

Parshat Chayei Sara

Is Anti-Zionism Really Anti-Semitism? Does it Matter?

Moshe Taragin

The parsha is dominated by two parallel stories of dramatic negotiations. Avraham bargains with the citizens of Chevron to secure a burial plot for his deceased wife. Afterwards he dispatches his loyal servant to secure a wife for his chosen son Yitzchak. In each instance local “parties” must be convinced – to sell land or to release Rivka to Avraham’s family. These two parallel negotiations exhibit multiple similarities: Each evolves in three successive waves of ‘discussions’: Avraham’s servant first encounters Rivka at the well, subsequently presents his request to her parents and finally “closes the deal” the next morning. Avraham, for his part, first negotiates with the general Chevron population, and subsequently engages in two rounds of negotiations with a chieftain named Efron. Each “project” of this parsha is riveted to a central and even iconic location: Avraham and Efron confer at the gates of Chevron- the ancient equivalent of City Hall; the servant discovers Rivka at the watering hole or the well. The Chevron talks are pitched on money and the marriage project involves gifts of jewelry and ornaments. There are numerous similarities uniting these two storylines.

Yet, these two parallel stories exhibit one glaring difference. The marriage project could not have gone more smoothly. “Luckily” Rivka literally falls into the servant’s lap and her family couldn’t be more excited nor more welcoming to this long lost “relative”. Indeed, they are torn about releasing their daughter so immediately but, sensing Rivka’s enthusiasm, they willfully offer their full blessings.

By stark contrast the Chevron project is protracted, plodding, and painful. Initially, the residents voluntarily propose burial opportunities, but Avraham soon discovers that these offers are empty pledges as he must persuade Efron as well. A simple burial-plot purchase, which could easily have been summarized in one pasuk, extends for twenty verses and becomes labyrinthine. Chazal sensed the bulky and stalled nature of the negotiations and portray Efron as hesitant, hostile and even manipulative. Ultimately, Avraham must pry away this burial site and

even overpays for his modest purchase. By carefully aligning these two storylines the Torah highlights their core difference: while the marriage project is wildly successful and harmonious, the land project is stalled and fractured.

Jews are tasked with advancing the human condition and Avraham's launches this grand mission. The arranged marriage between the two families represented more than "just" a wedding between Yitzchak and Rivka. This alliance extends Avraham's influence beyond the borders of Israel- to his long-forgotten family. Curiously, Avraham's camels play an outsized role in the story, in part because they highlight the great distance traveled. A short journey to the akeidah can be traversed by donkey but longer expeditions to international locations require camels. The camels were also essential in transporting Avraham's great wealth to his family. This marriage expedition enables Avraham to reconnect with his distant overseas family and share his prosperity. More importantly, Avraham's servant constantly thanks G-d and mentions His role in the family's successes. Through this servant's conversation, Lavan and his crew learn about the G-d of Avraham. During the marriage project Avraham's impact as international agent of religion and welfare goes global and his audiences, both in this parsha and in previous sections are, by and large, extremely receptive to his message. Throughout history, and even more so in the modern era, the world has welcomed the Jewish "contribution" to society. Jews have spearheaded development in almost every sphere of human achievement including science, economics, culture, medicine, and politics. The warm welcome which Avraham's servant receives foreshadows the manner in which humanity will welcome the Jewish "light" provided to nations.

However, a Jew is tasked with a second and parallel mission: to settle the land of G-d and transmit our messages from that land. This second mission commences in this parsha as Avraham bids for his first legally binding purchase of land. Though he previously resided in Israel, Avraham lived either a nomadic lifestyle wandering from hilltop to hilltop or as a guest hosted by his local friends. Finally, Avraham hopes to set roots in this land, but the locals aren't very happy. Though their hostility is hidden, it simmers beneath the surface and severely complicates what should be a quick and easy purchase of a small burial shrine. Though the world is

happy to embrace the “Jewish contribution” to humanity, they are far less enthusiastic about granting us our land of Israel. This ironic contrast is illustrated by the two negotiations of parshat Chaye Sarah- one which zigzags and one which is fluid.

We have worked hard at unmasking anti-Zionism and exposing the horrible monster of anti-Semitism which oftentimes lies beneath. We encounter many who, in addition to anti-Israel rhetoric, issue bigoted and vile attacks on Jews. However, as much as we battle this unholy union between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, we cannot conflate the two issues – for two reasons. Firstly, because they are fundamentally two different issues – oftentimes fused but still independent. Many opponents of Jewish settlement of the land of Israel fully embrace Jews and their importance to society. Sometimes, anti-Zionism bleeds into anti-Semitism, but often it remains absent of any hatred toward Jews. In fact, many Jews themselves are uncomfortable with the State of Israel even though they are proud of their Jewish identity and heritage. Though many enemies of Israel are virulent anti-Semites, some are not, and we best not simplistically blur those differences.

Secondly, and equally important, we must not conflate these issues for our own sake- to maintain our own clarity of mission. We deserve this land through Divine mandate and historical heritage and that is a self-sufficient justification. The battle for our land is important and Divinely mandated even independent of the important battle against anti-Semitism. Our two missions- to advance the human condition and to settle our homeland land are indistinguishable and inseparable. Our commitment to our land and our struggle with those who oppose this project doesn't have to be justified as part of a larger battle against anti-Semitism.