

11-15-25 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene – *Chayei Sarah* (life of Sarah)
Torah Portion: Genesis 23:1 – 25:18
Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1-31
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Rom 8:28

Thanksgiving, a Jewish Tradition

Central question: Do you realize where your blessings come from, and are you thankful to Him for them?

We are this week in the fifth parasha of the Torah. Its name *Chayei Sarah* means the “life of Sarah”, and it comes from the second and third words in English, and these same words in the original Hebrew.

Gen 23:1-4

23 Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. 2 And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. 3 Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 4 "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

וַיְהִי־וְ	חַיִּי	שָׂרָה	מֵאָה	שָׁנָה	וְעֶשְׂרִים	שָׁנָה	וְשִׁבְעַ	23:1
And was	old:	Sarah	an hundred	years	and twenty	and seven	these were	
1961	2416	8283	3967	8141	6242	8141	9999	
שָׁנִים שָׁנִי	חַיִּי	שָׂרָה:						
the years of	the life of	Sarah.						
8141 8141	2416	8283						
וַתָּמָת	שָׂרָה	בְּקִרְיַת־אֲרָבָע	הִוא	הַזֶּה	חֶבְרֹן	בְּאֶרֶץ	כְּנָעַן	2
And died	Sarah	in Kirjath-arba;	is	the same	Hebron	in the land of	Canaan:	
4191	8283	7153	9999	1931	2275	776	3667	
אֲבִרָהִם	לְסָפֹד	לְשָׂרָה	וּלְבִכְתָּהּ:					
Abraham	to mourn	for Sarah,	and to weep for her.					
85	5594	8283	1058					
וַיָּקָם	אֲבִרָהִם	מֵעַל פָּנָי	מֵתוֹ	וַיְדַבֵּר	אֵל-	בְּנֵי-	חֶת	3
And stood up	Abraham	from before	his dead,	and spake	unto	the sons of	Heth,	
6965	85	6440 5921	4191	1696	413	1121	2845	
וַיֹּאמֶר:	קֶבֶר	אֶחָזָה-	לִי	תִּנוּ	עִמָּכֶם	אֲנֹכִי	וְתוֹשָׁב	4
saying,	a buryingplace	a possession of	me	give	with you:	I	and a sojourner	
559	6913	272	3807a	5414	5973	595	8453	
וְאֶקְבְּרָהּ	מִתִּי	מִלְּפָנָי:						
that I may bury	my dead	out of my sight.						
6912	4191	6440						

We are approaching the American holiday of Thanksgiving. It is traditionally celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. This year that will be on November 27th.

I was contemplating giving this message the weekend before Thanksgiving this year, but Alex Yalenga will be sharing with our congregation on that weekend, and so I am moving up my message on Thanksgiving to today. That actually works very well, because the

concept of blessings and thankfulness is prominently featured in today's parasha.

Gen 23:3-20

3 Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 4 "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." 5 And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, 6 "Hear us, my lord, you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us will refuse you his grave for burying your dead." 7 So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. 8 And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your wish for me to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, 9 that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site." 10 Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; even of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, 11 "No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave

that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead." 12 And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. 13 And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." 14 Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, 15 "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead." 16 And Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard.

17 So Ephron's field, which was in Machpelah, which faced Mamre, the field and cave which was in it, and all the trees which were in the field, that were within all the confines of its border, were deeded over 18 to Abraham for a possession in the presence of the sons of Heth, before all who went in at the gate of his city. 19 And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field at Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 20 So the field, and

the cave that is in it, were deeded over to Abraham for a burial site by the sons of Heth.

Our sages have agreed that no field in that area would be worth anything near to 400 shekels of silver. I wish to have you consider what value that might have today. There are a couple of measurements we can use, given the common practices of that time.

Using a labor equivalency standard (where a shekel was worth four denarii and a day's labor was equivalent to \$80) 400 shekels would be worth approximately \$128,000 in today's dollars. But it might have been much higher. Based on commodity prices derived from the ancient Ugaritic texts, 400 shekels would have a value of \$624,000 today.

This passage tells us two important things. First, Abraham had a lot of money, and could buy this field for this exorbitant price with cash on hand (not requiring him to sell any assets to get it). Second, Abraham bought the title to at least a part of what is today Hebron, and there is no evidence that any other society ever purchased it from Abraham. So, it is not right that Hebron should be considered to be a "Palestinian" city.

How did Abraham become so wealthy? We see that in the opening verse of the next chapter.

Gen 24:1-2

24 Now Abraham was old, advanced in age; and the Lord had blessed Abraham in every way.

We have seen in the last few parashiot how Abraham had believed G-d, and did what G-d asked be done. It seems that in every chapter of Abraham's life, the cost of following G-d grew higher and higher. He was called to leave a place of relative comfort, and go to a place he had never been before. He was disciplined to stand up to rulers for truth, and stop being a coward before kings. He was called to show to G-d, to himself, and to many generations which followed, what faith looks like when it is hard – he offered his beloved son on the altar of sacrifice in an amazing picture of Messiah.

Heb 11:8-11

8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the

same promise; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Why was Abraham blessed? I believe it was because of two things. First, G-d saw what Abraham would be, if he became obedient to G-d and followed G-d's ways. And secondly, because Abraham stepped out in faith to do those hard things that G-d asked him to do. Abraham showed us the connection between faith and actions.

James 2:17-25

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." 19 You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he

was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.

Rom 8:28

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

This faith-actions combination was lived-out in a robust manner with Abraham. If you were to ask him how he gained all that wealth, he would tell you that he really didn't have any idea how it all happened... it just did. But Abraham was thankful in all that he was provided. And you can find great proof of that by the actions of Abraham's servant, who had gone to find a bride for Isaac. The servant prayed for guidance by G-d for identifying the one which was the right one as the bride.

Gen 24:13-27

13 Behold, I am standing by the spring, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water; 14 now may it be that the girl to whom I say, 'Please let down your jar so that I may drink,' and who answers, 'Drink, and I will

water your camels also'; — may she be the one whom Thou hast appointed for Thy servant Isaac; and by this I shall know that Thou hast shown lovingkindness to my master." 15 And it came about before he had finished speaking, that behold, Rebekah who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder. 16 And the girl was very beautiful, a virgin, and no man had had relations with her; and she went down to the spring and filled her jar, and came up. 17 Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar." 18 And she said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. 19 Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking." 20 So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. 21 Meanwhile, the man was gazing at her in silence, to know whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not. 22 Then it came about, when the camels had finished drinking, that the man took a gold ring weighing a half-shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels in gold, 23 and said, "Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room for us to lodge in your father's house?" 24

And she said to him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." 25 Again she said to him, "We have plenty of both straw and feed, and room to lodge in." 26 Then the man bowed low and worshiped the Lord. 27 And he said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His lovingkindness and His truth toward my master; as for me, the Lord has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers."

What was the servant's immediate action when he was shown favor by G-d? He worshipped and gave thanks... just as Abraham had shown him to do by his own life.

It is our people's practice to give thanks. Our daily prayers begin with thanksgiving. One of the sweetest prayers in the siddur said during the morning service is called the *Modim*. That word means many things, but mostly, "thank you."

"We gratefully thank You, for it is You, Adonai, Our G-d and G-d of our forefathers for all eternity; Rock of our lives, Shield of our salvation [lit. Yeshua] are You from generation to generation. We shall thank you and relate Your praise –

for our souls that are entrusted to You; for Your miracles that are with us daily; and for Your wonders in every season – evening, morning and afternoon. The Beneficent One, for Your compassions were never exhausted, and the Compassionate One, for your kindnesses never ended – always have we put our hope in You.”

With that foundation, I now want to discuss the origins of the American holiday of Thanksgiving. The story begins in England in the 1600s.¹

The church of England, under King James, was persecuting all who dared say that the church, the official agent of state control, did not have absolute authority in both civil issues and in spiritual issues. In other words, England was a tyrannical church-state. The enforcers of this persecution hunted down, imprisoned, and sometimes executed those who defied them.

A group of separatists fled to Leiden, Holland and established a community, where they remained for 11 years. A congregation formed there. Many have called them “Puritans.” But that term lacks definition today. Those people are better called “separatists” who believed that the

¹ I draw much of this from an article, found in the International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 8 No 9, September 2018. Its title: *DNA and Genealogical Evidence Suggests the Plymouth Colonists were Sephardic Jews*, by Hirschman, Vance, and Harris. https://ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_8_No_9_September_2018/1.pdf

Church of England had drifted far from the way G-d had wished His people to live and worship.

They saw that the Church of England had incorporated rituals, hierarchies, and the like which were inconsistent with the Scriptures. They wished to return to the style of worship that was seen in the Scriptures, but concluded that the Church of England could not be reformed from within. The title given them probably comes from their famous desire to purify the worship of G-d from all the improper changes and additions forced into it by the modern Christian church.

They heard about the “new world” and hoped that it might give them a chance to have freedom. They just wished to live free, and to be free to worship G-d in their own way.

As it turned out, Leiden was a place of refuge of a number of people fleeing oppression of one kind or the other. They bonded together in their shared misery, and decided to flee to the new world.

But only 50 of the 102 persons boarding the Mayflower were actually from the Leiden, Holland congregation of English Puritans. Most of the non-Leiden passengers were from an area of London known as Aldgate Ward. Aldgate was known for its large group of Sephardic Jews who

had re-settled in England after first moving there from the Netherlands and France.

Also situated in this same locale was Thomas Weston, who helped finance the voyages to Plymouth through the Merchant Adventurers Corporation. The oldest Jewish synagogue in England, founded just after the formal Restoration of Jews to England in 1655, is located in the same Ward.

The separatists in Leiden Holland were under threat from the expiration of a standing treaty between the Low Counties and Spain. The Mayflower passengers feared another attack by Spanish forces similar to those which had occurred in the late 1500s.

Remember that Christopher Colon² (a Messianic Jew) had earlier taken his Jewish crew aboard three ships and sailed to try to find a trade route to the east which should avoid the existing Muslim blockades, and incidentally also seeking a refuge for Jews from the Inquisition. Thus he discovered this new world.³ The specter of continued persecution of Jews was always in the back of the minds of Jews worldwide, especially since the rise of anti-Semitic thought in Christianity, which led

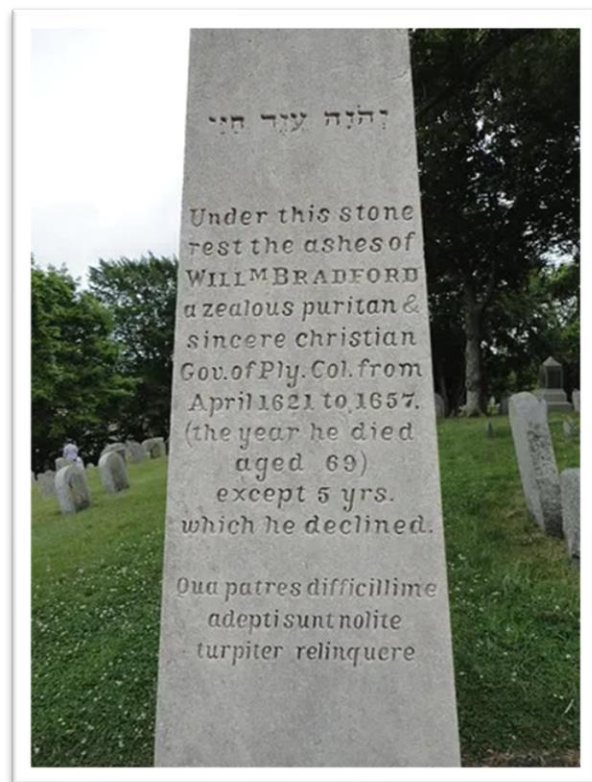
² His name has come to be called "Columbus"

³ The Captain's logs from the voyage demonstrate that the sailors chanted the liturgy of the Succot celebration from one ship to the other, as they were only days from discovering the new world.

Christians to become enthusiastic and persistent partners in persecutions of this kind.

It is also important that William Bradford taught himself to read Hebrew and even wrote a Hebrew grammar book. His focus was on the Torah, which he desired to read in the original language. This strongly suggests Bradford was of Jewish descent. It appears that the true genesis of Bradford's first "thanksgiving" celebration at Plymouth was motivated by Ainsworth's discussion of Jewish philosopher Maimonides' commentary on Psalm 107. The giving of thanks to God in Judaism, *birkat ha-gomel*, is celebrated on four occasions: the healing of a sickness, the release of a prisoner, the end of a voyage, and the arrival of travelers at their destination. The arrival of the pilgrims at Cape Cod would have been an appropriate moment to give thanks, and they did so by reciting Psalm 107.

And, as further evidence, there is an inscription on Bradford's tombstone in Hebrew. The inscription reads, "YHVH is the helper of my life."





The journal article continues to demonstrate, with substantial DNA evidence, that many of the prominent names associated with the Plymouth community were of Ashkenazic or Sephardic origin.

There is one further evidence of the prominence of Jews in that colony. Shown in a painting, now featured in the Mayflower Society website showing the first Thanksgiving, is a pious Jew, dressed in traditional black garb and wearing a yarmulke (a kippa), offering the blessing for the meal.



Note that his head is uplifted toward heaven, which I have experienced myself as a Jewish tradition, not bowed as is the Christian pattern. His hands are placed together in prayer. Although that hand position is generally today associated exclusively with Christian prayers, history tells us that this particular Jewish tradition predated Christianity.

It may be that this hand position signaling supplication and subordination to G-d may have been common among early Messianics, and carried forward by those who came to faith from the nations as the modern form of Christianity developed (then departed) from traditional Judaism of that time.

Before setting out on the journey to the new world, these pilgrims agreed to what is called the “Mayflower Compact.” It was designed to foster peace in the community and also to pay back the benefactors who paid for this voyage. The Pilgrims looked at the lessons of the Bible, and saw that fidelity to G-d was a strong precursor of success and blessing. They trusted G-d with their future, and proceeded without any doubt of failure. They just didn’t figure into the equation human nature, and they forgot G-d’s instruction found in the Proverbs regarding laziness.

On August 1, 1620, the Mayflower set sail with 102 passengers, including forty of these separatists, the Pilgrims. They made landfall in

November in what we today call New England. During that first winter, half of them, including William Bradford's own wife, died of starvation, of sickness, or exposure to the elements. Only 44 survived.

In the spring, they encountered the native Americans, who gave them some corn and taught them to farm. They also taught how to fish and to trap beavers to make coats and blankets from their skins.

The sponsors of this voyage, in Holland, demanded that everything that these settlers produced would be placed into a common storehouse, and each member of the community was entitled to a share. That was true of all the houses that the Pilgrims built and all the fields that were cleared. It all belonged to everyone. These sponsors expected a return on their investment, and thought they knew how to achieve it. What they insisted upon was pure socialism.

Bradford soon saw that socialism wasn't working as planned. Some people had learned that they didn't need to work to be fed, so they allowed others to do more work for the same share of food and lodging. Those who worked harder rightly felt they were being abused for the benefit of the lazy, and those who were lazy were quite happy with their undiminished reward involving no outlay of personal effort. There was no prosperity, there was no innovation, because there was no incentive

for hard work and excellence. Hard work was not rewarded, it was punished. Laziness reaped a great reward.

Bradford's own words described the situation:

For young men that were most able and fit for labor and service sat around and did nothing. [T]hey should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without being paid for it? Why should they do that? So, they didn't.

Bradford scrapped socialism in favor of capitalism and ownership of private property. He assigned a plot of land to every family, and they could do with it whatever they wished to do. They could farm it, build on it a store, or a barn, or whatever.

Bradford unleashed a powerful engine, based upon a social benefit gained by each person doing what was best for himself and his own family, and providing for the community by meeting their needs through free commerce as the families sold or traded their excess for other goods and services they needed.

Bradford wrote of this new social order:

“This had very good success, for it made all hands industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been,”

This prosperity led to benefits for the native Americans as well. The Pilgrims set up trading posts where the natives could come and trade what they needed for what they had in abundance. Both cultures benefitted from capitalism and free trade.

The profits helped the Pilgrims pay-off their debts to the merchant benefactors who financed the voyage. Word of this amazing success spread back across the Atlantic, and now the new world was flooded with new arrivals, ready to follow this example.

In its purest original form, Thanksgiving is a celebration of the grace and protection that G-d gave to some courageous people of faith (many of them Messianic Jews) and serves as a testimony to the abundance that comes from a free society taking advantage of the engine of capitalism combined with a holy lifestyle.

These holy ones walked in the pathway of Abraham, and succeeded. We should do the same... and constantly be giving thanks for what we have.