"*Chayyei Sarah*, the war in Gaza, and Abraham's message of optimism to our people"

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

From the start of the Gaza War on Simchat Torah this year, the Jewish world has been plunged into the depths of shock, fear, sadness, and grief, at the terrible losses we have sustained, the grotesque violence inflicted on our unsuspecting communities, and the ability of Hamas to kidnap so many and drag them into their heavily fortified underground strongholds. To this has been added a sense of utter confusion at the apparent unpreparedness of Israel's intelligence network, hitherto viewed and feared as one of the best in the world, and at its failure to render its border with Gaza impregnable.

Thank Hashem, the tide of the war seems to have turned, thanks to the valour and self-belief of the IDF, its high level of training, the brilliance of its commanders, and the resilience of our people that has suffered countless setbacks in its history, but has overcome them. We have done so, fortified in the knowledge that - אנחנו מאמינים בני מאמינים ("We are believers, in an unbroken chain of believers") – ואין לנו על מי להישען אלא על אבינו שבשמים ("with no one upon whom to rely other than our Father in Heaven").

Each morning we bless and thank God for that faith and strength that is the hallmark of our people:

ברוך...אוזר ישראל בגבורה *Blessed are You…who girds Israel with strength*

We thank Him also for the resilience to turn the tables on our enemies, even when they have 'wearied' us at the outset:

ברוך...הנותן ליעף כח - *Blessed are You…who gives strength to the weary*

We thank Him for making us ever 'firm' and undaunted in our resolve:

ברוך...אשר הכין מצעדי גבר - *Blessed are You…who makes firm the steps of man*

In war, there are, tragically and inevitably, captives who are taken, a situation which brings anguish both to them and to their loved ones at home. Hence the blessing for their safe return:

ברוך...מתיר אסורים - *Blessed are You…who sets captives free*

Wars also leave their emotional scars on those who have witnessed its horrors, suffered its wounds and/or fearful captivity, lost dear friends and fellow fighters, become tormented by the nightmares that with immense difficulty are suppressed, and the personality changes that the experiences impose. Not forgetting the family around them on their return, who often find it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to offer succour or to come to terms with that changed person.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all Israel's young fighters who gave their lives for *Am Yisrael* and *Medinat* Yisrael, and with their bereaved relatives; with those taken captive who fear they may never see their families again; with the wounded, who may carry the physical scars, and the traumatised, the emotional scars, for the rest of their lives.

May their sacrifice never have been in vain, and may Israel and all its citizens be granted the blessing of the eternal peace that it so richly deserves:

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו

ועל כל ישראל, ואמרו אמן

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The sidrah *Chayyei* Sarah opens with a statement of the death and burial of Sarah. It then proceeds to relate the difficulties that Abraham, a newcomer to Canaan, encountered to secure a burial plot in one of the Hittite enclaves of Canaan. The text is unclear, but it seems to suggest that he began by approaching a succession of the individual Hittites, all of whom initially agreed to sell (Gen. 23:6). We may speculate that, immediately word of his wealth and his requirement got out, the local Hittite chieftain, Ephron, slapped a prohibition of sale order on his clan. Hence Abraham's petition to the latter to intercede on his behalf with Ephron that he might grant him his request in return for כסף מלא - 'a jolly good deal'. The Torah then alludes to the financial haggling that followed. We can only imagine Abraham's stressed state of mind having to contend with all this on his own, and in a state of profound grief.

But then, immediately following this episode, we have the counterintuitive statement: 'Now Abraham was old - וה' ברך את אברהם בכל - and God had blessed him *in every way*' (24:1).

But, how could that possibly be? He'd just lost his life's partner, the one who was always at his right hand, to the extent that, while he was attempting to convert the men to belief in one God, Sarah had engaged the women in the same way! This was the beautiful wife who had traipsed with him on the 600-mile journey from Ur Kasdim, Mesopotamia, to Canaan, and subsequently all over that promised land, to find a suitable place to put down roots.

Her death was clearly an irreparable loss, so how could the Torah possibly describe Abraham as having been blessed, בכל, 'in *every* way?'

I suggest that underlying this single word lies an entire psychology of how to cope with grief and loss, a message that, we pray, our brethren in Israel will succeed in taking to heart. It is the message of faith and optimism, of never letting go of the blessings and joys of the past, of not allowing them to overwhelm, but rather to serve as a counterweight to the difficulties, and yes, even the sorrows, of the present.

Even after her death, Sarah continued to be a living and vibrant force in Abraham's life. Her spirit continued to light up his life and her words continued to guide him. He was thus, never alone, and he remained ever optimistic, ever counting his blessings, ever believing that he had been blessed with בכל, 'everything.'

שבת שלום

ניצחון לחייליו ושלום למדינתנו

Rabbi Jeffrey