) who were called Jebusites, and they did not accept him. He began to bow to them, as it is written, ‘and [Abraham] bowed down to the people of the land.’ (verse 7) They said to him: We know that in the future the Holy One will give you and your descendants all of these lands. Establish with us a covenant that Israel will not inherit the city of Jebus without their permission, and then you can purchase the *machpela*...” According to the Midrash, before Abraham could even approach Efron about purchasing a burial plot, he first needed to negotiate with and reach agreement with the local citizenry. Through diplomacy, respect and negotiation, Abraham is able to reach the critical political agreement necessary to achieve his long-term goal.

Today, we follow this very same model in our own political activity on behalf of Israel. Like Lord Balfour in his time, Abraham in his time, and in every Jewish community throughout history, our greatest national achievements have come through relationships and negotiations with governments and political leaders who both support Israel ideologically and appreciate the value of the support of the pro-Israel community. This is precisely why we work so hard to build solid relationships with our elected officials. Diplomacy and a strong relationship set the stage for the purchase of the oldest, most revered burial ground in the Jewish faith. Thousands of years later, similar efforts brought about the founding political document of the Zionist enterprise. Today, we follow in the footsteps of history, using these very same tools to strengthen and protect the Jewish State. ■