

# Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Chayei Sarah, Genesis, Chapters 23-25 | November 11, 2023

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

## Jewish Identity and Our American Moment

The most audacious words written in American Jewish history can perhaps be found in a 1787 letter by Jonas Phillips, a Philadelphia Jew and proud patriot. He had written to George Washington, and the Constitutional Convention over which he presided, arguing the Jews were unjustly prohibited from serving in the Pennsylvania legislature. The most striking line appears at the top. It is the date given by Phillips to the correspondence:

Philadelphia 24th Ellul 5547 or Sepr 7th 1787

“The 24th of Ellul”: needless to say, this is not the way in which most letters to the Constitutional Convention were dated. Thus did Phillips add the date from the Hebrew calendar to the conventional September one. At first blush, this seems utterly preposterous. Phillips knew he was corresponding with a non-Jewish audience; it is probable that not a single member of the Constitutional Convention had heard of “Ellul.” But in a certain sense that was precisely the point; Phillips wished to highlight the uniqueness of his identity, even as he reached out to the leaders of his country. Phillips’s letter captured the complexity of Jewish existence, one which lies at the heart of this week’s reading, and is worth remembering in the moment in which Jewry finds itself.

After Abraham’s beloved Sarah passes away, he seeks to buy a burial plot for the woman who was both wife and covenantal partner. He therefore addresses the Hittites in Canaan with a request:

I am **a stranger and a resident** among you; give me an inherited burial place with you, that I may bury my dead from before me. (Genesis 23:4)

Understanding the Hebrew here is absolutely essential. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin emphasizes that Abraham seeks not merely a burial place, but an *achuzat kever*, which means a family plot that would be separate and aside from those of the Hittites, a heritage that would belong to his own family forever. The Hittites do not initially understand what Abraham is asking, and seek to welcome him warmly among them as one of their own, offering him free burial plots among them, an offer that he refuses, insisting on an *achuzat kever*.

Why does Abraham need a familial plot? A separate burial is a way in which his descendants would highlight



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their own covenantal destiny. For this reason, he turns down the offer of land as a gift, and insists on paying full price to its owner, Efron the Hittite, for what would ultimately become known as the “Cave of Machpelah”:

I will give you the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there. (Genesis 23:13)

This burial plot forever marks Abraham as separate. That is why he began his entreaty to the Hittites by emphasizing his uniqueness. The phrase again is:

*Ger v'toshav anokhi imakhem.*

I am a **stranger (ger)** and a **resident (toshav)** among you.

Abraham defines himself as both stranger and resident, or, as one might also render it, as stranger and *neighbor*, or stranger and *citizen*. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has noted, these two descriptions seem contradictory:

The first patriarch, Abraham, introduced himself to the inhabitants of Canaan with the words, “I am a stranger and a resident among you” (Genesis 23:4). Are not these two terms mutually exclusive?

But the truth is that Jews have forever believed that these two terms are not mutually exclusive. We might have expected Abraham to ignore the pagan Canaanites around him, but he does not; as Genesis tells us, he constantly proclaims his faith to the populace, and, as we saw last week, he may have interrupted an encounter with God in order to minister to three strangers who suddenly showed up at his tent. Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that Abraham is indeed engaged with the land in which he lives, but on his own covenantal terms:

Abraham’s definition of his dual status, we believe, describes with profound accuracy the historical position of the Jew who resides in a predominantly non-Jewish society. He was the resident, like other inhabitants of Canaan, sharing with them a concern for the welfare of society, digging wells and contributing to the progress of the country in loyalty to its government and institutions. Here, Abraham was clearly a fellow citizen, a patriot among compatriots, joining others in advancing the common welfare.

However, there was another aspect, the spiritual, in which Abraham regarded himself as a stranger. His identification and solidarity with his fellow citizens in the secular realm did not imply his readiness to relinquish any aspects of his religious uniqueness. His was a different faith and he was governed by perceptions, truths, and observances which set him apart from the larger faith community.

Rabbi Soloveitchik further argues that when welcomed as equals in a democratic polity, Jews should seek to make Abraham’s example their own:

As a citizen of a pluralistic society, the Jew assumes the social and political obligation to contribute to the general welfare and to combat such common dangers as famine, corruption, disease, and foreign enemies [in order to maintain] freedom, dignity, and security of human life. . . .



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The Jew, however, has another identity which he does not share with the rest of mankind: the covenant with God which was established at Mt. Sinai over 3,000 years ago.

A Jew is stranger and citizen, stranger and neighbor, stranger and resident.

It is this Abrahamic dialectic of identity that Jonas Phillips made clear in his letter to Washington, not only in the date but in the letter itself. Phillips begins by emphasizing that he is bound by covenantal destiny to brethren around the world. He wrote:

I the subscriber being one of the people called Jews of the City of Philadelphia, a people scattered and dispersed among all nations . . .

The Jews, Phillips writes, are dispersed, yet remain bound together—and Phillips feels bound to them. Yet at the same time, as he makes clear, he is fully American. He emphasizes to Washington that he, and most other Jews of early America, proudly supported and fought for the Revolution, which is why discrimination against them is so unfair:

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**A Jew is stranger and citizen, stranger and neighbor, stranger and resident.**

It is well Known among all the Citizens of the 13 united states that the Jews have been true and faithful whigs, [i.e., supporters of the Revolution]; and during the late contest with England they have been foremost in aiding and assisting the states with their lives and fortunes, they have supported the cause, have bravely fought and bleed for Liberty which they can not Enjoy.

Every Jew in America, he was telling Washington, is not just a *ger*, a covenantal stranger, but also a citizen, a neighbor, a *toshav*—and America should acknowledge both aspects of Abrahamic identity.

Phillips well understood that up to that point, no country had welcomed Jews as both strangers and neighbors. Throughout much of the world, Jews were terribly persecuted. Meanwhile, in England, Jews achieved success, but could not participate in society as equals; for that, conversion would be required. And if Jonas Phillips's letter to Washington expresses the essence of Abrahamic identity, Washington's own letter to the Jews of Newport reflected the open-minded essence of America:

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights.

Jews, Washington writes, were not expected to assimilate; he assumed Jews would follow Abraham's example. They could be both strangers and neighbors, proud Jews and equal citizens, reflecting the way Abraham iden-



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tified himself when he sought to bury his wife. It is therefore striking, as I have noted in my Bible 365 podcast, that Jonas Phillips's daughter is buried in a separate Jewish grave in Monticello, the estate of Thomas Jefferson—which was preserved, following Jefferson's death, by the Phillips family.

Yet there is another story in our reading: the story of the burial of Sarah is followed by the search for a wife for Isaac. As Rabbi Alex Israel suggests, Rabbi Soloveitchik's reflection about the complexity of Jewishness allows us to understand how these two biblical tales are linked. The second story begins with Abraham ordering his servant to travel back to Abraham's birthplace to seek a spouse for Isaac:

You shall not take a wife to my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell . . .  
(Genesis 24:3)

Why is this essential? After all, Mesopotamia is no more monotheistic than Canaan. But as Rabbi Alex Israel explains, Abraham understands that if his son marries a woman from the area, then Isaac, alone after Abraham's death and linked to a local family, might ultimately assimilate. Isaac's wife must be "a stranger from a strange land" to ensure that he will be a "stranger" in Canaanite society.

But that does not mean that Isaac and his wife will not care about the society in which they find themselves. Abraham's servant, arriving at this destination, makes clear that he seeks someone with an Abrahamic instinct, who like the patriarch reaches out to those beyond her own family. Speaking to God, the servant designates a sign that will indicate Isaac's destined spouse.

Behold, by the well, and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water, and let it come come to pass, that the girl to whom I shall say, Let down your pitcher, I pray you, that I may drink; and she shall say Drink, and I will give your camels drink also: let her be she that You have appointed for Your servant Isaac. (Genesis 24:13-14)

The chosen wife will help Abraham's servant, an outsider, as Abraham helped his visitors; and this means that in Canaan she will assist Isaac in being not only stranger but also neighbor.

To read this is to be reminded of a story told by Stephen Carter, an African American professor at Yale Law School, whose life was changed when he moved as a young child to a white neighborhood, and a religious Jewish woman named Sara Kestenbaum cheerfully welcomed him and his family with cream cheese and jelly sandwiches. Like Abraham, Sara Kestenbaum saw all individuals as created in the image of God, and treated them accordingly. For Stephen Carter, the political implications are clear: "faith in God provides a justification for the equality that liberal philosophy assumes and cherishes but is often unable to defend." As he explains,

Nothing in contemporary secular conversation calls us to give up anything truly valuable for anybody else. . . . Only religion offers a sacred language of sacrifice-selflessness-awe that enables believers to treat their fellow citizens as fellow passengers. But even if religion is the engine of civility, it has too few serious practitioners, which is why those who are truly moved by it to love their fellow human beings are so special. I learned that truth in 1966, and, to this day, I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the



smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life for ever.

This passage captures how essential faith is to our moral fabric, and its earliest example can be found in the way in which Abraham lived his own life, the way in which this covenantal stranger was also neighbor. This point is made by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, commenting on Carter's tale:

Sara Kestenbaum's welcoming gesture belongs to a long tradition that began in the famous scene in Genesis, when Abraham, sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of midday, sees three strangers passing by, runs to greet them, and brings them food to eat and water to drink (Genesis 18:1–3). He did

not know that they were angels. The text describes them at that point simply as "men," as if to imply that Abraham and Sarah were the kind of people who treated all visitors as if they might be angels. That is no small part of why they were chosen to be the grandparents of a new kind of faith.

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**This is a critical moment in the history of the Jewish people and of the West, and we will be judged by how we act, and whether we live up to Abraham's example.**

Rebecca, Isaac's cousin, emerges and assists the stranger, Abraham's servant, revealing her suitability for her future role as matriarch. As Rabbi Amnon Bazak has pointed out, the story highlights how in the midst of Mesopotamia, a female version of Abraham existed, an embodiment of morality among pagans, who ministered to others just as Abraham ministered to the men that were angels in disguise.

Thus did Rebecca join Isaac in the task of succeeding Abraham as "strangers and neighbors" in society. And if it was in America that Jews were truly allowed to be both stranger and neighbor, it is because Americans revered the story of Abraham and the Hebrew Bible that Abraham's family brought into being. Thus Washington famously wrote to Newport's Jews:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

But it cannot be said, at this moment in America, that there is no one that can make us afraid. The specter of anti-Semitism has revealed itself again, in those that deliberately overlook Hamas's evil crimes, in those utterly unsympathetic to infant and elderly hostages, in those rallying in defense of evil incarnate in prominent universities and city streets. In the midst of this, it is also important to remember that these anti-Semites do not define America; polls indicate that multitudes of Americans recognize Hamas as evil and still stand with Israel, that so many still revere the biblical tale of Abraham, and embrace George Washington's worldview.

Jews must express gratitude to these fellow citizens, working with them for the moral wellbeing of the American



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polity. It is also important for Jews in America fully and fearlessly to embrace their own Jewishness, especially so now, when Jews around the world, and especially in Israel, find themselves in crisis. We must remind ourselves, as Jonas Phillips did long ago, that we are bound to our brethren far away from us.

This is a critical moment in the history of the Jewish people and of the West, and we will be judged by how we act, and whether we live up to Abraham's example. The novelist and essayist Cynthia Ozick gives us a striking symbol for how we are to be both proud Jews and dedicated Americans, *ger* and *toshav*, and how our choices will define the legacy of American Jewry:

If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wide part, we will not be heard at all . . .

May this musical metaphor for Abrahamic identity provide a clarion call for all of us.

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## **Additional Resources**

Letter from Jonas Phillips to George Washington, September 7, 1787. [Click here to read.](#)

Letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, August 18, 1790. [Click here to read.](#)

