

“From Death To Life”  
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Parashat Chayei Sarah 5770

Chayei Sarah. The life of Sarah. A woman of strength. The matriarch of our people. In this week’s parashah, Sarah dies, leaving Abraham, Isaac, her community, and our people to move forward in life and in the text of Torah without her.

Abraham weeps. Abraham mourns. Abraham buries his beloved Sarah in a meaningful way by buying her a beautiful plot of land, where he, too, will one day be buried beside her. Then Abraham moves forward to build his own future and ours.

After death can come life. That is the message of this week’s parashah, Chayei Sarah.

After despair can come hope. That is the message of this week’s commemoration of Kristallnacht that fell this past Monday night.

Many of us have personal connections to that moment in time.

It was January 30, 1933 when Adolph Hitler was sworn into power. It was on that day that my grandfather left Germany. It was on that night that the Nazis came to arrest him for his writings against Hitler in an underground newspaper. Fortunately by the time the Nazis came, my grandfather had already forever fled that land of his birth.

My grandmother remained behind with my father and aunt. She was a successful businesswoman and had no desire to leave her hard earned money and well developed business in the hands of Hitler’s government. She also had no intention of living with two children and her husband as destitute refugees. For five years she snuck funds over the border to my grandfather in Switzerland.

It was June 9, 1938, when the Main Synagogue of Munich was burnt to the ground. My grandfather saw it as a Nazi test to see the world’s response.

“Leave now,” my grandfather demanded of my grandmother. “This is the last train out.” And it was. They managed through various feats to make it over the border.

My grandfather was right. The bombing of the lone synagogue in Munich was a test that the world outside failed. Due to fact that the world’s cry was not loud enough nor threatening enough, five months later to the day, November 9, 1938, not just one synagogue but 267 synagogues would be destroyed, 7500 businesses looted, and at least 91 people murdered. That night 71 years ago this week, became known as Kristallnacht, The Night of Broken Glass, which the Holocaust Museum in Washington calls, “The spark that ignited the Holocaust.”

Devastation does happen. But let it not happen without our cries of outrage... against God, against humanity, against the perpetrators of crimes of hatred no matter where and when they come... Matthew Shepherd, Columbine, Rabin's Assassination, September 11<sup>th</sup>, Rwanda, Darfur, Fort Hood. Though the list is so lengthy it almost has no end, let us rage against discrimination with actions of protest, with our words on websites and newspapers, with our voices out loud until our last breath.

The head of my seminary when I was a student was Dr. Alfred Gottschalk. He died two months ago. Last Shabbat I heard a powerful story about his life as child in Germany. In the days following Kristallnacht, Dr. Gottschalk with his grandfather by his side, entered the river into which the Nazis had thrown the scrolls of Torah after they had desecrated and ripped them apart. Dr. Gottschalk, then a boy, and his grandfather, lovingly plucked the fragments of Torah from their watery grave. When they were finished, that grandfather through his actions gave his grandson his life's mission. Take the pieces of Torah and stitch them together. Protect them. Preserve them. Teach them and love them.

We, who live in the safety of America, take the sacred pages of our Torah for granted. We, who live in the midst of religious freedoms unknown to previous generations, take our religious heritage lightly. We do not appreciate the challenges that those before us undertook to preserve and pass on the timeless teachings of our faith.

After the Holocaust, in 1945, another great thinker, Professor Elie Weisel, was freed from the camps. Even though he struggled with God, his first act was to go to the mikvah, to purify himself from the death he had touched and the pain he had endured. His second act was to resume studying the Talmud on the exact page where he left off many years before.

Endings followed by new beginnings. Tragedy followed by joy. Faith springing forth from the depths of despair. Goodness in the face of evil.

Death and despair happen in our Torah.  
Devastation and despair have happened in our history.  
Let us not forget them. Let us not allow them to pass by without words and actions of protest. Let us take the memory of our lowest points of our Jewish lives as a people, and use them to raise up ourselves and our world.

As Jews of today, we do not wait for despair to inspire us to build. Rather we are building, at Beth El, from a place of strength rather than weakness. We are enlarging our tent in good times.

As Jews of today, we do not wait for outer threats to inspire us to find the inner beauty of our faith. We regularly seek out that splendor of our tradition especially on Shabbat.

Like Dr. Gottschalk, we, too, take the text of Torah and use its teachings to sew together and bind our people, in order too protect and preserve our future.

As every commentator who studies this portion will be quick to note, the portion is called the life of Sarah, even though it opens with her death. From this the rabbis taught that, "The righteous are called living even after death, while the wicked are called dead even in life."

As we celebrate the life of Sarah in the wake of Kristallnacht we commemorate the lives of the six million Jews who lived and loved yet were robbed of the abundance of life's blessings. In their memory, like Dr. Gottschalk, may we preserve Torah and pass it on. In their memory, may we make the continuity and survival of our people a priority in our lives. In their memory, may we celebrate our faith.

Zichronam livrachah, may the memories of all those who perished in the Holocaust be a continual blessing to our community and people inspiring us to be better Jews, better human beings, and to create a better world. Amen.