

The Jewish View of Nationalism and the Pittsburgh Tragedy

Parshat Chayei Sarah

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The word nationalism has been in the news lately. The word means different things to different people. To some it is innocuously synonymous with patriotism, the red, white and blue and American pie. To others it is synonymous with White Nationalism and bigotry.

As we experienced the worst anti-Semitic attack in U.S. history last week, we were in the midst of reading about Abraham, the father of three monotheistic faiths, whose beliefs provide the moral framework for many nation states. Any state grounded in Judea-Christian or Islamic teachings descends from Abrahamic monotheism.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that there is something unique about the birth of the Jewish nation-state: it developed in reverse. Usually, a people first acquire a land and only afterwards develop laws to meet their needs in the form of a social contract. *B'nei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) first received their law at Sinai and only afterwards received their land.

Why did God reverse the order? As Rabbi Meir Soloveitchik points out, the land is not an end unto itself. The land is a place where God can dwell among his people and in turn his people can share God's teachings with the world. This is the meaning of the proclamation of Isaiah and Micah that "from Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

God chose Abraham not because of his strength but because God trusted that Abraham would "command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice." How did God know that his trust in Abraham was not misplaced? God tested Abraham by seeing if he would passively accept the destruction of others as Noah did. Of course, Abraham passed the test by asking God if he intended to

destroy the righteous along with the wicked and then challenged, “Shall the judge of the world not do justice?” The irony is delicious. God, who had just declared his affection for Abraham because of Abraham’s love of justice, now found himself challenged by Abraham for not doing justice! But why did God bother to test Abraham if he already realized that there were no righteous among the wicked of Sodom and Gomorrah? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that this episode teaches that justice is not just a verdict but a process. Abraham realized that the rule of law required that even the people of those wicked cities be given their day in court.

The attack in Pittsburgh serves as a cruel reminder of what life is like for our brothers and sisters in Europe. Yet, there is hope that our situation will not devolve into that of European Jewry. The outpouring of support from public officials and private citizens of all faiths reminds us that the vast majority of Americans realize that our land is not an end unto itself but a vehicle to promote the Abrahamic values of righteousness and justice. John Adams wrote “I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder as the opening scene and design in providence, for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.” It’s not surprising that this devout Puritan would in essence charge America with the same mission that Isaiah charged Israel with: being an *Or Lagoyim* (Light unto the Nations).

Our job is threefold. The first is straightforward. We must take practical steps to secure our facilities. The second is a fight for the heart and soul. It is to remind people that, despite the sharp political and cultural divide, we can still speak to each other in a civil manner. *Bet Hillel* and *Bet Shammai* argued over virtually everything to the point they couldn’t even agree on how to light a Chanukah Menorah. Yet, they treated each other with the utmost respect. How were they able to maintain such civility in the face of disagreement? They were able to do so because they realized that their arguments were *L’shem Shamayim* (for the sake of heaven). In other words, though the two sides disagreed, each realized that the other side also sought the greater good and only believed a different path should be taken to arrive at that greater good.

To those engaged in hateful speech and activities, we remind you that your values run contrary to the Abrahamic values embraced by our founders and enshrined on the Liberty Bell: "Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants thereof." To those across the political spectrum who engage in incendiary rhetoric, we call upon you to learn from *Bet Hillel* and *Bet Shammai* and share your views in a civil manner and to desist from demonizing your opponents. And let us all remember that, though we may have sharp differences of opinion on particular issues, we must not forget that statehood is not an end in itself but a vehicle which should allow us to together pursue righteousness and justice.

Third, we must remember that fighting anti-Semitism is only one part of ensuring Jewish survival. Isaac and Rebecca only learned this lesson after being subjected to the world's first anti-Semitic incident; they were expelled by the Philistines because the Philistines had become jealous of their propensity. It was only after its expulsion that Judaism's second family turned its attention to inculcating its children with its values by blessing them (blessings convey values). Though Isaac and Rebecca disagreed as to which child should receive which blessing, they both understood that, if they wanted their family to survive spiritually, they had to convey their values to their offspring.

In the shtetel we feared for our physical survival. In philo-Semitic America we fear for our spiritual survival, as evidenced by the abundance of articles lamenting the "disappearing American Jew." If the only message we learn from this tragedy is that we need tighter security, we will not survive in the long run. Our survival is dependent on our ability to inculcate a love of Judaism to our children and teach them that, as Abraham's eldest child (the first of the three monotheistic faiths to descend from him), we have a special responsibility to share his teachings of ethical monotheism with the world.