

**Parshat Chayei Sarah 2013/5774:
A Cry is Heard from On High – Wailing, Bitter Weeping:
A Personal Reflection on Hevron – City of our Fathers**
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The following sermon was delivered by Rori Picker Neiss at Bais Abraham Congregation, St Louis, MO on October 26, 2013, Shabbat Parshat Chayei Sarah.

Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba—now Hevron—in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. (Bereishit 23:2)

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנִים שָׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה: וַתָּמֶת שָׂרָה בְּקִרְיַת אַרְבַּע הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיְבֹא אַבְרָהָם לִסְפֹּד לְשָׂרָה וּלְבַכְתָּהּ: (בראשית כג:ב)

Thus begins Parshat Chayei Sarah. This is the first time we are introduced to the city of Hevron, but it is certainly not the last time. In this week's parsha, Sarah dies and Avraham needs to find a proper place to bury her. In his search he encounters Ephron, a Hittite, who offers to give Avraham a burial plot for free. Avraham refuses to accept the land as a gift and insists on paying for it— and ultimately overpays for it. He acquires Ma'arat HaMachpeilah— the Cave of Machpeilah— and the land that surrounds it and buries Sarah. Later in our parsha we learn of Avraham's death, and he, too, is buried in Ma'arat HaMachpeilah next to Sarah.

The first time I was introduced to Hevron— other than through stories such as this in the Tanakh— was in 2003 when I travelled with my father, brothers, and a few family friends to tour the city. Our trip to Hevron began with a stop at Kever Rachel, the burial site of the matriarch Rachel, located in Bethlehem. Two soldiers in full armor met us at the van to escort us into the building. I remember waiting as I exited the van for the next person to make her way out. The soldier brusquely insisted that I go inside. I pointed out that there was one more person in the van, thinking he just hadn't noticed her climbing over the seats. He snapped at me more forcefully: "Get inside!" That is when I realized he knew she was there. His job was to make sure that I didn't stay out in the open where he couldn't protect me.

I entered the tomb with a lot of conflicting emotions. I thought of the pasuk in Yirmiyahu:

Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard from on high— Wailing, bitter weeping— Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. (Yirmiyahu 31:14)

כֹּה אָמַר יְקֹוֹק, קוֹל בְּרִמָּה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוֹרִים-רַחֵל, מְבַכָּה עַל-בְּנֵיהָ; מֵאֲנָה לְהַנְחִיחַ עַל-בְּנֵיהָ, כִּי אֵינָנּוּ. (ירמיהו לא:יד)

I envisioned Rachel weeping as she watched the Jews passing by her gravesite as they were sent into exile. I sat there with these two images in my mind: with the image of a mother mourning over the tragic loss of her children, and with the image of the soldiers outside, in bulletproof vests, holding rifles, rushing people into this holy site to protect them against sniper fire.

I probably prayed while I was there, but I don't remember what I said.

At some point we continued on to Hevron. And Hevron... I'm not sure I have the words to describe it.

This was my second visit to Israel. Before my first visit to Israel friends told me again and again that I would feel the connection to the land as soon as I stepped off the plane, that as soon as I breathed my first breath of Israel's air I would know I was home— but I didn't. I saw highways and buildings. The trees looked a little different than

they do in America. The signs were in a foreign language. That was about it; nothing that pulled at my heartstrings. There was no intense connection immediately upon sight.

But Hevron is where I experienced that. Maybe it was because there were no highways. Maybe it was because there were no bars and nightclubs. I saw the land of my ancestors. I saw the land that Avraham bought right in our very parsha. I saw the place where, our tradition tells us, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah are all buried. I saw the city where David was crowned king and where he had his first capital of Israel. I was introduced to the Avraham Avinu synagogue where, as the legend goes, an old man appeared right before Kol Nidrei one Yom Kippur in the 1500s, the tenth man for the minyan. He refused to go to anyone's home that evening, staying in the shul learning all night. The next day there were again only ten for the minyan. After ne'ilah, the man disappeared. That night, he appeared to one of the residents in a dream and revealed that he was Avraham, and that he could not bear the thought of a Yom Kippur in his city without a minyan.

I saw so many places that touched me, but, more than that, I saw the people. I saw 500 Jews who had chosen to live among nearly 170,000 Palestinians just to ensure that Jews could maintain access to these sacred sites. I saw people— heroes— who lived in conditions far less luxurious than I would ever want for myself, under fear of violence and even death each and every day, because they knew the holiness of those streets. I was in awe of them.

That year, my father and I went back to Hevron for Shabbat on Parshat Chayei Sarah. We joined about 10,000 other people who, like they are doing right now, travel to Hevron in commemoration of the story of when Avraham first bought this land, a testament to our inheritance so many thousands of years later. It was an intense experience. To describe it in words would not do it justice. There are more people than places to put people. People sleep on floors in apartments and in hallways of buildings. They sleep in cars. They sleep in tents that they pitch in fields. At davening Shabbat morning I took three steps back before the Amida, and someone else took that space in front of me before I had the chance to step forward.

Not only is the space overflowing with people, but the mood is one I can only describe as sheer ecstasy. Prayer is full of singing and dancing. Meals are warm and joyous. You have never met most of these people before in your life, nor will you likely see them ever again, and yet you are with 9,999 of your brothers and sisters, reuniting in your father's house.

My father and I went back to Hevron four more times over the years, three of them for parshat Chayei Sarah. Four times I heard the story of this parsha, the story of Avraham buying Ma'arat HaMachpeila to bury Sarah, in the very place where they are buried. Each time it blew my mind. It blew my mind to be able to touch a piece of my history. To stand on the very ground the Torah describes.

Then, one year, during my visit over Shabbat Chayei Sarah, I was walking down one of the streets, trying to imagine what it looked like when Avraham Avinu walked down what I imagined to be that very street. And I looked up. And I saw, above the abandoned shops of what I had thought to be a deserted road, there were apartments. And in those apartments there were people. And those people were peering down at me from the windows.

That is when I learned that for me to visit Hevron on Parshat Chayei Sarah meant that the Israeli army imposed a curfew on all the Palestinian families that lived in the area. That for me to visit this city meant that tens of thousands of people were confined to their homes and forbidden to leave.

I had been so focused on the 500 people who dedicated their lives to making Hevron a city that was a Jewish city, to showing Jews these sacred landmarks, to ensuring that Jews always had access to the place that the Torah tells us Avraham bought. I had never stopped to wonder why I never saw one of the 170,000 other people who live in the city.

I stopped going to Hevron after that. Not because I ever stopped loving it. I do. Not because I do not still feel drawn to it. I do. I miss Hevron a lot. I think about Hevron a lot. I think about it especially this week when we read about it in this week's parsha.

The tradition teaches us that Avraham overpaid for Ma'arat HaMachpeila. We emphasize that so that there should be no doubt that it was rightfully and fairly purchased to be his, and thus ours as his heirs. Yet, in maintaining our claim for the land, there are thousands of people— Jews and Arabs— who live in fear for their lives each day of violence or even death. Markets have been closed, destroying people's livelihoods. Access to roads are limited. On February 5, 1994, Baruch Goldstein entered Ma'arat HaMachpeila— this sacred site where Avraham buried Sarah— and opened fire on Muslims during prayer, killing 29 and wounding 125. On March 26, 2001, Shalhevet Pass, a 10-month old baby, was killed by a Palestinian sniper. She was shot in the head while sitting in her stroller, in what was determined to be a targeted attack— arguably the most incomprehensible victim of countless terrorist attacks.

Avraham overpaid for Ma'arat HaMachpeila. But what is our price?

I think of Rachel.

Rachel weeping for her children רַחֵל, מְבַכָּה עַל-בְּנֵיהָ

I think about her crying as she watches her children sent off into exile.

A cry is heard from on high— wailing, bitter weeping. קוֹל בְּרַמָּה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים

I hear that cry still, as Rachel sees people being murdered and children suffering.

I think of Avraham.

I think of Avraham Avinu, who may have appeared at a shul in the 1500s just to make sure they had a minyan on Yom Kippur. I think of Avraham, who we learned last week walked away from God so that he could go welcome guests— strangers!— into his home. I hear his cry. The cry that his city— that the land he bought, the first step in God's promise that Avraham's children will inherit this land— is not a place where every single person feels welcomed and embraced.

I hear the sounds of my cries join with theirs.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has a brilliant d'var Torah that may offer us some inspiration amidst these painful and difficult questions.

There are three other things that take place in this week's parsha after the purchase of Ma'arat HaMachpela and the burial of Sarah: Avraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Yitzchak, Avraham marries another woman— named Keturah— and has six more children, and Avraham dies. The Rabbis draw a fascinating connection between these three events.

When the servant brought Rivka to meet Yitzchak, the Torah tells us:

Yitzchak had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi (Bereishit 24: 64) וַיֵּצֵאקָא בָּא מִבּוֹא, בְּאֵר לַחֵי רֹאִי (בראשית כד:סב)

What is Beer-lahai-roi? It is a place that is mentioned one other place in the Torah. In parshat Lech Lecha we read the story of when Hagar became pregnant, and Sarah, regretting her decision to give her maidservant to Avraham, drove Hagar away. An angel appeared to Hagar and told her to return to the house of Avraham and Sarah and foretold that she would have a son named Yishmael.

And she called the Lord who spoke to her, "You Are El-roi," וַתִּקְרָא שָׁם-יְקוֹק הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ, אַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵי רֹאִי

Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi (Bereishit 16:13-14)

על-כן קרא לְבַאֵר, בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי (בראשית 16:13-14)

What was Yitzchak doing at Beer-lahai-roi? Our sages tell us that he had gone to find Hagar. When he heard that his father's servant went to find him a wife, he said, "Shall I be married while my father lives alone? I will go and return Hagar to him."

Thus, the rabbis teach us that Avraham's wife Keturah was in fact Hagar called by another name. Hagar, who does not end her days as an outcast but as an embraced second wife to Avraham, mother to six more of his children.

Avraham not only reconciles with Hagar, but also with his son Yishmael. The midrash in the Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer tells the story of Avraham visiting Yishmael twice. The second time, Avraham meets Yishmael's wife, Fatimah, who, without knowing who he was, but in the spirit of her father-in-law, gave him food and drink.

Avraham stood up and was praying to God for his son, and Yishmael's house became filled with all good from all manners of blessing

עמד אברהם והיה מתפלל לפני הקב"ה על בנו ונתמלא ביתו של ישמעאל מכל טוב ממין הברכות

And when Yishmael returned, she told him what happened, and Yishmael knew that his father still loved him

וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו את הדבר וידע ישמעאל שעד עכשו רחמי אביו עליו

That is why the Torah tells us:

And Avraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin.

וַיָּגוּעַ וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה, זָקֵן וְשָׂבֵעַ; וַיֵּאָסֶף, אֶל-עַמּוּיוֹ.

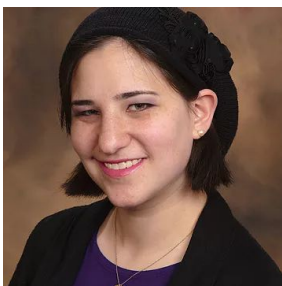
His sons Yitzchak and Yishmael (together!) buried him in the cave of Machpeilah,

וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ יִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל, בְּנֵי, אֶל-מַעְרַת, הַמְּכַפְלָה:

in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife (Bereishit 25:8-10)

אֶל-שְׂדֵה עֶפְרָן בֶּן-צֹחַר, הַחִתִּי, אֲשֶׁר, עַל-פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא. הַשְּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר-קָנָה אַבְרָהָם, מֵאֵת בְּנֵי-חֵת-שָׂמָה קָבַר אַבְרָהָם, וְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ. (בראשית כה:ח-י)

My prayer for all of us is that the legacy that we embrace of Avraham will be not only of the land that he purchased, but of his spirit of love, of openness, of welcoming, and of reconciliation, and that we— children of Yitzchak and children of Yishmael— should be able to come together, just as our ancestors did, in life, and not only to bury our dead.



Maharat Rori Picker Neiss serves as the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St Louis. Prior to that she was the Director of Programming, Education and Community Engagement at Bais Abraham Congregation, a Modern Orthodox Jewish synagogue in University City, MO. She previously served as Acting Executive Director for Religions for Peace-USA, Program Coordinator for the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Assistant Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, and Secretariat for the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, the formal Jewish representative in international, interreligious dialogue. Rori is the co-chair of the North American Interfaith Youth Network of Religions for Peace, a CLAL Rabbis Without Borders fellow, and co-editor of "InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook." She is married to Russel Neiss, a Software Engineer for Sefaria, and they have three children.