



**SERMON EREV VAYISHLACH:  
ELEANOR RIGBY**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 4 December 2020  
Wimbledon Synagogue

- 1 Rebecca dies in this week's parashah. But not only is her death not explicitly mentioned, nobody went to her funeral. A midrash tells us: "When Rebecca died, they asked, 'Who will attend her funeral? Abraham is dead. Isaac is housebound. Jacob has gone to Paddan-Aram. Should Esau the wicked go? Then people would curse her for birthing such a man!' What did they do? They brought out her coffin at night, so that Esau not attend. Rabbi Yosei bar Rabbi Chaninah said, 'Because of this, the text only explained about her death obliquely.'"<sup>1</sup>
- 2 I once officiated at an empty funeral, of someone who had no close family or friends. It was me, in a room, on my own, reciting the prayers, singing the psalms, giving the deceased a respectful send-off.
- 3 Of course, that was quite different to Rebecca's case, because Rebecca did have family. She wasn't alone in the world, and the rabbis understood that at least one person – her eldest son – would have liked to be there. But he was barred from attending due to a perceived risk.
- 4 This sounds very familiar. This year has seen many such funerals: funerals where attendance is restricted due to a perceived risk, caskets going on their final journey unaccompanied. People – fellow citizens, fellow Jews,



fellow members of this community – have been denied a chance to say goodbye, or at least a chance to say goodbye in the conventional way.

- 5 The validity or otherwise of the restrictions isn't the point here. Whether the Israelites' fear of disruption was fair or unfair, Esau was denied a proper grieving process. Whether the risk of coronavirus transmission in a cemetery is great or small, countless families have been denied a proper grieving process.
- 6 The Torah's solution was to cover up the death altogether. It was erased from the record, the description of Rebecca's passing hidden in a cryptic verse. But we know that that's no solution. As the sociologist Meghan Tinsley has said, "The alternative to mourning is melancholia: the denial that a loss is real, the inability to make sense of it or learn from it and, ultimately, the inability to move on."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Marie Curie charity is calling on the government to designate 23 March 2021 – the first anniversary of lockdown – as a national day to reflect, grieve and remember.<sup>3</sup>
- 7 But my main reflection is how much of an advantage is held by those of us who are part of a community. It's no substitute, but the ability to connect, weekly or more often, with the same group of people, is invaluable. And Wimbledon is not just any community: it's a synagogue community. Friendships are important, but Wimbledon isn't just built on friendships. It's built on the principle of **כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה**,<sup>4</sup> all of us are responsible for each other, and there is a specific caring mission that binds us together. There is a care team; there are spaces where people can come to talk; there are lay leaders who volunteer to support the



bereaved; and it has been my pleasure and honour to be a semi-rabbinic part of the community over the last couple of years.

- 8 This is a community which respects the right of everyone to membership, to support, to be a part of something. Even while we've been compelled to scale back our activities, we've been endlessly creative in finding new ways to do as much as we can. The pandemic will pass, but I know that this synagogue will continue to be a leading light of a community. Kein y'hi ratzon, may this be God's will.

## **GKW 04.12.20**

<sup>1</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Teitzei 4

<sup>2</sup> Meghan Tinsley. "Do we need a national day of mourning after the coronavirus pandemic?", *The Conversation* (3 August 2020): <<https://theconversation.com/do-we-need-a-national-day-of-mourning-after-the-coronavirus-pandemic-143772>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/policy/campaigns/day-to-reflect>>

<sup>4</sup> Sifra, Bechukkotai, Perek 7:5 (Weiss ed, p 112)