

A Strange Fit

Chayei Sara – Rabbi Jay Weinstein

As Jews, how do we relate to the society around us? Are we full participants with no boundaries or do we withdraw to the greatest extent possible? Or, perhaps, we might find ourselves somewhere in between. In this week's parasha we find that Avraham sets the example for us.

Upon the death of Sarah, Avraham is tasked with the responsibility of finding a burial plot for his wife. As he approaches the people of Heth he begins his negotiations with a very strange phrase: ger v'toshav anochi imachem- I am an alien and a resident among you. This is strange for two reasons: why did Avraham offer personal information at the beginning of this business deal? After all, Avraham was here to buy a plot of land, why is he sharing details of his life story? Further, Avraham's words are an internal contradiction. He calls himself both a ger, a stranger AND a toshav, a resident. Make up your mind! If you are a visitor than you are not a resident and if you are a citizen there than you are not a stranger?

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993) understood this phrase as describing the mission of every single Jew. On the one hand, we all must be "residents" of the society in which we live. We have to be fully comfortable with the secular world, both contributing and gaining in positive ways. On the other hand, we are also "outsiders" to our society. Our morals, beliefs and ways we act are all based on the Torah. From that perspective, we are strangers to the general world. Is this mission impossible? No, it's complex. It's an attitude which requires us engage the world, and to embrace the positive attributes while filtering out the parts which do not fit in with our Jewish belief system.

As Avraham was embracing a new city in which he wanted to bury his wife, Sarah, he made this message very clear. Yes, he'll be an active member of the general society and contribute to the wealth fare of the public. But at the same time, they should realize that his ultimate alliance is to G-d and in certain circumstances he's also a stranger to their values and culture.



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