

Hayyei Sarah 5779
Rising Up From Before Our Dead

Dedicated to Joyce Fienberg, Richard Gottfried, Rose Mallinger, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Melvin Wax and Irving Younger.

Shabbat shalom.

As I stand here this morning I cannot help but remember last Shabbat, when the news of the atrocity perpetrated in Pittsburgh was beginning to make its way through to us. We stopped the service to say Psalm 121 and Mourner's Kaddish. As soon as Shabbat ended, the Clergy Council and the Federation planned the vigil so many of you attended.

Now it is Shabbat again. And as the funerals in Pittsburgh come to an end, another Shabbat brings with it the sense of another cycle opening. How should we direct ourselves as we enter this new week, seven days on?

At the end of Shivah, we traditionally quote a verse from the book of Isaiah. It is the same verse that we put on the most recent plaque at the new Chevre Thilim cemetery:

*Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.*

But I suggest - and not only because Shivah for the victims is not yet complete - that that verse, beautiful and comforting though it is, does not fit with either our feelings or our reality. This week has been much more about the ground - literally, with the graves dug in Pittsburgh and metaphorically, as we have felt what we thought was safe ground shifting under our feet.

So instead we turn, as our ancestors always have, to the Torah. In the juxtaposition of the two verses I pointed out at the start of the Torah service this morning there is wisdom for us to take into this coming week.

The Torah reading opens with Sarah's death. We read how Abraham came to mourn Sarah and weep for her - *livkotah*. Within that word, the Hebrew letter *kaf* is unusually tiny, as if the middle of the word has been crushed. This is a powerful and wrenching symbol of what it means to grieve - the crushed heart, the sense of being struck at our very center.

It's followed by the sentence, *And Abraham rose up from before his dead*.

The question for us this week is: how do we, crushed like that tiny *kaf*, *rise up from before our dead*? As we continue to grapple with the implications of last Shabbat, what can we learn from what Abraham did?

There are a number of responses.

First, I look back on last week's sermon, when I spoke about the importance of minyan [the quorum of ten that we require for full prayer] in the sense of it being a mitzvah - a holy obligation - that we perform not for ourselves but for each other. That idea is just as relevant this week. The final ritual act we perform at a funeral is to form two lines to guard and comfort the mourners as they leave the grave after the burial, so that they do not have to endure the most painful of walks alone. In light of the events of this week, it is even more important that we do the same for each other. I think every rabbi of every shul in this country sent a message to their community along the lines of the one I wrote for the top of this week's bulletin - come to services, stay for lunch, be together. Stand in the line so another person can walk through. As we rise up from before our dead, we must continue to show up for each other. And we should be making a special effort to reach out to those who cannot physically get here, so they too feel included.

Second, we should look at the words with which Abraham addresses the local powers-that-be, the *bnai Het*. *Ger vetoshav anochi imachem*, he tells them - I am a stranger and a sojourner among you. He acknowledges that no matter how wealthy and renowned he has become, he is still an alien. He does not have the right to bury his dead because in some sense he is not attached to the place in which he finds himself. He lives there, but he doesn't belong. He doesn't fit in.

Rabbi Lionel Blue teaches that every people is a question God is posing to the world. If so, this is the first occurrence in the Bible of the question that our people represents to those around them - who are these strangers who don't fit in and how should the culture that hosts them behave? This particular week, all over this country, those questions are being asked with renewed urgency as our own strangeness has been thrown once again in our faces, armed and emboldened and deadly.

The best negative articulation of what it means to be a stranger is expressed by Haman in the book of Esther:

"There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed..." [Esther 3:8-9]

Strangers are scattered and dispersed. Strangers are different and have different laws. Strangers act illegally. Strangers are worthless. Strangers are not to be tolerated...here is the formula for antisemitism and every other similar hatred. But Haman does not endure, and instead the Torah demands of every host culture that it recognize and honor difference and diversity and behave with compassion. There will always be strangers. Abraham's unaltered alien status is a clue that strangers are part of the grand plan for the world. It is no accident that the commandment to love the stranger is the one most frequently repeated in the Torah, because it will not go away and it is so challenging to perform. But without it, there can be no true human society.

So on the one hand, as we rise up from before our dead, we should reclaim our strangeness. The way we pray, our rules around food, our observance of an alternative calendar of holy time - all of these differences are part of our heritage, the question we pose to the world. It is scary to be different. But Jews have been managing fear for centuries. In communities all over the world we have stubbornly held to our beliefs in the face of ignorance and prejudice. Of course we are frightened. But we are also - unavoidably - Jewish. So let us take hold of our difference with pride and dignity and renewed conviction and live it to its fullest.

And on the other hand, we must not let our own fears blind us to the presence of other strangers. The HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society], the purported cause of this latest atrocity, cared for at least one of the families of this community that I know of when they came here fleeing the Holocaust. Now it is caring for other families that need its help just as badly. We must follow its lead. In doing so, we must practice the dictates of our own Torah, keeping our vision broad and our hearts open, because - as the Torah tells us - we know the heart of the stranger.

And of course, this week, there will be the opportunity to engage directly with the leadership of this country through the ballot box. Abraham had to grovel and kowtow to his hosts, because he was a resident alien. Resident aliens cannot vote - a fact to which I can personally testify. But citizens of a civilized society can. I'm not going to lean on this point. I will only underline what a privilege it is for an individual to be able to influence the direction of a whole country. People died for the right to do this. Please, vote.

There is one more aspect of rising from before our dead that I want to mention. It is the most challenging reaction I have encountered all this week.

The man behind the guns in Pittsburgh was taken to the local hospital to be treated for his injuries from the shoot-out with police. He arrived in the ER shouting, "I want to kill all the Jews." In that ER, the attending doctor was Jewish and the nurse the son of a rabbi. The president of the hospital, Dr Jeff Cohen, a member of Tree of Life Synagogue, was also there. He went to see the shooter - he says that he wanted to try to understand why he did what he did, and introduced himself: "I'm Dr Cohen." Asked about his action by reporters afterwards, he explained, "We take care of sick people. We don't ask questions about who they are."

Dr Cohen and his staff symbolize a very particular kind of rising up. It might not be available, or available immediately to all of us, because it requires the making of a distinction and it is hard to make distinctions when we are crushed and hurting. But Dr Cohen and his staff did. They differentiated between human behavior and humanity. It is critical, as we face the week ahead, that we find a way to do the same.

Because my fear is that the events of last week will shut us down - not from outside but from within. If what happened in Pittsburgh makes us lose our faith that there is good in the world, that the image of God resides in human beings - then evil will have conquered us.

So, to summarize. How do we rise up from the tiny, crushed letter in the Torah? How do we rise up from our rage and our fear and our sorrow? Five ways:

- we show up for each other
- we reclaim our difference proudly
- we uphold the sacred principles of our Torah
- we make our voices heard
- and we retain our faith in humanity.

I want to give the last word to Rabbi Jonathan Berkun, son of Rabbi Alan Berkun, the Rabbi Emeritus of Tree of Life. He's writing about the funeral this week of Cecil Rosenthal, one of the victims:

"I rushed to grasp the railing of Cecil's casket and was surprised by the strong pull of gravity downwards. It felt less like Cecil's body and more like the weight of the world. I was carrying both Cecil and a metaphor for this tragedy: if we are to move forward, we must pull ourselves and one another up by force. If we don't fight against and resist the forces of hatred and evil all around us, we all will get dragged down, and fast."

Now let us rise up from before our dead.

Shabbat shalom.