Chayei Sarah 5786

Asher and Holly, thank you, both of you, for bringing our focus to the good.

Holly, you focused on the very first verse of our parasha,
וַיִּהְיוּ֙ חַיֵּ֣י שָׂרָ֔ה מֵאָ֥ה שָׁנָ֛ה וְעֶשְׂרִ֥ים שָׁנָ֖ה וְשֶׁ֣בַע שָׁנִ֑ים שְׁנֵ֖י חַיֵּ֥י שָׂרָֽה׃
Sarah's life, the years of Sarah's life, were 127 years.

You found a teaching from Menachem Mendl Schneerson, that the verse repeats the phrase chayei Sarah, or Sarah's life, to show that Sarah had two lives, her life as a mother and her life as an independent woman. Cool! I never heard that teaching before! This led you to reflect on how amazing your mom is in having both her work life and her home life, and how amazing all moms are, and how much work has gone into women's rights to be independent in all the years since Sarah lived. You also want us to see Sarah's kindness as a mom, and how Sarah's kindness connects to Rebekah's kindness.

And that brings us to Asher. Asher, you focused on Rebekah's act of kindness – offering water to Eliezer, who was a stranger to her. You see in this incident the religious principle to treat others as one wants to be treated – the particular Jewish articulations of this principle being Hillel's "what is hateful to you do not do to another"; Leviticus 19's *veahavta l'reacha kamocha* – love your fellow human being as you love yourself; and the commandment to not oppress the stranger, which as you say, appears 36 times in Torah, more than any other commandment.

You did two things today, Asher, that we don't do enough. First, you showed that these bedrock principles are not just particular to the Jewish people. They are also fundamental to Christianity and Islam, and we could add Hinduism and Buddhism to that list. These principles are fundamental to all world religions, and yet our societies violate them daily. But you didn't want us to stay there in our focus. The second thing you did that we don't do nearly enough is bring those commandments to reflect not only on what's *wrong* in our society today, but also on what's *right*.

You want us to pay attention to the ways that people all around us are living up to these foundational principles. You want us to notice the efforts over the last 40 years to clean Lake Muskegon in Michigan so that now it is no longer a polluted body of water. You want us to notice the people who are traveling to Jamaica right now to help the victims of Hurricane Melissa to rebuild. You do not want us to give in to despair at all of the ways that these foundational principles are being violated in our country right now. Instead, you want us to see the good news, to see the impact of human effort, to see that small and large actions that any of us can do make a difference. To see the ways that the power is in our own hands.

It seems, in our moment, that many of us are kind of immobilized. Are we waiting and watching, as it all just gets worse? As if we have all the time in the world? Are we paralyzed by the speed and outrageousness and brutality of what's happening? Are we maybe depressed? Grieving? Afraid? Whatever it is, we're not as active as we probably ought to be, given what's happening around us. Given that our neighbors are being disappeared every day with no due process, given the corruption of every kind on display in the White House every day, given the hate and division that's infecting our communities.

I wonder whether we might find in our parasha a clue about how we get unstuck, how we get into motion from this immobilization. A single verse in the parasha serves as a segue between the story of Abraham burying Sarah and the story of Abraham sending his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac. This is a moment when Abraham is grieving. Sarah was his wife, and his partner through his entire journey of life, and now he has buried her. But he sees that he must act. The verse says this: "Abraham was old, advanced in years, and Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things." Ramban explains that it was Abraham's awareness of his advanced age, in other words, his awareness that he didn't have a lot of time, that gave him urgency to act – to send Eliezer to go find a wife for Isaac. And where the verse says, "Adonai had blessed Abraham in all things," Rabbeinu Bachya says it means that Abraham was aware that "he had not been denied any of the things the average person hopes for." It's true that his wife died, but he was also aware of all that he had. He didn't have many of the comforts we think we need. He lived in a tent. He didn't have running water or sanitation. But he was aware of how much he did have–in property, in honor, in years. And that awareness of being blessed – of having – gave him the impetus to take action.

What's the relationship between being aware of all that you have, and feeling that you can take action? I'd suggest the following. If we think of ourselves as living in deficit, if we only can see what's wrong and what's missing, it's hard to feel that we have the resources – the bandwidth, the space, the time, the enoughness – to reach beyond ourselves, to pursue goals beyond our immediate needs, even when those immediate needs are well met. We can feel like we're just barely keeping up, when, if we really step back and look at our blessings, and see how much we have – we realize there's room here to give. There's room here to contribute to the greater good, to care about someone who doesn't have enough, to stand up for our deepest and truest values.

But most of us, most of the time, see the negative. This is so ingrained. It's the way our media and social media operate, it's the negativity bias of our brains. Holly's d'var Torah celebrating women's independence, for example, made me think immediately of the efforts to reverse women's independence, from the rollback of reproductive rights and healthcare to the ascendant Christian nationalist views that women should be in the home and men should rule over them. These things are terrifying, infuriating, and can lead to hopelessness and immobilization.

It is true that some people are working hard to reverse rights and freedoms that we hold dear. We need to tell that story to be clear-eyed about what's happening. But that's not the full story.

The full story is that 7 million people filled the streets of this country on October 18th, at 2,700 events in all 50 states. The full story is that that No Kings March was the largest single-day protest in United States history. The full story is that in the recent elections, voters sent a loud rebuke to this administration. It's going to take more than single day marches and winning a few local elections to achieve the country we need.

But, the full story is that every one of the laws and policies that this administration is trying to overturn – every ruling or procedure, every federal agency or department, every funding grant, every social, political, and governance norm, was won, at some point in history, often slowly and methodically, by people. The reason those laws are there, the reason that funding was there, the reason those norms were there, is that ordinary people organized with each other to achieve

their goals. People who wanted to see our country be more fair and equal; people who wanted to honor human dignity; to care for those in need; to regulate the excesses of greed; to prosecute corruption and violence; to protect our natural environment. Over centuries, human beings made choices about where to put their effort. And they worked hard, usually locally, usually with the people around them. That's how the society changes. That is how we get the world we want. It doesn't happen by sitting back, waiting and watching. We get up, we pick something specific that we can do, we join with the people around us, and we get to work. The people who came before us did that. Every right and freedom we enjoy comes from their hard work. They did it, and we can do it too. We must do it too.

Here at CBE there are so many ways to get involved right now in our Meet the Moment campaigns. On Tuesdays from 6-7pm every week, along with neighboring churches from Sunset Park, we stand in vigil outside the Metropolitan Detention Center where many ICE detainees are being held. They see us through the windows  and know that they are not forgotten and not alone. On Thursdays from 5:30-6 pm every week, as part of a larger campaign called Shine the Light, we stand in Grand Army Plaza with homemade signs about freedom and democracy and caring for the stranger, and cars come by and honk their approval. That's a great place to bring kids and people of all ages.
Today, at noon in the chapel after services, we are hosting "Signs of Solidarity", by which we are building relationships with local businesses and restaurants on 7th Ave and sharing how they can know their rights for when or if ICE agents show up;
On December 7th we are hosting a non-violence civil disobedience training, because we believe that in this time we all should become deeply steeped in the ethic and practice of non-violence.
We're also offering weekly opportunities to volunteer by making sandwiches for those who are hungry in our city, including refugees. We also have our climate campaign and our dismantling racism team, both of which have events coming up in the next few weeks.

You can do this. Get involved. Do something. The action itself will counter the despair. When the world is overwhelming and the news is depressing, the very best therapy is to do something for someone else.

The hardest part is getting out of paralysis into motion. Once we're in motion, we're in motion. One act of kindness leads to another act of kindness. As Pirkei Avot teaches, one mitzvah leads to another.

Abraham was aware that he had limited time. And he was aware of how many blessings filled his life. Our lives are full of blessings too. Most of us have what we need. We can afford to dedicate part of our time and part of our resources to our core values. We don't have all the time in the world either. The sooner we act the better, the sooner we build, the sooner we gather all together, the more powerful we'll become, the more capable of standing for those foundational principles of our religion and all religions.

What is hateful to you, do not do to another. Love your fellow human being as yourself. Do not oppress the stranger.

Let's go. We can do this.