Protecting the Legacy of the Overlooked
Parashat Chayei Sarah 5787
Response to 2026 United States Midterm Elections & Israeli Elections
November 7, 2026
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Shabbat Shalom! Yasher Koach, Sophie and Jack! Thank you for your wisdom this morning, helping us better understand this part of our Torah. Jack, you lifted up the story of Keturah, Abraham's last wife, and how Abraham struggled to live up to his own value of generosity toward her and their descendants. Through this struggle, he demonstrated just how human he truly was in our Torah, forced to confront his own flaws and mistakes. And Sophie, you brought to our attention the story of Eliezer, Abraham's servant who does not receive recognition in our Torah, but ensures that Isaac finds a wife, Rebecca, and is able to carry the Jewish people forward. Hidden in both of these stories, of Keturah and Eliezer, both of you brought to life two figures in our Torah who are often overlooked and ignored, pushed toward the background in place of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca.

In some ways, this prioritization of characters in Torah makes sense. It is, after all, our ancestral patriarchs and matriarchs whom we mention during the Amidah, our central standing prayer; they are who we invoke to learn Jewish wisdom and practice; they are the figures who move us from story to story, parsha to parsha, making up the rich tapestry of our Torah. At the very beginning of Parashat Chayei Sarah, we read:

וַיִּהְיוּ֙ חַיֵּ֣י שָׂרָ֔ה מֵאָ֥ה שָׁנָ֛ה וְעֶשְׂרִ֥ים שָׁנָ֖ה וְשֶׁ֣בַע שָׁנִ֑ים שְׁנֵ֖י חַיֵּ֥י שָׂרָֽה׃

"Sarah's lifetime came to one hundred years and twenty years and seven years; this was the span of Sarah's life."[1]

Many of our Torah commentators explore the repetition of the word שנה, translated as "year", and explain that we are to remember Sarah for more than her 127 years of life, but that we could understand each year of Sarah's life as a unique contribution to our people and to the world. A similar pattern is seen in the description of the death of Abraham, drawing our attention to the ways in which they lived, not just the lump sum of years.

And yet, as we have learned already this morning, little-known figures, such as Eliezer and Keturah, are pushed to the side, receiving little recognition for their contributions or roles amongst the Israelites. In this way, some figures are minimized for the sake of the larger narrative, the larger story of our people. And that minimization, that omission, impacts their legacy, their standing in our consciousness. This is true for Torah, but it is also true in our lives today. We encounter dozens, if not hundreds of people each day, walking past them, seeing their names in our emails and texts; but when we reach the end of the day, how many of them do we remember? Headlines, from local, national, and international stories, whirl past us so fast

[1] Genesis 23:1

and so often that we can sometimes fail to register the severity of a tragedy or the magnitude of a triumph. Although the well-known idiom is phrased “missing the forest for the trees”, I find that oftentimes we are “missing the trees for the forest”, floating above everything and missing the story of so many individual people as we focus on the larger ideas of the world around us.

Much of our attention over the past couple of weeks has been on the elections, both in Israel and in the United States, and both were incredibly consequential. In Israel, this was the first election since the horrors of October 7th and the ensuing war with Hamas that has decimated Gaza and traumatized all in the region. The main dividing lines among the parties and coalitions were around their support or disdain of Prime Minister Netanyahu. And here in the US, the midterm elections offered the chance for the public to respond to the policies of the Trump administration and the Republican-led Congress that’s been in power the past two years. For months, we’ve been inundated with political commercials, ads, texts, calls, and emails. And so by now, the names of these many candidates and parties are incredibly well-known, their names and faces everywhere; the reasons for the election results are well-documented, examined, analyzed; and there will be, I’m sure, any number of remaining think pieces, articles, even books about the larger impact and story of these momentous elections. And yet, if we are to take anything from our Torah this morning, and from the wisdom of our b’nei mitzvah Jack and Sophie, it would be to make sure that we do not overlook the people who played small, but mighty roles in these elections:

- In the United States, we can begin with the voters, which I’m hoping is many of us here in this sanctuary this morning. Millions of us overcame weather, and long lines, and confusing voting procedures, and so much more to cast our ballots and make our voice be known
- I’m especially thinking of those first-time voters and the voters, particularly Black and Latino voters, who had to overcome voter suppression tactics, laws and practices enacted upon them by their own representatives
- Of course, supporting all these voters are the poll workers, which we might have some of here this morning, people who put in hours and hours of their time to make sure that machines operate, lines are orderly, and that everyone gets to participate in democracy
- And also all the people who phone banked, wrote postcards, knocked on doors, did everything possible to encourage people to use their voice, to not sit on the sidelines
- And how about the thousands of local candidates, people who have not been politicians, who did not run multi-million dollar campaigns, but saw a problem in their community and decided to run to make life just a little bit better for their family and their neighbors
- In Israel, much of the same can be said, where we saw millions of people making their voices heard, including Arab Israelis having their most significant participation in history

- Families of those killed on October 7th, or taken hostage by Hamas, who were used as political pawns over the past three years, raised their voices in this election, attempting to hold the current government accountable.
- I'm also thinking of the tens of thousands of Israeli citizens who live abroad who flew back to Israel and made sure that they too were able to cast their ballot

Millions of people having their voices be heard through this messy, but beautiful process we call democracy. Beyond all of the huge campaign operations and strategies lie individual people, us, each of us, striving to have our story be known, our lives be taken into account by the people set to represent us. Maybe you felt that as you filled out your ballot, slowly darkening the circle next to a candidate or a proposal. Your hopes and dreams, worries and anxieties, placed into those little circles on the ballot. We cannot, and we should not, overlook our role and contribution in this democracy, each of us playing a part.

And also, if we are to truly consider the people who have been overlooked during the past few weeks and months, we must also remember the people kept from participating:

- In the United States, this includes people suffering from voter suppression tactics. They were taken off the voter rolls; they were forced to present a new form of ID that they don't even own; their polling place moved and they were confused where to go; their polling place opened late and they left the line because they needed to go to work; or they were scared at the possibility of ICE officers being present at polling stations.
- I'm also thinking of people who are incarcerated, or formerly incarcerated, who have had their voting rights eliminated. For example, in Florida, 960,000 Florida residents cannot vote because of a previous felony conviction; the vast majority of them have completed their sentence, and yet still cannot vote.
- And in Israel, millions of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are not able to participate in national elections even though the government of Israel controls their lives on a daily basis. For Palestinians in East Jerusalem, they are able to vote on the local level, but not in national elections. And for Palestinians in the West Bank, they have zero ability to participate in elections, even though Israeli Jews living in settlements right next to Palestinian villages and cities throughout the West Bank are able to participate.

These two incredibly consequential elections deserve to be analyzed and examined; in many ways, they were powerfully historical, especially for the Jewish world. But part of that analysis, that examination, must include the people who often get overlooked: the regular American or Israeli citizen striving to have their voice be heard, and the American or Palestinian who is kept from participation. Because whether it is about elections and democracy, or about the sacred stories of our tradition, we miss out on much-needed passion, wisdom, and insight when we overlook individuals and only focus on the larger narratives. And that oversight has an impact on our legacy, on how we tell these stories that make up our lives and our traditions.

I'll close this morning with a story of a man overlooked, a man oppressed, but who, through the hard work of many, many individual people, is now a known part of the story of this country. This is the from the front page story of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Wednesday, November 4, 2026, written by Ernie Suggs :

> "In 1860, an enslaved man named Sheppard Peek was listed among the possessions of William Peek, a white man in Crawfordville. His value was placed at $1,400. On another surviving document, Sheppard signed his name with an X. More than a century and a half later, Sheppard's great-great-granddaughter, Keisha Lance Bottoms, was elected governor of Georgia. The distance between Crawfordville and the Governor's Mansion can be measured in miles. The distance between a man once listed as property and his descendant, now elected to lead the state that sanctioned his enslavement, is harder to comprehend."[2]

Thank you, Jack and Sophie, for inspiring all of us to look deeper into the larger story and seek to understand the individual person, no matter their role or part. In doing so, we protect their legacy, and we strengthen the legacy of us all. Shabbat Shalom.

[2] https://www.ajc.com/politics/2026/11/keisha-lance-bottoms-crawfordville-governors-mansion/