

Torah Thoughts Chayei Sarah

5779:

In this election season, members of Congress and the White House continue to wrangle over the issue of immigration and its implications for the country. As in previous generations, we once again face vexing questions about how to craft a sensible approach to those who come to America seeking a better life. What rights and responsibilities do immigrants have, and what does our society owe them?

At the beginning of this week's parshah, Chayei Sarah, we see an illustration of the immigration issue as it played out in ancient Canaan. Abraham must find burial ground for his wife Sarah, but he has a problem: He is not a part of the larger society, only a resident alien. As an immigrant, he has no burial rights for himself or his family. The response of the local people is instructive. They engage Abraham in what appears to be a highly formalized negotiation over the right to bury his dead: First they praise him, then offer to give him a cave and the land surrounding it for free, then they point out that the value of the land, 400 shekels, is really not the kind of thing that should cause dispute between Abraham and the landowner. Abraham accepts their praise and their broad hint about compensating the owner of the land. They pretend to give the land to Abraham, and he pretends to accept it, while giving them the suggested price.

On the one hand, you might think this is a shakedown, a predatory sale to a man who is in emotional distress, alone in a land he does not know well and with a wife to bury. On the other hand, Abraham has already shown himself to be a man who is capable of responding to the needs of the moment. He has bargained with God, he has let Ishmael and Hagar be banished to the wilderness, he has shown himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, and has undertaken a long journey in order to reach this land. God's promise to Abraham can only be fulfilled if Abraham transitions from being an immigrant to being a resident, a citizen in our parlance. If the price he has to pay is to have a burial price set by the locals, then so be it. As in so many instances in the Torah, God's will is established through the actions of an individual, someone whose personal interests will eventually blossom into national destiny.

As Americans, we can't know now how any individual immigrant will contribute to our nation, but we do know that we are a nation of immigrants. Practically every U.S. citizen traces their roots back to an immigrant ancestor, and our status as the leader in so many of the world's activities points to a successful integration of our immigrants. Jews are certainly the beneficiaries of that integration. Long ago, the local people of Canaan were willing to take a chance on Abraham, allowing him a landholding among them. As our national leaders continue to address this issue, I hope that as Jews we take the long view on immigration, and consider the blessings that future Abrahams might bring to America.