

Jew, American or Both?

Are we part and parcel of this country or do we stand apart? A deeper look at the behavior of Abraham and Isaac in this week's parsha.

A New Reality

For countless generations, Jews have been viewed by their home countries as different, second class citizens. Jews were not granted most of the rights the regular citizens of their countries were given.

In America however, Jews have been accepted as part of the fabric that makes up this great country. In America, Jews have as many rights under the constitution as any other citizen. In America, Jews are so much a part of the country that they have even run for the highest offices; something unheard of in earlier times.

Our grandparents put it best, "America is a goldene medina-a golden country."

Abraham's Distinction

Yes, Jews live a blessed life here among the wonderful peoples that make up America's population. But we are still not the same as our neighbors. As always, Jews are different.

In the Torah portion this week, Abraham demonstrates to us how to relate to nations who accept us as equal.

At the beginning of the Parsha, Sarah has passed away and Abraham wants to purchase a plot of land from the sons of Heth for her burial. They, however, were willing to give him a burial spot for free. Yet Abraham insisted on properly purchasing land for his wife's grave saying, "I am a stranger and an inhabitant with you."

Right there Abraham categorized the essence of a Jew in this world; we are full "inhabitants" of the world yet we are still "strangers."

On the one hand we are inhabitants of this country in every sense of the word. We are involved in the country's politics and government together with our non-Jewish countrymen. We do business with our non-Jewish countrymen, we go to the same universities and we speak the same language. We are even prepared to stand right alongside our non-Jewish countrymen and sacrifice our lives defending our country.

Still, we are total strangers to the people of this country. We are of a world that is completely strange to them. We live in a world of firm belief in a Creator, with a strange tradition and a different set of values. We live our lives differently, we pray differently, we eat different foods and celebrate different holidays in a different manner than they.

Therefore when it came to burial, which is a part of that spiritual world of which our neighbors have no understanding, Abraham said to the Hittites, "Sell me a separate burial plot so that I may bury my dead."

The Hittites couldn't understand why Abraham was talking

about differences and separations. They wanted Abraham to feel at home among them and as one with them. They wanted him to bury his wife the way they buried theirs. They said, “You are a prince of God in our midst. You may choose even the best of our gravesites for your wife. Even if you choose a plot that is already reserved no one will stop you from burying her there.”

Yet all their courtesy did not cause Abraham to sway. He insisted on buying the Machpela cave. He insisted because he wanted to demonstrate that although in certain ways Jews are one with their neighbors, when it comes to anything that is a part of our spiritual world (including death and life after death) we are completely strangers to them. Jews are a different breed.

Isaac’s Distinction

There is another display of this concept a bit later in this week’s parsha.

When Eliezer arrives at the outskirts of the town of Aram Naharaim, (from where Abraham insisted Isaac’s bride be taken) Eliezer makes his camels kneel beside the well where the daughters of the townspeople come to draw water for their families. Then he prays to God, “Let it be that the girl to whom I will say, ‘Please tip over your jug so I can drink,’ will say, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels,’ and that is the one You have designated for Your servant, for Isaac.”

Rashi explains that Eliezer specifically chose this sign because he recognized that only a woman of tremendous kindness could be permitted to join Abraham’s household. G-d heard Eliezer’s

prayer and the miracle unfolded as the very first girl responded exactly as Eliezer had prayed she would.

When Eliezer brought her home to Isaac he related to Isaac all of the miracles that had been done for him in order to convince Isaac that kindness, the sign he had chosen, was true proof that this girl was meant for him.

And Isaac brought her to the tent of Sarah his mother. Rashi explains that Isaac brought Rebecca to the tent, and behold, she was just like Sarah his mother, for as long as Sarah was alive, a candle burned from one Sabbath eve to the next, a blessing was found in the dough, and a cloud was attached to the tent. When she died, these things ceased, and when Rebecca arrived, they resumed.

When Isaac saw this, he took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her.

But why did Isaac have to see these miracles before he agreed to marry Rebecca? Why was the sign of kindness that Eliezer had chosen not enough for him?

Here we again see the difference between the “inhabitant” and “stranger” sides of the Jew. Eliezer was an outsider. Therefore, what he as an outsider saw in Abraham, kindness, that’s what he looked for in the potential bride, so that she might fit in with the family.

But Isaac was looking for something else in the woman he would marry. Isaac was looking for “the stranger” in her. Kindness alone was not enough for him, he wanted a special

spirituality. He wasn't satisfied with a girl who did good deeds for other people. He wanted a girl who has a relationship with G-d. He wanted to know what her connection to G-d was about.

He found his answer in the cloud of glory and the Shabbat candles. Only when he had established her credentials as a stranger to the non-Jewish world did he accept her as a suitable member of his father's household.

Our Distinction

When our grandparents came to this country, they were complete strangers in the literal sense. They were seen as immigrants, newcomers and that's how they felt about themselves too. Therefore they did everything in their power to blend in and become integrated among the "inhabitants" of America. The problem is that they were too successful. They became so integrated that they forgot about being "strangers."

The mission of this generation is to reinstate ourselves in the "stranger" category. We must constantly remind ourselves and teach our children that we belong to a higher spiritual world. Let's get back to being "strangers."