

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

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In Memory of Eliokime bar Mi'hoel z"l

whose *yahrtzeit* is 19 Cheshvan

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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers  
for Refuah Shelemah for all who require healing, comfort and  
peace – those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and  
privately. May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and  
compassion.

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“And if a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall  
not do him wrong”

The Purchase of *Me'arat Ha-Machpela*<sup>1</sup>

By Rav Gad Eldad

Avraham's house is overcome by grief, and he is forced  
to search for a proper burial place for the wife of his youth.  
Avraham is aware of his inferior opening position, given that he is  
a stranger:

And Sarah died in Kiryat-Arba, which is Hebron in the  
land of Canaan; and Avraham came to mourn for Sarah,  
and to weep for her. And Avraham rose up from before  
his dead, and spoke to the sons of Chet, saying, “**I am a  
stranger and a sojourner with you:** give me a  
possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury  
my dead out of my sight.” (23:2-4)

In the end, after negotiations with the sons of Chet,  
Avraham succeeds in his mission:

**So the field of Efron**, which was in Machpela, which  
was before Mamre, **the field, and the cave which was  
therein**, and all the trees that were in the field, that were  
in all the border thereof round about, **were made sure** to  
Avraham for a possession in the presence of the children  
of Chet, before all that went in at the gate of his city. And  
after this, Avraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of  
the field of Machpela before Mamre, which is Hebron in  
the land of Canaan. **And the field, and the cave that is  
therein, were made sure** to Avraham for a possession  
of a burying-place by the children of Chet. (17-20)

The redundancy in the verses that inform us of the  
transfer of ownership of the field and the cave to Avraham is  
clearly evident, especially since the verses make use of the very  
same words. The fact that Scripture repeats this fact indicates  
that it views this as the main element in the story. The first  
mention of the purchase serves a technical purpose, as there was  
a practical need to purchase the cave prior to Sarah's burial. But

then the verse mentions it once again in order to emphasize the  
importance of this fact in and of itself.

This is the understanding of the Ibn Ezra, but the  
Ramban critiques this position:

I do not know the reason for the words of R. Avraham,  
who says [that this comes] to inform us about the  
advantage of *Eretz Yisrael* for the living and for the dead,  
**and also to fulfill for him the word of God that he  
would have an inheritance**, for what is the advantage  
of this land that he should not take her to some other  
land for burial, and God's word to Avraham was about  
the entire land and it was fulfilled only through his  
descendants. (Ramban, v. 19)

The Ramban cites another possibility in the name of  
*Chazal*:

And our Rabbis said (*Bava Batra* 16a) that this, too, was  
one of Avraham's tests, that he searched for a place to  
bury Sarah, but could not find one until he purchased it.

Upon initial examination of the verses, it would seem that  
just the opposite is true. Whereas the sons of Chet demonstrate  
great generosity toward Avraham, it is he who insists on buying  
the place.

In addition, the Ramban offers an explanation of his own  
(*ibid.*):

This portion was written in order to inform us of the  
lovingkindness that God performed for Avraham that he  
was a mighty prince in the land in which he had come to  
live, and all the people called him "My lord," but he did  
not respond in that manner as he was a great prince,  
and even in his lifetime [God] fulfilled for him, "And I will  
make your name great, and you shall be a blessing," and  
his wife died and she was buried in the territory of God.  
And furthermore, He wished to inform us where the  
patriarchs were buried, as we are obligated to respect  
the burial site of our holy forefathers.

The advantage of the proposals advanced by the  
Ramban and by *Chazal* lies in the fact that they relate to  
Scripture's detailed account of the negotiations between Avraham  
and the sons of Chet. According to the Ibn Ezra, there is no need  
for this lengthy account. But the Ramban argues that it is in the  
framework of this discussion that the respect that the sons of Chet  
have for Avraham becomes evident and God's blessing, "I will  
make your name great," is fulfilled, while *Chazal* see this stage as  
a test.

In order to test the proposals of the Ramban and of  
*Chazal*, we must carefully examine the development of the  
negotiations between Avraham and the sons of Chet.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all references are to *Bereishit*, chap. 23. The  
point on which this *shiur* focuses was dealt with by R. E. Samet in his  
*shiur* on the VBM site. Several *shiurim* on the VBM site deal with the  
general issue. R. Prof. Y. Grossman expanded on this topic in his book:  
*Avraham – Sippur shel Masa*, pp. 338-354.

<sup>2</sup> R. Samet (above, note 1) understands the main message of the story  
based on the words of Benno Jacob. According to him, with the purchase  
of a burial cave for Sarah, Avraham expresses his love and respect for his  
wife, and the obligation he felt and the effort he made to bring her to a  
respectable grave. In this way he demonstrates for his descendants the  
proper conduct for all generations. However, from the story itself it does  
not appear that Avraham had to exert himself in an exceptional manner to  
bury Sarah. The sons of Chet immediately showed empathy and

## "I AM A STRANGER AND A SOJOURNER WITH YOU"

Despite Avraham's hesitant opening statement in which he notes the limitation imposed upon him by the fact that he is but a stranger and a sojourner among the people of Chet, the latter counter with an exceedingly sympathetic response:

And Avraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Chet, saying, **"I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."** And the sons of Chet answered Avraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord: **you are a mighty prince among us**; in the choice of our sepulchers bury your dead; none of us shall withhold from you his sepulcher, but that you may bury your dead." (3-6)

Avraham directs his words to the sons of Chet. It is not exactly clear who they are, but it would appear that Avraham's request had communal significance, seeing that he was a stranger to the place, and therefore his request had to be clarified in a public manner. The answer that he receives is exceedingly warm, and it would appear that he planned his next steps accordingly. Since the sons of Chet proclaimed that "none of us shall withhold from you his sepulcher, but that you may bury your dead," Avraham turns to a particular person:

And Avraham rose up, and bowed down to the people of the land, even to the sons of Chet. And he spoke with them, saying, "If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me to Efron the son of Tzohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpela, which he has, which is in the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in the midst of you for a possession of a burying-place."

Avraham answers the sons of Chet and presents them with his plan to buy a grave from Efron. To this end, he asks for their help in locating Efron. Efron emerges from the crowd, and continues both the respectful attitude towards Avraham – referring to him as "My lord" – and the spirit of generosity in which Avraham had been received, refusing to accept payment for the grave:

Now Efron **was sitting in the midst of the sons of Chet**; and Efron the Hittite answered Avraham **in the hearing of the sons of Chet, even of all that went in at the gate of his city**, saying, "**No, my lord, hear me: the field give I to you, and the cave that is therein, I give it to you; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it to you; bury your dead.**" (10-11)

Avraham insists on paying, and in the end, the deal is closed:

And he spoke to Efron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "But if you will, I pray you, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there." And Efron answered Avraham, saying to him, "My lord, hearken to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and

you? Bury therefore your dead." And Avraham hearkened to Efron; and Avraham weighed to Efron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Chet, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant. (13-16)

## "FOR THE FULL PRICE LET HIM GIVE IT TO ME"

It is possible that Avraham refused Efron's generous offer because he was uncomfortable with the idea that his wife would lie in eternal rest in a grave that was not hers. But we would do well to address this question in light of a broad perspective on the story. First, let us note that Efron proposed to Avraham much more than what he had asked for. Avraham's request related exclusively to the cave:

That he may give me **the cave of Machpela**, which he has, **which is in the end of his field**.

In contrast, Efron responds with extreme generosity, and wishes to give him even the field together with the cave:

No, my lord, hear me: **the field give I to you, and the cave that is therein**, I give it to you.

Avraham is aware of the change, but accepts the dimensions of the transaction proposed by Efron. He bows down before him in gratitude, but once again insists on paying:

And Avraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he spoke to Efron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "But if you will, I pray you, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there." (12-13)

Efron mentions a price, taking pains to note that from his perspective this is not an inflated price. Avraham immediately pays him "four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant":

And Efron answered Avraham, saying to him, "My lord, hearken to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, **what is that between me and you?** Bury therefore your dead." And Avraham hearkened to Efron; and Avraham weighed to Efron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Chet, four hundred shekels of silver, **current money with the merchant**. (14-16)

## "YOU ARE A MIGHTY PRINCE AMONG US"

The Torah does not provide us with any information about the relationship between Avraham and the sons of Chet prior to Sarah's passing. Despite the absence of information concerning previous connections between them, Avraham is immediately referred to by the sons of Chet as "a mighty prince." What can possibly stand behind such a designation?

In the previous chapters, we read about Avraham's great wealth:

And Avram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the South. And Avram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. (13:1-2)

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understanding for his situation and agreed to cooperate with him from the very outset. It was Avraham who insisted on purchasing a burial plot. One would therefore expect that the story would explain to us why Avraham insisted on buying a grave, and did not content himself with burying his wife in accordance with the generous offer of the sons of Chet or of Efron.

It stands to reason that Avraham was very wealthy, and that his fame spread widely owing to his riches.<sup>3</sup> But despite his wealth, he never acquired for himself a fixed plot of land, and he therefore finds himself in an inferior opening position, as he himself notes. However, from the perspective of the sons of Chet, this is a golden opportunity for business. The richest man in the region makes his way into their shop and asks for their wares. It turns out that Avraham is indeed in a difficult situation and desperately needs to close a deal. Opposite him stand the sons of Chet, who will not easily allow such an opportunity to slip from their hands.

From this perspective, the honor heaped upon Avraham does not necessarily flow from humanitarian motives. Throughout the course of the negotiations, the sons of Chet never refuse Avraham's requests. Avraham knows from the start where he is going, since he needs a plot of land to bury Sarah, though he has to cross the hurdle of being a stranger, which could even cost him a refusal. It turns out, however, that it is also clear to the sons of Chet where they are headed – to establish a strong bond with one of the country's leaders, no matter what.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that at first the sons of Chet think of granting Avraham the right to bury Sarah in their graves, but do not think that Avraham wants to buy a burial plot for this purpose:

And the children of Chet answered Avraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord: you are a mighty prince among us; **in the choice of our sepulchers bury your dead; none of us shall withhold from you his sepulcher**, but that you may bury your dead."

Once Avraham makes it clear that he is interested in purchasing a certain burial plot,<sup>5</sup> he does not encounter any refusal. On the contrary, Efron continues with the generous approach that his brothers, the sons of Chet, had prepared for him, and he is prepared to give it to Avraham free of charge. However, when he includes the field in his proposal, he reveals his true intentions.<sup>6</sup>

### "WHAT IS THAT BETWEEN ME AND YOU"

<sup>3</sup> In the past, Avraham established his residence near Hebron (13:18), and so it is reasonable to assume that the sons of Chet heard about him and saw his wealth from close up, even if they did not have a connection with him. Later, he moved to Gerar, and there his wealth grew even more, after the incident involving Sarah (20:14): "And Avimelekh took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them to Avraham, and restored him Sarah his wife."

<sup>4</sup> We have already seen that Avimelekh made his way to make an alliance with Avraham because of his great wealth, or in Avimelekh's words, because he realized that God was with him (21:22-24): "And it came to pass at that time, that Avimelekh and Fikhol the captain of his host spoke to Avraham, saying, 'God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son; but according to the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me, and to the land wherein you have sojourned.' And Avraham said, I will swear." And so it happened again with Yitzchak (26:26-31). Now, when Avraham himself needs something from the sons of Chet, they will certainly not miss the opportunity to make a permanent alliance with him.

<sup>5</sup> Y. Grossman (above, note 1), p. 345, brings differing opinions as to whether from the outset Avraham had in mind "a possession of a burying-place," or whether at first he was merely inquiring about a place to bury Sarah, and only after he received a positive answer, did he raise his request to a higher level.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Grossman (above, note 1), p. 349, discusses the question of whether the field was added only in order to take advantage of the moment and raise the price, or whether this followed logically, to give Avraham free passage to the tomb.

Avraham needs a burial plot; he focuses on the obstacle of his foreignness, and he tries to overcome that hurdle. The sons of Chet wish to exploit this for their own needs, to the point that they are prepared to grant him the plot that he wants, immediately and without any monetary compensation. Nobody ever doubted Avraham's ability to pay any sum that would be demanded, and precisely for that reason the sons of Chet refrain from demanding payment – in order to exploit the opportunity to enter into a long range relationship with Avraham that would bind him to them with an eternal covenant. However, as soon as Avraham insists on paying, Efron, with great cunning, inserts the field into the picture. Since Avraham asked only for the grave, a man as rich as he was would find it difficult to accept the field, which was not critical for his purposes, as a present. In the end, Efron exposes his conduct before Avraham:

My lord, hearken to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, **what is that between me and you? Bury therefore your dead.**

Compared to other cases,<sup>7</sup> it would seem that this sum is very high. Efron explains the charge – that he is aware of Avraham's economic abilities. To a man like Avraham, such an amount is of no importance, and therefore it is clear that he will not negotiate the matter, and not only because Sarah is lying dead before him.

### "IN THE HEARING OF THE CHILDREN OF CHET, EVEN OF ALL THAT WENT IN AT THE GATE OF HIS CITY"

The discussion between Avraham and his interlocutors can easily be divided into two parts. In the first part, Avraham addresses the sons of Chet, as a collective,<sup>8</sup> and this is also the body that responds to his words:

And Avraham rose up from before his dead, **and spoke to the sons of Chet**, saying, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." **And the sons of Chet answered** Avraham, saying to him, "Hear us, my lord: you are a mighty prince among us; in the choice of our sepulchers bury your dead; none of us shall withhold from you his sepulcher, but that you may bury your dead." And Avraham rose up, **and bowed down to the people of the land, even to the sons of Chet**. And he spoke **with them, saying**, "If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me to Efron the son of Tzohar." (3-8)

As soon as Avraham mentions the name Efron, the discussion is narrowed to include only him and Efron. Nevertheless, Scripture emphasizes the public nature of the negotiations, noting that despite the private nature of the content of the discussion, it is conducted in the presence of all the people, at all stages:

### Now Efron was sitting in the midst of the sons of

<sup>7</sup> Yosef was sold for twenty shekels (37:28); a virgin's dowry is 50 shekels (*Devraim* 22:29); a field to be sown with a *chomer* of barley is also assessed at 50 shekels (*Vayikra* 27:16).

<sup>8</sup> In the course of the story we encounter three bodies of people: the sons of Chet, the people of the land, and those who go in at the gate of the city. It is not entirely clear that these are separate bodies, and there may be overlap between them. But "the sons of Chet" are certainly a ruling body, for Avraham directs his request at them, and the verse distinguishes between them and "those that go in at the gate of the city." See the sources cited in note 1.

**Chet;** and Efron the Hittite answered Avraham **in the hearing of the children of Chet, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying,** "No, my lord, hear me: the field give I to you, and the cave that is therein, I give it to you; **in the presence of the sons of my people give I it to you;** bury your dead." And Avraham bowed down **before the people of the land.** And he spoke to Efron **in the hearing of the people of the land, saying,** "But if you will, I pray you, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there." And Efron answered Avraham, saying to him, "My lord, hearken to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? Bury therefore your dead." And Avraham hearkened to Efron; and Avraham weighed to Efron the silver, **which he had named in the hearing of the children of Chet,** four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.

Efron arises and identifies himself as one of the "sons of Chet," and he seems to be careful that his words be heard in their ears. The repeated mention of this point suggests that Efron wants his words to be sounded not only in their presence, but with their agreement. Thus, the text implies that Efron, by virtue of his being one of "the sons of Chet," serves as their representative in the continuation of the negotiations; this is not a new page in the process. He is even careful to address Avraham with the title, "my lord," which the sons of Chet had coined at the beginning of the discussion.<sup>9</sup>

This assumption is verified by the fact that Scripture emphasizes that Avraham continues to express his gratitude with bowing before the people of the land, even though the discussion was now between him and Efron, and they are no longer a party to the negotiations:<sup>10</sup>

Now Efron was sitting in the midst of the sons of Chet; **and Efron the Hittite answered Avraham** in the hearing of the children of Chet, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying, "No, my lord, hear me: the field give I to you, and the cave that is therein, I give it to you; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it to you; bury your dead." **And Avraham bowed down before the people of the land.** And he spoke to Efron **in the hearing of the people of the land, saying.** (10:13)

### "HEAR US, MY LORD: YOU ARE A MIGHTY PRINCE AMONG US"

One might have thought that Efron alone was trying to make the most of the opportunity that came his way. However, the fact that throughout the story Scripture emphasizes the presence of the sons of Chet suggests that this was done with their consent and under their direction. According to this, the behavior of the sons of Chet is consistent. At first they wanted to grant Avraham a free plot, and thus they would become his allies, like Avimelekh. Once it becomes clear that he wishes to pay, the

way is found to take advantage of the opportunity in that manner as well. Now it turns out that beyond the mannerisms of honor lies cunning and self-interest. In fact, it turns out that the demonstrations of honor are meant to conceal the cunning hiding behind them.

This analysis poses a difficulty for the Ramban's understanding that the details of the negotiations are intended to demonstrate Avraham's greatness and the honor shown him by the sons of Chet. We are not dealing with a genuine appreciation of his virtue and standing. Rather these designations are a cunning way to exploit Avraham's distress for the purpose of deriving utilitarian benefit from the circumstances that came their way.

### "FOUR HUNDRED SHEKELS OF SILVER, CURRENT MONEY WITH THE MERCHANT"

From the outset, Avraham was aware of his inferior starting position and aware of the difficulty that it posed for him. Being aware of his inferior standing, he may have anticipated two possible scenarios. It was possible that the sons of Chet would refuse outright to negotiate with him, but it was certainly possible that they would receive him warmly in order to profit from him in due course. He too did not anticipate a burst of humanitarian feelings on their part, if only for the simple reason that until now there had been no connection between them. As soon as he realized where they were headed, he insisted on buying the field at the full price.<sup>11</sup> He does not bargain, and on his own initiative he pays with shekels that are current with the merchant, in order to avoid any obligation towards them.

It now becomes clear why it was necessary to repeat the verse that records Avraham's purchase of the field. It is precisely because the purchase itself was made for specific motives connected to the time that Scripture wishes to add an independent and timeless layer to that act. It therefore repeats the purchase detached from its actual context.<sup>12</sup>

### "And if a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong"

We would like to end on a note similar to that with which we opened the discussion, with the reason for the Torah's lengthy account of the details of the negotiations regarding the purchase of the field. We are accustomed to relating to the book of *Bereishit* as the "Book of the Righteous," from which we must learn the ways of life of our forefathers and apply them in our own lives. This relates to their entire lives, including the many difficulties that they experienced, which put them to the test. These tests can be divided into two categories. Some of them were between the patriarchs and their Maker, e.g., the command to leave Ur Kasdim, or the command to sacrifice Yitzchak. But many of the difficulties and tests were the product of human action, which created a difficulty for one of the patriarchs and forced him to contend with it. It would seem that just as we are commanded to learn from the boldness and strength of our forefathers' faith in standing resolutely on their path, we are no less supposed to

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that in any case Avraham's request should have been directed at a single person, for even according to the proposal put forward by the sons of Chet, "in the choice of our sepulchers bury your dead," this would in the end be executed on the private land of a particular individual. Therefore, the transition to Efron does not necessarily end the discussion with the sons of Chet. On the contrary, Efron serves as their representative in fulfilling Avraham's request.

<sup>10</sup> Their involvement in the transaction is noted also at the end of the story (v. 20): "And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure to Avraham for a possession of a burying-place by the sons of Chet."

<sup>11</sup> See above, note 5, where we brought differing opinions as to whether from the outset Avraham made it clear that he wished to buy the field. It is possible that Avraham deliberately clouded his intention in order to see the reaction of the sons of Chet. After he saw that they were trying to profit from his situation, he chose the appropriate plan of action that he had prepared for himself.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the second time that the transaction is mentioned, the other party is "the sons of Chet" and not Efron. This is because of the everlasting significance of the matter, that Avraham purchased the plot of land from the local people, as was noted by Grossman (above, note 1).

distance ourselves from the actions of those who stood opposite them and made their lives difficult. It might be that the reason for the length of our story belongs to this category of lessons that the Torah wishes to engrave in our hearts.

From an analysis of the negotiations there arises a gloomy picture of man whose world has caved in on itself, and who seeks help starting from an inferior starting position owing to his being an outsider. On the face of it, he is surrounded by compassion and many hands reaching out to him, but a careful examination shows that the real intention hidden between the lines is to derive maximum profit by exploiting the fact that he stands alone against all of the local population. In the course of time, the Torah will demonstrate its distaste for such conduct by explicitly instructing Avraham's descendants not to adopt such perverse behavior. In order to adopt a humane and compassionate approach to the stranger who comes to our door, it will engrave on the hearts of Avraham's descendants the call: "And if a stranger sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong."<sup>13</sup>

Translated by David Strauss

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<sup>13</sup> See R. Katz, "*Chata'ei Avot Be-Toratam shel Banim*," *Megadim* 32, pp. 47-52), who notes several examples of how the Torah carries out a dialogue between stories of the Torah, on the one hand, and the *mitzvot* that will follow at some later point, on the other hand.