



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Chayei Sarah 5775

By Joshua Rabin
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Over the past 2.5 years, Rohingya Muslims, an ethnic and religious minority living in western Burma, have been repeatedly attacked and over 100,000 have been displaced and forcibly held in camps. The government has failed to protect the Rohingya from, and has at times participated in, unspeakable atrocities, including violence, murder and internment. In addition to physical attacks, the government has also sought to destroy the Rohingya's peoplehood. At the present time, the Rohingya are a stateless people who are not recognized as citizens of Burma. In order to receive citizenship, the Burmese government requires that the Rohingya abandon their identity and declare themselves "Bengalis," which codifies their lack of citizenship and self-identification.¹ Those Rohingya who refuse to capitulate are forced to live in internment camps or flee the country.²

The human rights watchdog *Fortify Rights* reports that the Rohingya are forced to live under horrific conditions in the internment camps, with limited access to basic provisions, healthcare, education, and economic opportunity.³ One diplomat told the *New Republic* that the living conditions of the Rohingya in the Sittwe camp, in the capital of the Rakhine State, are equivalent to a "concentration camp."⁴

The atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese government against the Rohingya people occur even against the dead. A *Human Rights Watch* report states that Burmese military forces the Rohingya to bury their dead in mass graves, both to expedite the burial process and to make it far more difficult to investigate and prosecute individual acts of violence against the Rohingya by the army.⁵ Moreover, the report notes that digging mass graves deprives the Rohingya of the ability to provide their dead with a proper Muslim burial.⁶

One Rohingya man describes the desecration of the burial process:

"That night [October 23], we could not collect the dead. We collected them in the morning but we could not bury them. We had to wait one day for [government] approval. Once we received permission we ... put three or four bodies in one hole, and many more in other holes. ... The [larger] holes we dug were 10 feet wide and several feet deep. We made at least one very big hole and other smaller ones. At first we buried the bodies in single graves but then the soldiers said we should dig bigger graves because single graves would

¹ Jared Ferrie, "Myanmar Confirms Controversial Rohingya Plan at United Nations," *Reuters*, 30 September 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/30/us-myanmar-rohingya-idUSKCN0HP15T20140930>>.

² Jane Perlez, "For Myanmar Muslim Minority, No Escape from Brutality," *The New York Times*, 14 March 2014, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/world/asia/trapped-between-home-and-refuge-burmese-muslim-s-are-brutalized.html>> (Accessed 26 March 2014).

³ *Policies of Persecution: Ending Abusive State Policies Against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar* (Fortify Rights, 2014), 34.

⁴ Graeme Wood, "A Countryside of Concentration Camps: Burma Could be the Site of the World's Next Genocide," *New Republic*, 21 January 2014, <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116241/burma-2014-countryside-concentration-camps>>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "All You Can Do is Pray": *Crimes Against Humanity and Ethnic Cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Arakan State* (Human Rights Watch, 2013), 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

take too much time. They wanted it done quickly. It was both the police and army who ordered us to dig bigger graves. They were watching over us.”⁷

The Burmese government’s denial of a dignified ritual burial represents a final, horrific act of degradation against an already violently oppressed people.

Few obligations are more sacred and affirming of the sanctity of life in the Jewish tradition than providing the dead with proper burial, a lesson we learn in *parashat Chayei Sarah*. Immediately after the Torah announces the death of Sarah, we are told that Abraham, “rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said... ‘Sell me some property for a burial site here so that I can bury the dead.’”⁸ Our rabbinic commentators asked for what purpose the Torah contains such a detailed description of Abraham’s negotiations to find a burial plot for Sarah.

Benno Jacob, a modern German commentator, argues that the primary purpose of this passage is:

“...the one given by Abraham. He wants a burial place for Sarah. The purchase is made in her honor and is testimony of his love beyond death. For this reason alone this passage [about buying a burial plot for Sarah] is worthy of being written.”⁹

By devoting an entire chapter of the Torah to Abraham’s quick purchase of a burial plot for his wife, the *parashah* teaches us that proper burial is a true act of kindness, *chesed shel emet*.

In *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm writes that Jewish tradition treats the dead like a Torah scroll that can no longer be used, for “While the ancient scroll no longer serves any useful ritual purpose, it is revered for the exalted function it once filled.”¹⁰ When we fulfill our Jewish obligation to bury the dead, we acknowledge the inherent sanctity of every human life, and recognize that each person, like the Torah, reflects the vision that God sets forth for humanity. In contrast, when we deny a human being a proper burial, we essentially say that this person is no more holy than any other object that can be discarded—no more precious than a piece of trash.

In a speech at Rangoon University during his 2012 visit to Burma, President Barack Obama said regarding the Rohingya that, “There is no excuse for violence against innocent people. And the Rohingya hold within themselves the same dignity that you do.”¹¹

Today, the Burmese government, in word and deed, denies the unalienable dignity of a largely defenseless people, treating both the living and dead with a disregard that is anathema to basic human rights and Jewish values. The government of Burma is pushing for the identity of the Rohingya to be erased, aiming to ban even the word Rohingya from the nation’s vocabulary. Unless we demand that our government speaks up for the Rohingya, insisting

⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁸ Bereishit 23:3-4.

⁹ Benno Jacob on Bereishit 23. For a more lengthy translation and explanation, see Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis (Augmented Edition)*. Interpreted by Benno Jacob (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, 2007), 153, and Rav Elchanan Samet, “There Avraham Was Buried, and Sarah his Wife,” in *Torah MiEtzion: New Readings in Tanach: Bereshit*, eds. Rabbi Ezra Bick and Rabbi Yaakov Beasley (New Milford: Maggid Books, 2011), 217.

¹⁰ Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning: Revised and Expanded* (Middle Village: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2000), 3.

¹¹ See footnote 4.

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on recognizing their existence and realizing their rights, we will passively deny the message of this week's *parashah*, where Abraham sets the example for how honoring the dead affirms the sanctity of life.

American Jewish World Service supports grassroots organizations that are working in Burma to stop the systematic persecution of the country's ethnic minorities. They are currently rallying behind a campaign to validate the Rohingya's very existence by urging President Obama and other global leaders to say "Rohingya" in public statements. We, too, can support this campaign by using the #JustSayTheirName hashtag and [sharing the petition](#) on social media. This initiative is a way to honor the living and the dead by telling the world that this people exists and their rights and lives are of equal worth to ours.



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