

Dear Chavraya,

With the death in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, of Sarah *Imenu/Sarah our mother* and *Avraham Avinu/Abraham our father*, the torch of Jewish people-hood is symbolically passed to the generations. The first of our ancestors, as their descendants we are called through the generations to be *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. It is a beautiful calling of who we are meant to be. It is not a description, however, but for each generation and each individual it is a challenge.

Each religion, in its own way, challenges those who walk in its path to be guided by the highest expression of what it means to be of that faith. On this weekend, people of all faiths and ethical traditions have been challenged to affirm a "Charter for Compassion." Initiated by the British writer and theologian, Karen Armstrong, the Charter is a call "to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion." On the three "Abrahamic" sabbaths of this weekend, Muslims, Jews, and Christians have been asked to reflect on compassion as expressed in their own faith and in their own lives. Affirmation of the Charter is a starting point for affirmation through action of the "inviolable sanctity of every single human being." We are each called as individuals "in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain." While I have attached the Charter to this letter, you can read and learn more about it at the following website, where you can also sign onto it and see a moving video of its reading by a rainbow spectrum of people: www.charterforcompassion.org.

Parashat Chayei Sarah is the context for our reflections on this Shabbat. *Chayei Sarah* means the life of Sarah, but the portion tells at its outset of her death. In that is the first teaching. Our death, as our birth, is beyond our choosing. The choice is in how we live on the journey to that time, in whether or not the way of our living shall help to enhance life beyond our own and indeed help toward the birthing of a gentler, more compassionate and peaceful world. The Torah portion opens with a delineation of the years of Sarah's life into stages. Rather than simply saying that she lived to be one hundred and twenty seven years, the Torah says, *The life of Sarah was a hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years: years of the life of Sarah*. On this last culminating phrase, Rashi comments on the culmination of Sarah's years, *all were equal in goodness*.

In the twilight of Abraham's years, we are told, *Avraham zaken ba bayamim/Abraham had become old; he had come through the days*. To the question of why both phrases, if he had become old of course he had come through the days, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches that *a day in which a Jew does not do an act of kindness is not reckoned as a day in her or his life*. From the lives of Sarah and Abraham two teachings are joined; if the culminating signature of our years is to be goodness, doing acts of kindness every day is the way. So we become *rachmanim b'nei rachmanim/compassionate children of compassionate ancestors*. So may it be said of us.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor