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בס"ד

Parashat Haye Sarah Part I Genesis 23

1. Transition

By passing the *'aqedah* test, Abraham had exemplified in the manner par excellence the principle of readiness to fulfill G-d's command whatever it may be. He thereby set the foundation and identity of the nation-to-be and had accomplished his mission. He now had to focus on Isaac getting married and "passing the baton" to the next generation. The blessings G-d proclaimed to him after the *'aqedah*, which confirmed and expanded upon the blessings He had previously given him, constitute the final prophecy granted him that is recorded in the Torah.

In the brief genealogical notice that immediately follows the *'aqedah* passage, beginning with, "And after these matters" (Gen. 22:20), a messenger informs Abraham of the twelve sons born to his brother Nahor. This report includes the information of the birth of Rebekah, daughter of Nahor's eighth son (eighth, symbolically indicating suitability for joining the Covenantal enterprise), thus foreshadowing the forthcoming Isaac-Rebekah marriage. The next verse records the death of Sarah. The narrative focus has moved to matters concerning the transition to the second generation. (Not that Abraham was then close to death,* but his last years involve activities only indirectly connected with the Covenant that is carried on by Isaac.)

After Sarah's death and burial, Abraham sends his trusted servant to find an appropriate wife for Isaac. He returns with Rebekah and, surprisingly, reports back only to Isaac, with no mention of Abraham (24:66). Of course Abraham was notified, but the narrative reflects the transition that was taking place. The statement that "Isaac brought her into his mother's tent, he married Rebekah, loved her, and was comforted for the loss of his mother" (v. 67), attests to

Rebekah being found to be a worthy successor to Sarah, completing the changeover.

The Torah concludes the Abraham saga with a single compact paragraph (25:1-11). Abraham married Keturah, had six sons by her, gave them gifts and sent them eastward, away from Isaac, who inherited his whole estate. When he died, Isaac and Ishmael buried him, indicating that a measure of cordial relations had been established. "After Abraham's death G-d blessed Isaac his son" (v. 11) officially marks the successful succession. Ishmael's genealogy follows (25:12-18), which reflects the fulfillment of G-d's blessings to Abraham regarding the proliferation of his progeny aside from the covenanted line that goes through Isaac. At that point *וְאַלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת יִצְחָק* (v. 19), the story of Isaac commences.

2. Importance of a Burial Plot

The Torah narrates Abraham's efforts to secure an appropriate burial place for Sarah at unusual length. Why were the particulars of his discussion with Bene Het and the back-and-forth negotiations with Ephron recounted? It would not have been surprising had the Torah briefly stated that he purchased a burial holding in Hebron for 400 shekels and buried Sarah there. It required only one verse to relate that Jacob purchased a parcel of land in Shechem from *Bene Hamor* for one hundred *qesitahs* (33:19)!

The passage does establish (or reinforce) the ever-relevant principle that passing G-d's ultimate test and obtaining His glorious blessings do not exempt a man from having to struggle in the mundane arena of human affairs. But that lesson also does not require as protracted a treatment as given. True, after the acute tension of the *'aqedah* episode, a leisurely paced narrative is welcome. Perhaps that consideration plays

a role in the formulation of the following narrative, that of seeking a wife for Isaac. But with Sarah lying unburied, there must be more to our passage's expansive elaboration.

Ibn Ezra comments, "This was related to teach the excellence of the land of Israel over all other lands for both the living and the dead. Also, to indicate Hashem's fulfillment of His promise to give Abraham possession in the land."

Ramban considers these explanations inadequate. It is taken for granted that Sarah would be interred somewhere in the land of Israel – the dead are not usually taken to other lands – so purchasing the plot did not demonstrate the land of Israel's excellence over other lands regarding the dead. And acquiring a burial plot does not appear related to G-d's promise to Abraham to give him possession of the whole land. It may be countered that a small plot may serve as a symbol for the whole, but Ramban does not feel that informing us concerning the purchase of a burial plot is the passage's underlying purpose. He sees its purposes as follows:

- a) To illustrate that the Deity fulfilled His promise to make Abraham's name renowned (12:2), seen from how respectfully the local leaders spoke with him
- b) To teach that Sarah was buried in the land of Israel
- c) To teach the location of the patriarchs' burial place

These explanations also appear inadequate. The Torah had already depicted Abraham as a most prominent man, interacting with kings, receiving their attention, refusing the spoils of war from one and beseeched by another for a long-term oath to deal well with his subjects. And the lengthy description of his difficulty and necessary perseverance in acquiring the burial place he chose, while Sarah lied unburied, does not, at first sight, appear to accord with his princely status. (We will return to this point in due course.) That Sarah was buried in the land of Israel and the location of her burial plot could all have been transmitted in less than one verse. Abraham's persistence in obtaining a permanent burial site and the lengthiness of the passage seem to reflect a motif related to the patriarch's deeper intentions and long-term vision.

Abraham was surely interested in acquiring a family site for multiple burials that would serve as a tangible symbol for the local inhabitants that he and his descendants were now officially rooted in the land. But his intentions undoubtedly extended much further. He was future-oriented; he knew his descendants were going into exile (15:13) and even a small inheritable burial area in the promised land would be a powerful symbol for them. Children aspire to be buried near parents. The symbolism in the anticipated reconnection is comforting and the common burial site contributes to the unity of the family and preserves its legacy. Children visit ancestral graves to stay in touch with their heritage and receive inspiration from the lives and values of their forebears. A family interment site often has a significant impact on children's identity and is a potent link between generations.

Jacob requested to be buried with his fathers, adjuring Joseph to strive to bring it about (47:30-31). He insisted, despite the slight that Pharaoh might feel. In his very last words, Jacob expounded to his sons on the theme of the family interment site, *me'arat hamakhpela*. He recalled that Abraham purchased it and reminded them of all the immediate family members who were buried there (49:29-32). In all this, he was fortifying their consciousness of their homeland and the expectation that they will someday return. Abraham probably had some such similar thoughts in mind.

In this sense, a tiny plot may, indeed, be symbolic of the beginning of the process of attaining possession of the land. (Perhaps that is what Ibn Ezra had in mind even if he did not speak it out fully.)

An additional reason the Torah may have detailed Abraham's perseverance in securing Sarah's burial in what will be the family interment site may be to set a precedent for the upcoming nation to recognize the importance of providing a dignified burial to the deceased, segregated from idolaters.

3. Regarding the Negotiations

It had been the policy in certain areas of the ancient Near East, as is the case in some countries even today, to deny strangers the right to purchase land in perpetuity. As deeply embedded ethnic, cultural and

security considerations were at play, this restriction often applied even to “strangers” who had lived in a particular region for many years. Exceptions were generally only possible with the broad consent of the townspeople or the leaders. (When exceptions were made it was undoubtedly to the great benefit of the sellers.) We do not specifically know that Hebron had such an official policy, but it may very well have been the case; it surely appears to have at least been the unofficial practice. Perhaps the reason that Abraham had not purchased a parcel of land prior to Sarah’s death was because of such a policy.

Abraham seems to have acknowledged such a situation in his request to purchase a burial cave from the local people. He “rose from beside his dead,” and, speaking to a group of *Bene Het***, began his request with the words, גַּר וְתוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עִמָּכֶם (“I am a stranger-resident among you” [23:4]).*** Abraham’s initial request may have been made near Sarah’s body and he may have been speaking with men who came to pay their respects. The second וַיָּקָם אַבְרָהָם (“Abraham rose” [v. 7]), as well as the apparently expanded audience manifest from that verse forward, indicates the venue had changed – his request required approval before the townsmen.

In articulating his request, Abraham employed the term “give me” (תִּבְנוּ לִי אֶתְהָיָה קְבֹרָה). Although in a secondary meaning the phrase may be understood as “sell me,” since he clearly desired only to purchase, why did he not straightaway request “sell me”? It appears that when an item being requested was not “on the market,” particularly if it was a portion of an ancestral inheritance, the respectable term to use was “give,” with the understanding that the individual making the request would reciprocate with the appropriate price or whatever was an acceptable equivalence. Especially in a hardship case such as this, an explicit request to purchase would put the property owner in an uncomfortable position, for it is unseemly to negotiate with one who is pressed to bury his wife. By talking about “giving,” haggling is ruled out.

Bene Het replied to Abraham that he was highly esteemed among them and they were willing to give him the choicest burial location for Sarah; that is, he was invited to bury Sarah in any extant burial site that he chose. They consistently acted deferentially toward

him. However, their offer was merely an accommodation to bury Sarah in one of their sites, not an opportunity for Abraham to purchase land as he requested, as an אֶתְהָיָה, an inheritable possession.

The scene shifts to the town gate, where the elders assemble and where public policy was transacted. If an exception were to be made, it would be made there. “Abraham rises and bows to the people of the land” (v. 7). He requests to be introduced to Ephron and immediately, before the introduction, states his request publicly. There should be no mistake. He was interested in a cave at the edge of Ephron’s field, that he would like Ephron to “give” him for an אֶתְהָיָה קְבֹרָה (“an inheritable gravesite”), but give him for “full price.” A cave at the edge of a field, presumably with access from the road (which might explain how Abraham knew about it), serves the purpose while it provides the owner the necessary independence and is not a significant imposition on anyone. By being explicit, Abraham made it clear that he does not want a gift. His audience surely understood that his insistence on making full payment was not merely a desire to refuse a gift in accordance with his dignified status. Even members of the nobility accept appropriate gifts and subsequently reciprocate with their own gifts. Abraham sought to purchase.

Ephron was present and responded to Abraham. He spoke “in the ears of *Bene Het*” and addressed his words לְכָל בָּאֵי שַׁעַר עִירוֹ, “to all who had entry to the gate of his town” (v. 10). He agreed to “give” Abraham not just the cave, but also the field in which the cave was located. He mentions the word “give” three times, does not touch on the issue of payment and encourages Abraham to proceed to bury his dead. Abraham had no interest in a gift; gifts are susceptible to varying interpretations and conditions and he would have no assurance that the property would really be inheritable. In some societies, gifts are revocable.

When Abraham insists on paying in full, Ephron maintains the verbal charade while transmitting the information of the payment he seeks: “A land of four hundred silver shekels, between us, what is it? Go bury your dead” (v. 15). Abraham understood and weighed out the four hundred silver shekels mentioned without any negotiating, and the transaction was finalized. Given that the townsmen were present – a point greatly emphasized in the

narrative – and obviously assented to the transaction, an exception to the local zoning policy was possible. The Torah provides an expansive statement that “records” the transaction, emphasizing that it was “in front of the eyes of *Bene Het*” as well as “of all who had entry to the gate of his town” (v. 18).

Seen in this way, the passage does, indeed, present Abraham in a prestigious light beyond what was previously shown. His successful interaction with the townsmen further manifests his princely deportment. He possessed the eminence that made it possible for him to persevere in his request to the townsmen and have some sort of exception made to the local landowning practice in a single negotiating session, albeit at what appears to have been an inflated price. (This accords with the general lines of Ramban’s first explanation as to why the narrative was recorded in its many details.)

Although we do not know the size of the field Abraham purchased, we may ask how much four hundred silver shekels were worth? The weight of the ancient Near East עֵבֶר לְפָקֶה (“the going merchant’s rate”) silver shekel in which Abraham paid appears to have been almost twelve grams of silver. It is noteworthy that four hundred shekels is eight times the fifty shekels King David paid Araunah to purchase the field on which the central national altar was established and where eventually Solomon built the Temple (2 Sam. 24:24; 2 Chr. 3:1). For perspective, consider the case of one who vows to give to the sanctuary the worth of a person. The Torah provides a “valuation table” in which the greatest obligation is fifty shekels for a male in his prime, between twenty and sixty years of age (Lev. 27:3). An ox that gores a slave to death obligates its owner to pay thirty shekels (Exod. 21:32). Joseph was sold for twenty silver (Gen. 37:28), assumed to be shekels. It should also be noted that scholars of the ancient Near East have determined that the purchasing power of silver had experienced a slow decline through the centuries that span the Bible.

When Jeremiah redeemed his ancestral land in Anathoth during the siege of Jerusalem, he said, “I weighed out the *keseif* to him, seven *sheqalim* and ten *keseif*” (Jer. 32:9). Many commentators interpret him to mean he paid seven plus ten silver shekels, that is, seventeen shekels of silver, seemingly on the low side. But perhaps the second use of *keseif* in that statement

refers to a larger unit of silver than a shekel. In any event, as the nation was on the verge of being exiled, G-d asked Jeremiah to make that purchase as a powerful expression of faith in the future of the nation in the promised land, somewhat of a common denominator it shares with Abraham’s purchase.

What is the explanation of Ephron speaking of a “field” while Abraham spoke merely of a cave? Perhaps he sensed Abraham’s fuller wishes and chose to be accommodating, recognizing that a family burial site was more appropriate on a field that the family owned. It seems more likely, however, that he was preparing the ground for a possible large sale; if there was going to be a sale, it should be a most lucrative one, at a much-inflated sum.

In the light of ancient Near Eastern law, another explanation has been proffered. Perhaps Hebron had a regulation that appears to have been “on the books” in a number of Near Eastern regions to discourage proliferation of small parcels of land. Landowners who sold part of an officially recognized lot were not relieved of a proportionate tax burden and therefore would generally sell the entire lot (suggested by Manfred R. Lehman, quoted by Nehama Leibowitz, *Iyunim Besefer Beresheet*, 150). Of course, had that been Ephron’s intention, he should have mentioned that consideration to Abraham without “springing” it on him as he did.

4. Hebron

The city within which the *me‘arat hamakhpela* is located, Hebron, is situated about twenty miles south-southwest of Jerusalem at one of the highest points in the central Judean hill country (about three thousand feet above sea level). Protectable and flanked by fertile agricultural land, it is one of the most distinguished cities in Israel’s history. It is the first city in which Abraham settled and where he constructed one of his altars to Hashem, apparently an indication that he established some sort of a religious center there promoting his new vision of religion (Gen. 13:18). (Shechem, his first stop, had been a temporary location.) He lived in Hebron for many years (see 18:1) and had established an alliance with Aner, Eshkol and Mamre, the three local chieftains of the *Elone Mamre HaEmori* district of the city who had provided him military assistance (Gen. 14). When

Sarah died she was there. The field of *me'arat hamakhpela* was the first portion of land purchased by a member of the forthcoming nation and thus the first official symbol that Israel belonged in the land.

Hebron was one of the only sites mentioned that the scouts who Moses sent to inspect the land entered (Num. 13:22). In that context it is described as having been built seven years before Zoan of Egypt (Tanis). Zoan – located in the northeast Delta close to Goshen, fifteen miles north of Raamses – was a city of major importance in the ancient world. For centuries it periodically was the residence of Egyptian kings (including the Pharaoh of the Exodus and the Pharaoh whose daughter King Solomon married) and the center of the region where G-d's miracles associated with the Exodus took place (Ps. 78:12, 43). The notation that Hebron was built seven years before Zoan – particularly in light of the symbolic significance of the number seven in the ancient Near East and in the Bible – surely appears to be an indication of Hebron's eminence in some way or other.

In the aftermath of the scouts' episode, Hebron became a city symbolizing faithfulness to G-d: "Thus Hebron became the inheritance of Caleb...because he was loyal to Hashem" (Josh. 14:14). It was also a city of refuge (20:7-9). It was to Hebron that G-d instructed David to repair after King Saul's death (1 Sam. 2:1). There he was anointed king of Judah (v. 4) and it was there that he subsequently was anointed king of all Israel (5:3). Hebron served as his capital (of Judah) for seven and one-half years, after which time he moved the capital to Jerusalem.

Whatever the deeper meaning, the accounts of the patriarchs' burial in *me'arat hamakhpela* are undoubtedly linked to Hebron's importance.

Endnotes

* Isaac married Rebekah at forty years of age (Gen. 25:20), making Abraham one hundred and forty at the time, and he lived until one hundred and seventy-five (taking ages literally, which we may be responsible to do in interpreting the surface dimension of the narrative, although the ages are ultimately understood as symbolic).

** It is unlikely that these *Bene Het* are to be identified with the historical Hittite kingdom. The latter was comprised of an Indo-European people whose empire was based in western Asiatic Turkey in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., at a time roughly contemporaneous with Abraham. However, there is no record of them having reached anywhere near as far south as Hebron. In later centuries (in a reformulated kingdom) they penetrated Syria and Lebanon and clusters may have settled in Canaan.

*** In words strikingly reminiscent of those of Abraham, G-d articulated the great social justice innovation associated with the jubilee year, namely, that no Israelite could sell his portion of the promised land in perpetuity, for all the land belongs to Him and we are but stranger-residents with Him. He proclaimed *כִּי גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי* ("for you are strangers-residents with Me" [Lev. 25:23]). King David, within an expression of appreciation for G-d's gifts, made reference to the transience of human life with an extension of this phrase: *כִּי גֵרִים אֲנִיחֶנּוּ לְפָנֶיךָ* ("For we are strangers before You, sojourners like all our fathers" [1 Chr. 29:15]).