

Chayei Sarah

The Life of Sarah

Living in the Land, Not Being of the Land.

Torah:

Genesis 23:1-25:18

(1) 23:15: ***My lord, listen to me, a parcel of land worth 400 shekels, what is that between you and me?*** This expression is not polite, but aggressive to express displeasure. The Hittites wanted Abraham to assimilate into their community (and have all the blessings of Abraham apply to them and to their descendants – they were on a long decline), but he declined to accept and remained distinct from them – even though he was a good citizen and observed all the local laws and protocols. We need to do the same – we need to live in the land, but we are never of the land – our home is in the Heavenly Jerusalem on the New Earth and among the New Heavens. To accommodate should never be the same as to assimilate.

(2) 24:9: ***The servant put his hand underneath the thigh of Abraham his lord and swore to him to observe these things.*** This was a very common ancient Middle Eastern custom (which I am glad is no longer practices). The servant was asked to perform a difficult task with only a small chance of success. He did not want to bind himself to a task without safe guards. Abraham was stepping out in faith, but not blindly. He did not want his son to assimilate into the people he had refused to join. May our children and children's children never assimilate into the world where we live, but to which neither we nor they belong.

(3) 24:47: ***I questioned her and said: whose daughter are you? She answered: I am the daughter of Bethuel, son of Nachor and of Milcha. I put a ring in her nose and bracelets on her hands.*** The servant is making sure that all his ducks are in a row and wants the family to see that his visit was blessed of G-d. Rebekah had a nose ring which was decorative, without religious significance and she had established her lineage. Abraham did not want his son assimilating into the pagan religious practices which were increasingly prevalent among the Canaanites. We may dress like the ones among whom we live, but we never do what we do for the same reasons. Our spiritual identity needs to be both our primary focus and the bedrock of our identity, generation by generation.

(4) 25:9: ***Isaac and Ishmael, his sons, buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar, the Hittite, which is east of Mamre.*** Ishmael was the son of a Hamitic (Egyptian) woman and is not the father of the Arabs, but of twelve princes who became leaders among the splintered and reforming peoples of that day. There was no hostility between him and his brother, nor between his descendants and his brother's descendants. We should never let the false claims of the world in which we live cause us to be either fearful or hostile among those we are called to reach out to and to bless. There are many wonderful features of Arab culture which have not been tainted by Islam. We may live in a time where there is great spiritual hostility against us (against Israel and Christians), but we should never adopt this hostility. We need to see it as part of the spiritual battle we are to engage in. We should neither let the world choose which battles we should fight nor how we should fight them. We are in the land; we are never of the land.

Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1-31

(5) 1:29: ***And the king swore and said: YHVH who has delivered me from all distresses is alive.*** David allowed his own mistakes to prevent him from effectively raising his children to walk with the L-rd. Though there were some seventy sons in line for the throne before Solomon, David had sworn to Uriah's wife that her son would rule after him. As he was failing and approaching the moment of his death, he declares that YHVH is alive and despite David's blunders, it is the promise which he made to G-d and the promises which G-d made to him which would prevail. Family and community intrigues were trying to derail the purposes of G-d, but David did not let them. In our lives we will encounter some fairly aggressive resistance to allowing our lives to turn around the promises of G-d, but we should not let either our mistakes or the resistance we encounter separate us from His Word and His agenda – because we are in this world, we are never of this world.

(6) 1:31: ***Bathsheba inclined her face to the earth and prostrated herself before the king. She said: May my lord, King David live forever!*** Bathsheba was using a standard form of politeness when addressing royalty, but she was also saying at least three things. First, that she had no ambitions to usurp David's throne or his choice of successor. Second, that she had no wish for his demise and lastly, in this formulation she was recognizing the ongoing hand of G-d to fulfil all the promises which he made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is common in Judaism to proclaim that David the King lives and rules forever, but we do not mean the one who lay dying in this account. We are referring to our blessed Messiah who came into the world to accomplish salvation, but who was never of the world – and He wants to save us out of the world, even if He does not (yet) take us out of the world.

Brit Chadashah: Matthew 1:1-17

(7) 1:17: ***There are therefore in total, fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the deportation to Babylon and fourteen generations between the deportation to Babylon and the Messiah.*** We understand that this was the genealogy of Joseph, and not Mary's, which is the one through whom our Messiah inherits the throne of David according to the promises made to Abraham. Matthew is making a point about the timing of our Messiah, and not about His lineage. He came at G-d's appointed time to inaugurate the final stage of the promises and to prepare the way for the eventual establishment of David's eternal throne over all the generations and nations of mankind. This lineage has sometimes been called the scarlet thread which would reverse the unravelling of mankind at Babel and open the way for all the nations and generations of the children of Adam and Eve to be delivered out of this darkening world and enter the kingdom of G-d's light forever. He came into this world to save us from this world and even though we are in this world, like Him we are never of this world and we should resist all and any attempts to assimilate us into either the morality (immorality) or the beliefs (secularism) of this lost and dying world. Abraham lived long and prospered, may we do the same, blessing those among whom we live, without letting them influence us to become part of the world system from which we have been delivered.

(Angelo: p. 147) **Ps. 45** Jewish Hero: Pharaoh's cup bearer. Torah Carrier: Jack

Sermon: **Where Do We Go From Here? Thinking Outside the Box**

Scripture: 2 Cor. 5:17: ***If anyone is in the Messiah, behold old things have passed away, all things have become new.***

Paul is talking to a group of believers who have just come through some very painful community house cleaning and he wants to encourage them not to fall back into the habits which caused them to choke and fail – he wants them to see that they have a new identity which carries with it both the power and the ability to live a totally renewed and radically different life in the same old neighbourhood, amidst the same old neighbours (influences).

One of the reasons Judaism has survived so long as we wandered among the nations has been our ability to think outside of the box without losing our cultural or our spiritual heritage. Our community is poised to see some radical growth so that we truly become a self-sustaining, generational community which will be here long after all of us have gone home to rest until the L-rd returns. In today's Torah portion, neither David, nor Abraham saw the fulfilment of the promises which they received, but they lived their lives so that they would remain inside the generational progression which the L-rd continues to use to bring about His everlasting kingdom. They both encountered attempts to derail this generational progression and they took the necessary steps to overcome this resistance by thinking outside the box.

In the world of management and motivational thinking, this expression is used to call for the kind of aggressive creativity which engenders success and which prevents mediocrity from turning a going concern into something which is no longer viable. Unfortunately in many corporate and government settings this just means regularly upsetting the apple cart to make it look like progress is being made, even though things just go around and around as the wheel is invented over and over again. In French we say: *bientot ca change, bientot c'est la meme chose* (pretty soon things change and pretty soon they remain the same).

In the short life of our community we have seen many changes, both in what we do and how we do what we do and we have survived (and grown) because we have been able to think outside the box as we continue to nurture a congregation which is authentically Jewish, without being encumbered with either the stifling weight of the constricting traditions which have come down to us from rabbinic Judaism, or that stifling weight of constricting traditions which is trying to come down to us from Gentile Christianity.

This is not to say that everything which happens in churches and synagogues is either stifling or constricting, but there is a sad trend among most organized, traditional religious bodies in our modern world which seems to result in large, empty buildings which only fill up a few times a year or for special occasions. There seems to be fewer and fewer young people and young families who are involved in the spiritual life which their parents and grandparents were engaged in. The loss of the next generation is making many religious communities no longer sustainable and as the founders of our community and of our movement grow older, we want to continue to think outside of the box so we remain sustainable and do not lose this vital group of people (young demographic). We want to attract younger people and we do not want to lose the younger people who are growing up in our midst. Just as Abraham wanted to assure that his new community was sustained into the next generation, without assimilating

into the cultures among whom they lived, we also want to make sure that the next generations of B'nai Chayim walk with the L-rd dynamically.

You see Judaism has always lived only one generation from disappearing, because unless our children and their children continue to identify as Jews and continue to adopt a Jewish spirituality and lifestyle, we will sink back and disappear into the past.

Years ago, when I lived in Calgary, I was looking for the Jesus people church I had heard about, but I got the address wrong. I showed up at a church building where a small group of old people were sitting around studying their Bibles and did not seem to want strangers or newcomers to come in and disrupt their peace and quiet. They directed me to the right place and I have always looked back at their dilemma with sadness. Newcomers and children are the life blood of any growing movement and we want to keep thinking outside the box, so that we do not become a closed group where these two groups of people (newcomers and children – young people) are ignored and wander away.

Now, don't get me wrong, we want to meet all the needs of every generation of those who are part of our community, but in the process, we do not want to lose sight of the generational nature of who we need to be. There are many things which we do well and there is always room for improvement and for innovation as we aim for that critical mass which will allow our community to be self-sustaining spiritually until the L-rd returns.

What does that self-sustaining spirituality look like and how do we make thinking outside the box help to maintain that aggressive creativity which will always keep us functioning as a going concern which is not dwindling into the past? There is a hybrid to this approach which we need to avoid called iconoclasm (tearing everything down and starting from scratch as we throw the baby out with the bath water). Let me describe a threefold, aggressively creative approach which I call: principle, priority and practice.

To become relevant, we do not have to keep up with all the styles and fashion trends, either in how we live or what we believe. The principles of G-d's Word will remain our rock bottom, non-negotiable spiritual foundation. His kingdom may no longer be fashionable or even acceptable, either locally or globally, but we will never abandon the clear teachings of the Bible in any area of our lives. But we do not want to just be defensive and cut off all contact (impact) with the world we are trying to reach. We also need biblical priorities where worship and outreach join hands with Bible Study, prayer and fellowship to make our daily lives an expression of what we believe.

It is never easy in our busy world to find time to maintain a dynamic spirituality, but it is only as we make the principles of G-d a priority in our lives that we are able to ward off the tentacles of assimilation even as we rigorously endeavour to remain spiritually relevant. How we practice our priorities needs to be that which is dynamic and flexible and never rigid. How we pray, where we pray and when we pray is never the same set of considerations as why we pray or what we pray about and especially who among us prays. The positions we adopt as we pray and whether we pray with our eyes open or closed as we rock back and forth are technical details we need to work out so that we practice what should be a major life priority for us.

The same would go for worship, for Bible Study, for outreach and especially for fellowship.

Our move to a new location gives us a small window of opportunity to effect changes in how we practice our priorities. We want to do all we can so that new people feel welcome and so that our young people and children feel the same way. For me, two of the greatest joys of our ministry are our youth group and our Shabbat school. As I get stronger and less reactive, our fellowship times are exciting opportunities to really get to know one another.

How, when and where we do our Bible Study is not set in cement, neither are the ways in which we conduct our Shabbat services. We will always have the same priorities based on the same principles, but how we put these into practice will always be able to be changed to make sure that our spiritual needs are being met effectively.

I want to start asking more people of all ages to become Siddur readers, Torah carriers and some brave souls who will agree to prepare Torah meditations. Our shul is unique and we reach out to some very unique people of all ages. Not all our visitors will decide to become part of the spiritual life of our community but we want to be as welcoming and helpful as we can as we maintain our distinctive Messianic Jewish context.

I am asking all of us to be willing to think outside the box with me and our leadership as we steer an aggressively creative course that makes the straight and narrow path of our Messiah how we all live our lives as our world tumbles and stumbles towards the coming kingdom. If ever we stop being able to think outside the box, we might as well put a lid on it and be buried with it. This does not mean we will become a community where there are too many chiefs and not enough Indians or where there are too many chefs spoiling the broth. We will not act on every suggestion and certainly not everything we try and do will always succeed. Some people will continue not to play well with others and want to push their weight around and gather up their toys and move on when they do not get their own way all the time.

However, through it all, it will always be our ability to think outside the box and always be willing to upgrade (modify) how we practice our priorities that will determine how successful we are at continuing to stand firm on our principles. Our world will continue to be fast paced and constantly changing. The rate of global spiritual darkness will continue to increase as the global righteous core continues to shrink. But we will remain faithful to our mandate and continue to explore new and better ways to fulfil this task which is set before us and which has been set before every generation, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

So when we ask for participation and look for volunteers to help us remain a dynamic, exciting shul for everyone from the cradle to the grave, please understand that we really want to welcome positive changes which will help us to be aggressively creative.

We also want to resist changes which will try and pull us away from our principles or that will try and diminish or threaten our priorities. Abraham was creative in the way he held onto the promises as he lived in the land but was never of the land. We live among modern day spiritual Canaanites (Hittites, Egyptians and Philistines) who are on the prowl and are gunning for us so that we join them in their excesses and follies. We may be in the land, but, sorry folks, we will never be of the land.

We will think outside the box, but only so that how we do what we do, and when and where we do it, will keep us focused on how to better fulfil our mandate and not lose our young folk or fail to welcome (include, integrate) the visitors who come to check us out.

Someone once said that change is inevitable, but growth is optional. I would like growth to be both an inevitable part of how we live as a community and the rationale behind all and any changes we make (or decide not to make).

It is enjoyable to get to know people better and to watch our children grow into adulthood in a context which maintains a dynamic spirituality, because nothing less is acceptable.

We will have our struggles and we will sometimes clash and fight and grumble and all take turns being hurt (and being the ones doing the hurting), but as long as we use these necessary growing pains as a means to grow together and not to scatter, we will see the building continue to fill up with the most amazing and distinct people imaginable, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

How is your box doing? How is your thinking doing? Do you give top priority to your principles in what you end up practising? Are you open to aggressive creativity without always wanting your own way? Then join us as we move ahead and explore the exciting challenges which are going to continue to come our way as we explore where we go from here.

Expect changes. Become part of those changes as we learn to work together in unity as a cohesive community of spiritually maturing individuals who desire to remain relevant in serving the L-rd. We want to remain relevant to the world, without joining their Canaanite lifestyle as we invite those who want to join the righteous core and learn kingdom living skills.

This is who we are and this is what we will always be doing. There is no greater challenge in life than living in a world we can never be a part of but before whom we want to shine as a dynamic generational community of believers – whatever it takes.

Kingdom living which thinks outside the box will show us where we go from here. It will be both exciting and dangerous. Are you up for it?

Lets pray.