

Chayei Sarah 5783 – Life Experiences – We are each unique

I received a call today from my son Kevin – it's the wonderful kind of call that a parent can wait a lifetime to hear, if ever. He said, mom, I just want you to know that I know that you have your own life – it seemed like when I was growing up, you were always there, and I didn't really think about you having your own life. I do realize that now, and just wanted you to know, and I want to thank you for being there for me.

During the High Holy Days we tend to read and talk about the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, and we ponder what it is that we are supposed to glean from this surprisingly terrible thing that God asked of Abraham. At the end of the story Isaac is fine – I think – or was he emotionally scarred for the rest of his life? We don't know.

What gets minimal attention is Sarah's experience of all this. A clue is that the very next chapter is titled Chayei Sarah – the life of Sarah – but it's not about her life – the verse continues,

וַיְהִי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה מֵאָה שָׁנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים שָׁנֵי חַיֵּי שָׂרָה:

Sarah's lifetime—the span of Sarah's life—came to one hundred and twenty-seven years.

Rashi comments on this, sharing midrash with us: the narrative of the death of Sarah follows immediately on that of the Binding of Isaac, because through the announcement of the Binding — that her son had been made ready for sacrifice and had almost been sacrificed — she received a great shock (literally, her soul flew from her) and she died (Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 32).

It occurs to me that this might be something of a surprise. How often have we thought, actually, have we ever thought to ourselves, upon hearing the story of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, what must Sarah think of all this? Does she know?

This midrash that Rashi shares is not biblical text. Yes, Sarah dies, but we do not know why.

But I think that in this story, the Rabbis are conveying to us an important teaching. Yes, we each have our own perspective – how we see the world, what occupies us, what we spend our time on, our goals, our hopes, our dreams, our worries. But how often do we really take a look and step out of our own world and wonder what life is really like for those closest to us – perhaps our spouse, our child, our parent, our sibling, a niece, a nephew, a dear friend?

We often skip over Sarah, admiring how long she lived, how beautiful she was, but perhaps not really ever knowing her or her heartbreak. We move quickly on to her son Isaac and the story of how he meets his bride Rebecca. An important story, to be sure, but I think Sarah's life and what she has to teach us about our lives and those around us is worth more than just a momentary pause.

May our upcoming Thanksgiving truly be a holiday of gratitude and giving thanks. May it also be a time of honest reflection. May we think not just of the pilgrims, but also of the Indians who helped them survive. We brought to the eastern shores not only a whole new way of life and thinking, but also guns, germs and steel¹.

But as I was taught, like many Americans, the popular story of the first Thanksgiving often goes like this: in 1621, the Pilgrims had recently arrived in what is today Plymouth, Massachusetts—the traditional lands of the Wampanoag and Massachusett people—and were faced with a cold and bitter winter. The Wampanoag people noticed their plight and generously provided the Pilgrims with the means to survive. To provide thanks, the Pilgrims welcomed the Wampanoags to a harmonious feast.

However, this story is a one-sided understanding that ignores the full truth of history, particularly for the Indigenous People of the United States.²

While many historians and activists have worked to disrupt public memory as it relates to the imagined history of Thanksgiving, the true agency of the story lies in the hands of indigenous communities, who recognize the fourth Thursday of November as a National Day of Mourning.

¹ For more on this topic, I recommend the Pulitzer Prize winning book by Jared Diamond: Guns, Germs and Steel.

² <https://www.facinghistory.org/ideas-week/disrupting-public-memory-story-national-day-mourning>

The National Day of Mourning is an annual day of remembrance and protest organized by the United American Indians of New England (UAINE). Held each year on Cole's Hill in Plymouth overlooking the famed Plymouth Rock, the National Day of Mourning provides the space for Indigenous People to speak about their history and the struggles they experience in the United States.

The National Day of Mourning began in 1970 as a form of protest to the 350th anniversary celebration of the arrival of the Pilgrims. The 350th celebration was organized to celebrate the glorified, and largely false, narrative of Wampanoag-Pilgrim relations in the 1620s. As part of the celebration, organizers approached Wamsutta (Frank) James, a Wampanoag man, to give an appreciative speech. The speech that James was set to deliver at the celebration was censored because it was not in line with the mythological story celebration organizers were set on sharing. James declined to deliver a scripted speech at the celebration, and instead the suppressed speech was delivered at the first National Day of Mourning.

In the suppressed speech, James shared how the consequences of colonial settlement have impacted the Wampanoag people:

“Even before the Pilgrims landed it was common practice for explorers to capture Indians, take them to Europe and sell them as slaves for 220 shillings apiece. The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod for four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors and stolen their corn and beans... Massasoit, the great Sachem of the Wampanoag, knew these facts, yet he and his People welcomed and befriended the settlers of the Plymouth Plantation. Perhaps he did this because his Tribe had been depleted by an epidemic. Or his knowledge of the harsh oncoming winter was the reason for his peaceful acceptance of these acts. This action by Massasoit was perhaps our biggest mistake. We, the Wampanoag, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end; that before 50 years were to pass, the Wampanoag would no longer be a free people.”

James' speech includes the harsh truths for those who have grown accustomed to the narrative of harmony. The reality of the early relations with Indigenous People and the first Thanksgiving in what would become the United States is one marked

by epidemics, robbery, and violence. While the suppressed speech was marked by great sorrow and truth, it also speaks of the resilience of the Indigenous People of the Americas and the enduring presence of their language and practices. James explained, "Today, I and many of my people are choosing to face the truth. We ARE Indians! Although time has drained our culture, and our language is almost extinct, we the Wampanoags still walk the lands of Massachusetts."

Every year since 1970, Indigenous People have gathered in Plymouth, Massachusetts to honor their ancestors and protest the oppression many Native Americans continue to face today. This event not only recognizes historically marginalized indigenous voices, but also brings attention to the history that many Americans still do not know about. While challenging a narrative that is so deeply embedded in American consciousness can be difficult, we are stewards of this legacy and have the responsibility to face the past and the present so we can develop a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. As Frank (Wamsutta) James shared in 1970, "What has happened cannot be changed, but today we must work towards a more humane America, a more Indian America, where men and nature once again are important; where the Indian values of honor, truth, and brotherhood prevail."

In our celebration of Thanksgiving this coming week, may we consider the ways in which we can work toward a more humane world, where we respect and honor one another, and recognize a spark of the Divine in each of us. May we look outside of our own worlds, and recognize the depth and breadth of the loves, dreams, hopes, worries and cares of those around us.

Shabbat shalom and Happy Thanksgiving,

Rabbi Lisa Bock