

A Rood Awakening!

Presents

Awakening in the Word

By Glenn McWilliams of TK TORAH KEEPERS
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THE OVERVIEW

This week's portion begins with the announcement of Sarah's passing. The rest of the portion is the extremely detailed narrative of Abraham's bargaining with the sons of Heth for permission to bury his deceased wife in their land and his negotiating with Ephron the Hittite for a parcel of land containing a cave. While the narrative form of the portion seems very straightforward, there is much to learn from this story. There are also a number of questions that are raised by this passage. Biblical archeologists and anthropologists have gleaned a great deal of useful information about life in the patriarchal period from this chapter. We too can learn much from a careful examination of this detailed story of the close of Sarah's life.

THE OUTLINE

- Genesis 23:1 The life of Sarah counted
- Genesis 23:2 The death of Sarah and Abraham's mourning
- Genesis 23:3-4 Abraham's request of the sons of Heth
- Genesis 23:5-6 The sons of Heth make Abraham an offer
- Genesis 23:7-9 Abraham's counteroffer
- Genesis 23:10-15 Abraham negotiates with Ephron for the cave of Machpelah
- Genesis 23:16-18 Abraham takes ownership of Machpelah
- Genesis 23:19-20 Abraham buries Sarah

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Where was Abraham when Sarah died?
2. What name of the Creator is used in this portion?
3. Why is this story included in the Torah?
4. What is "face"?
5. Why does Abraham ask permission to bury Sarah?
6. Who are the sons of Heth?
7. What is Abraham truly asking for?
8. Is Abraham a "mighty prince"?
9. What solution do the sons of Heth suggest?
10. Are they offering hospitality or politely saying "no"?
11. Why does Abraham refuse their solution?
12. Why does Abraham conduct his business in public?
13. Why doesn't Abraham haggle over the price?
14. What is significant about the purchase of this land?

THE TEXT

Genesis 23:1-20 *And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah. ²And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her. ³And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. ⁵And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him, ⁶Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead. ⁷And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. ⁸And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar, ⁹that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you. ¹⁰And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying, ¹¹Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead. ¹²And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land. ¹³And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, But if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there. ¹⁴And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him, ¹⁵My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead. ¹⁶And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant. ¹⁷And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, 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 borders round about, were made sure ¹⁸unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan. ²⁰And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.*

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Our Torah portion this week begins with the announcements of Sarah's life and her death. The significance of Sarah's life and death is evidenced by the fact that Sarah is the only woman in the Torah whose age is recorded at the time of her death. There are a number of other lessons to be gleaned from these opening verses. First, we should note that the previous chapter about the offering of Isaac ended with the peculiar intrusion of the news of YHWH blessing Abraham's brother Nahor with family. The last we had heard of Nahor was in Genesis chapter 11.

Genesis 11:26-29 *And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran. ²⁷Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. ²⁸And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. ²⁹And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah.*

Eleven chapters later we are suddenly told:

Genesis 22:20-24 *And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor; ²¹Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, ²²and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. ²³And Bethuel begat **Rebekah**: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother. ²⁴And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.*

The question we must ask is why the Torah so abruptly revisits a family story that was discontinued so long ago – why the Torah interrupts the Abrahamic narrative to revisit the story of a family seen only as a footnote in Abraham's previous life. The answer to these questions may be found in a subtle statement in the creation narrative and confirmed in the book of Ecclesiastes. In the story of creation we witness that everything begins in darkness. We are also told that the new day begins not with the sunrise but with the sunset. The biblical day is counted from sunset to sunset.

Genesis 1:5 *And Elohim called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.*

Genesis 1:8 *And Elohim called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.*

Genesis 1:13 *And the evening and the morning were the third day.*

Genesis 1:19 *And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.*

Genesis 1:23 *And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.*

Genesis 1:31 *And Elohim saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.*

So we witness that the new day begins with the setting of the sun. The book of Ecclesiastes declares:

Ecclesiastes 1:5 *The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose.*

The sages see in this verse an axiom concerning the light of the righteous. In other words, before the light of a righteous person is extinguished, another righteous person is appointed or brought into the world to replace their light so that the world is never left in complete darkness.¹ Thus, we witness that before the announcement of Sarah's death we are presented with the announcement of Rebekah's birth. We also see that at the death or sunset of Sarah's life, a new day begins. Rebekah, the future wife of Isaac, will assume the role of matriarch of the faith.

Another question that we might ask is why the Torah lists Sarah's age in such a peculiar way.

Genesis 23:1 *And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah.*

The literal Hebrew is even more revealing.

Genesis 23:1 *And was the life of Sarah a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of the life of Sarah.*

This particular division of the years of Sarah's life would seem to imply that there is something significant about these times. I would suggest that the Torah is simply communicating to us the fact that Sarah lived her full life. In other words, these three divisions may be suggesting the three stages of life – childhood, adulthood, and full maturity (I hope this is diplomatic enough). If so, the Torah is telling us that as a righteous woman Sarah lived her childhood to its fullest, her adulthood to its fullest, and now her final years have been fulfilled. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch eloquently addresses this very concept.

As is well known, the Sages present the life of Sarah in terms of three distinct age groups. If we interpret the text of the narrative in its straightforward meaning, what we are told here is not that Sarah lived 127 years, but that she lived one hundred years, twenty years, and seven years. These three figures demonstrate to us the entire course of a human life: childhood, young adulthood, and finally, the completed phase of old age. The life of a man who exemplified spiritual and moral perfection could not be summed up in better terms than by saying that he was old in his old age, mature in his prime, and a child in his childhood. Indeed, the Sages note: One who has truly lived takes the crowning quality of each stage of his life into the next stage. Hence also the expression "he walked through his days." He does not walk above or below them but passes straight through them. He retains all the spiritual and moral attainments of his past and takes them with him into the future; he does not permit his days to rob him of anything that has ever become truly his.²

Due to the fact that the preceding chapter reports the near death of Isaac on Mount Moriah, many of the rabbinic writings teach that the cause of Sarah's death was a false report that Abraham actually sacrificed Isaac.

The Sages teach that the narratives of Sarah's death and the Akeidah follow each other to indicate that she died as a result of the event. She was told by Satan that Abraham

¹ The Schottenstein Edition Interlinear Chumash Volume 1: Bereishis / Genesis, ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, Pg. 116

² The Pentateuch, Samson Raphael Hirsch, Judaica Press, Pg. 110

had actually slaughtered Isaac, and she cried out in grief and died (Targum Yonasan). This explains why Abraham and Isaac were not present at her death.³

There is a line of teaching that explains the absence of any reference to Isaac after his binding in the previous chapter by stating that Abraham actually did sacrifice Isaac and that he was not resurrected until later. Based on the use of various divine names, some liberal scholars feel that there were two separate traditions being blended into one. The Yahwist or J (Jehovah) tradition had YHWH stop the sacrifice of Isaac and provide a lamb, while the Elohist or E (Elohim) tradition had Abraham actually slaughter Isaac. The conclusion of the story of Abraham offering Isaac clearly would have followed the E tradition. Thus, we see in the text that only Abraham is mentioned as returning from Mount Moriah, and only Abraham is mentioned as mourning for Sarah.

Genesis 22:19 *So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.*

Genesis 23:3 *And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying...*

Isaac's name is not mentioned again until Genesis 24:9, when Abraham is making arrangements for Isaac's marriage. I address this two-tradition assertion in the lesson of the previous chapter.⁴

While the absence of Isaac's name is notable, there is no evidence that Abraham actually sacrificed him or that he rose from the dead. An event such as this would surely have been recorded in the Torah. There is nothing in the text that should cause us to draw a connection between the offering of Isaac and the death of Sarah. If these two stories were indeed juxtaposed hard against one another, there might be some merit to this concept. But as we have already stated, the two narratives are abruptly separated by the intrusion of the announcement of the birth of Rebekah. Therefore, we should not infer that the news of Isaac's near death or actual death was the cause of Sarah's passing. Again, as we have already stated, the Torah clearly indicates that Sarah did not die prematurely but lived out the fullness of her days.

This does beg the question, however, as to why Abraham was not with Sarah when she died. There are at least two possible answers to this question. But first let us set the stage with a little geography lesson. To understand our portion it is important to understand the lay of the land. Therefore, we will try to locate some of the key events of the last few stories.⁵

Abraham and Sarah were living in Gerar, 55 miles southwest of Mount Moriah, when Sarah was abducted by Abimelech.⁶ Isaac was born in the area of Gerar. Hagar and Ishmael were also set free in the land of Gerar and journeyed towards Beersheba, 25 miles southeast of Gerar. Later Abraham went to Beersheba and made a covenant with Abimelech. It was this covenant that gave the well the name Beersheba—"Well of Sevens" or "Well of the Oath."⁷ It was also at Beersheba that Abraham was instructed to take Isaac and go to Mount Moriah, 50 miles northeast of Beersheba.⁸ Mamre and Hebron are 30 miles northeast of Beersheba between Beersheba and Moriah. Hebron is 20 miles south of Moriah. Thus, we see that Abraham journeyed through Hebron on his way to Moriah. The Torah tells us that Abraham returned to Beersheba; therefore, he passed through Hebron on his way back.

³ The Schottenstein Edition Interlinear Chumash Volume 1: Bereishis / Genesis, ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, Pg. 116

⁴ See my commentary Y1 P19 6008 The Binding of Isaac

⁵ See map on page 16 of this study

⁶ Genesis 20:1

⁷ Genesis 21:31-32

⁸ Genesis 22:2

We may recall that Abraham first dwelt in the land in Mamre, which is the area of Hebron.⁹ I would suggest that Sarah went to Hebron when Abraham and Isaac were heading to Moriah. Remembering that a part of Abraham's travels may have been for seasonal grazing for his vast herds of cattle, sheep, and goats, they may have had a regular dwelling area in Mamre. The bigger question is, if Sarah was in Hebron, why did Abraham return to Beersheba?

At first glance it may appear as though Abraham was not a very loving husband, but we should be slow to judge. First, we should remember that the road to Beersheba from Mount Moriah goes through Hebron and Mamre. Thus, if Sarah was in Hebron, it is possible that Abraham stopped there and maybe even left Isaac there with his mother while he and his servants returned to Beersheba. The question then becomes, what would draw Abraham back to Beersheba, another 30 miles south of Hebron? The answer, I believe, is alluded to in the earlier story of Abraham making a covenant with Abimelech. After Abraham secured the rights to the well at Beersheba, we are told that Abraham planted a grove.

Genesis 21:33 *And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of YHWH, the everlasting Elohim.*

Based upon various ancient laws of land use, I am going to suggest that Abraham returned to Beersheba to tend to the grove he planted in the land of King Abimelech of Gerar. As we shall see, Abraham was a sojourner and stranger in the land of Canaan. Land ownership was a critical issue. Generally, strangers and sojourners could not own land; therefore, it is possible that Abraham's covenant with Abimelech was one of land use. If this was indeed the case, then a part of the covenant may have been that Abraham would pay for the use of the land by giving a portion of the harvest or its revenue to Abimelech. Let us take a brief look at some of the ancient laws concerning land use.

42 If a man rents a field in tenancy but does not plant any grain, they shall charge and convict him of not performing the required work in the field, and he shall give to the owner of the field grain in accordance with his neighbor's yield.

43 If he does not cultivate the field at all but leaves it fallow, he shall give to the owner of the field grain in accordance with his neighbor's yield, and he shall plow and harrow the field which he left fallow and return it to the owner of the field.

44 If a man rents a previously uncultivated field for a three-year term with the intention of opening it for cultivation but he is negligent and does not open the field, in the fourth year he shall plow, hoe, and harrow the field and return it to the owner of the field; and in addition he shall measure and deliver 3,000 silas of grain per 18 ikus (of field).

60 If a man gives a field to a gardener to plant as a date orchard and the gardener plants the orchard, he shall cultivate the orchard for four years; in the fifth year, the owner and the gardener shall divide the yield in equal shares; the owner of the orchard shall select and take his share first.

62 If he does not plant as a date orchard the field which was given to him—if it is arable land, the gardener shall measure and deliver to the owner of the field the estimated yield of the field for the years it is left fallow in accordance with his neighbor's yield; furthermore he shall perform the required work on the field and return it to the owner of the field.¹⁰

B 10 If a man digs a well and builds a permanent structure in a field not his own, he shall forfeit his claim to his well and his permanent structure; they shall strike him 30 blows

⁹ Genesis 13:18

¹⁰ Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, Martha T. Roth, Society of Biblical Literature, Writings from the Ancient World, Atlanta: Scholars Press, Pp. 89-93

*with rods; he shall perform the king's service for 20 days....the permanent structure [...] he shall swear [...].and further, "I have indeed [dug] the well, I have [indeed built] a permanent structure." The owner of the field [...]...the well [...]*¹¹

Here we witness the seriousness with which the ancient cultures dealt with land ownership and usage. I would suggest that Abraham returned to Beersheba to tend the grove he had planted lest the land become forfeit and the crop insufficient to pay the rent on the land. It may also have simply been a case of checking on the grove and its harvest. None of this is substantiated in the Scriptures and, therefore, must be left as mere speculation.

Since we do not know Isaac's age at the time of his offering on Mount Moriah, we have no clear understanding of how much time may have passed between this event and the death of Sarah. It is quite possible that Abraham was also in Mamre at the time of Sarah's death and was merely in the fields watching over his flock when Sarah died. Therefore, we should not assume that Abraham was any great distance from Sarah at the time of her death. While we know that Abraham did indeed journey to Beersheba following the offering of Isaac, we are not told how long Abraham stayed there or where he went from there. Thus, it is very possible that Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac all travelled from Beersheba to Mamre at some point in time without the Torah reporting it.

The absence of Isaac's name in our portion should not surprise us, since this part of the patriarchal narrative is not about Isaac but about Abraham. The focus of Genesis chapters 22-24 is on Abraham.

What should surprise us is the fact that the Holy One is never mentioned in our portion. The voice of YHWH is not heard in this chapter, nor is His name or any of His titles mentioned. One possible reason for this marked absence of the Creator's name, title, or voice may be that this chapter is all about death, and death has no part in the Creator. Death is the work of man, not Elohim. Death entered the world and enslaved man at the fall of Adam and Chava, rendering them unfit to be the true image of Elohim. Thus, we see that death moves us from the realm or state of *tahor* (clean) to a state of *tamei* (unclean).¹²

Leviticus 21:1 *And YHWH said unto Moses, Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people.*

Leviticus 21:11 *Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father, or for his mother.*

Numbers 19:11 *He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days.*

Numbers 19:13 *Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of YHWH; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him.*

Since the whole of this portion deals with death, it seems appropriate that the name of the Creator would not be mentioned. It is the reality of this separation of man from his Creator and source of life due to his own bondage to sin and death that causes us to continue following the story of Abraham and his "seed" in the hope of witnessing the fulfillment of the original messianic promise.

Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

¹¹ Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor, Martha T. Roth, Society of Biblical Literature, Writings from the Ancient World, Atlanta: Scholars Press, Pg.179

¹² The terms "clean" and "unclean" are poor translations of the Hebrew words *tahor* and *tamei*, which mean "fit" or "unfit," "acceptable" or "unacceptable" to be the image of Elohim.

We should remember that although the Creator is not overtly mentioned, it does not imply His total absence. Just as there is no overt mention of the Creator's name in the Book of Esther, it is quite evident that the Sovereign One was covertly orchestrating a great deliverance for Esther and her people. The Holy One is eternal. He is not limited by the boundaries of corporeality. YHWH is everywhere; there is nowhere that He is not. All creation takes place in Him. That we cannot see Him or hear Him in every situation is due to our own finite and fallen nature, not some defect in the character or nature of the Creator.

With this said, however, we may still question why there is a chapter in the Torah that does not include some overt reference to the Creator. It is possible that this story was included simply to teach us of the power sin has to separate us from the Source of Life? It is possible that this story was included to show us that even the most righteous among us are still in bondage to sin and death and in need of the Messiah? Anthropologists, archeologists, and biblical scholars may well contend that this story was included in the Torah to give us an accurate picture of what life in patriarchal times was like. Finally, it may be that this story is in the Torah because historically, it is what happened, and it is a part of the continuing testing of Abraham.

Let us turn our attention now to the heart of this portion, which revolves around the purchasing of a burial plot in the land of Canaan.

In many ways, without diminishing the significance of either the life or death of Sarah, the opening verses simply provide the context and impetus for what is truly the heart of the portion, the procurement of a burial site for the family of Abraham. In many ways this could have been a very simple action of digging a hole in the ground and placing Sarah's body in it. But as we shall see, there was much more at stake than just a place to lay Sarah's remains to rest.

Before we begin looking at the text of this portion, there are a couple of historical and cultural matters that we should have a firm grasp of. The first of these is the matter of "face." In oriental society, how one appears to others is of great importance. The oriental culture has, in many ways, mastered the art of making oneself look good, even better than others, while at the same time apparently elevating those around one, including one's adversaries. Most business dealings in the oriental culture are won or lost not on the basis of financial gains or losses, but on how much "face" one has gained or lost. We shall see in this portion a very clear example of "saving face."

A second vital issue that we must understand concerns that of land ownership in the Ancient Near East. This should not surprise us, given the current battle over land in the Middle East. As we have witnessed in several places in the Torah, possession of land is a critical issue, even for the children of Israel. The children were promised a "possession" of land as an inheritance. Later, the tribes of Israel would each receive a portion of this inheritance. The land was sacred and never to be sold permanently. If one was too poor to maintain his land, it was to be redeemed by a fellow Israelite. We should note here that the difference between the children of Israel and the stranger in their midst was the difference of land ownership. The children of Israel were given an inheritance in the land, but the resident alien lived without such an inheritance. This is why the stranger is included with the widow, the orphan, and the Levite as those who eat from the Sovereign's table and portion. Let us look briefly at just a few of the Torah's teachings on land ownership.

***Leviticus 25:10-13** And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubile unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family. ¹¹A jubile shall that fiftieth year be unto you: ye shall not sow, neither reap that which groweth of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of thy vine undressed. ¹²For it is the jubile; it shall be holy unto you: ye shall eat the increase thereof out of the field. ¹³In the year of this jubile ye shall return every man unto his possession.*

Leviticus 25:23-24 *The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with Me. ²⁴And in all the land of your possession ye shall grant a redemption for the land.*

Leviticus 27:24 *In the year of the jubile the field shall return unto him of whom it was bought, even to him to whom the possession of the land did belong.*

Numbers 36:6-9 *This is the thing which YHWH doth command concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, saying, Let them marry to whom they think best; only to the family of the tribe of their father shall they marry. ⁷So shall not the inheritance of the children of Israel remove from tribe to tribe: for every one of the children of Israel shall keep himself to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. ⁸And every daughter, that possesseth an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall be wife unto one of the family of the tribe of her father, that the children of Israel may enjoy every man the inheritance of his fathers. ⁹Neither shall the inheritance remove from one tribe to another tribe; but every one of the tribes of the children of Israel shall keep himself to his own inheritance.*

Deuteronomy 19:14 *Thou shalt not remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance, which thou shalt inherit in the land that YHWH thy Elohim giveth thee to possess it.*

Deuteronomy 27:17 *Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen.*

Many of these same ideas and laws were already in effect in the land of Canaan at the time of the patriarchs. Concerning Abraham's desire to buy a family burial ground, Nahum M. Sarna writes:

First, Abraham labors under the two disabilities that derive from his status as an alien. He cannot avail himself of local burial facilities without municipal permission, and he cannot acquire land. Second, even if these restrictions were to be overcome, he would still face the problem of procuring an inheritable estate to be used by future generations, for an alien could not normally own land in perpetuity (c.f. Lev. 25:23). Third, apart from legal problems, there is still to be encountered the reluctance of landowners to part with their property, a pervasive and deep-seated attitude throughout ancient Near East. Naboth's rejection of Ahab's offer to buy his vineyard exemplifies this tendency. "The LORD forbid that I should give up to you what I have inherited from my fathers. (1 Kings 21:3)." At work here is a profound and complex emotional attachment to the estate, an emotion that is shaped by a powerful feeling of continuity with one's forebearers and a compelling sense of responsibility toward one's family, clan, and posterity. The land is looked upon as an ancestral trust. All this is reinforced by the strong influence of communal solidarity and the consciousness that disposal of real estate to an alien may upset the local demographic balance, impair social cohesion, and weaken the community in its relationship with neighboring cities and tribes. Given these circumstances, it is small wonder that the entire community was involved in transacting a land sale.¹³

We see the evidence of this reality in the division of the heart of this portion into two distinct negotiations on the part of Abraham. The first of Abraham's negotiations is seeking permission from the whole of the city and its elders to acquire a parcel of land in which to bury his dead. In other words, this is not just a deal to be made with the owner of the land; it must be made with all of his neighbors as well. Abraham must first secure permission from the people of the area to purchase land among them before he is able to actually negotiate with the owner.

¹³ The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, Nahum M. Sarna, Jewish Publication Society, Pp. 156-157

We may here remember that Lot lived in the city of Gomorrah but was clearly understood to be an alien or resident stranger in the midst of the people of the city. The men of Sodom point to the fact that they gave Lot permission only to live among them.

Genesis 19:9 *And they said, Stand back. And they said again, **This one fellow came in to sojourn**, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door.*

Abraham is not asking merely to live among them; he is asking to own land among them. Therefore, he goes to the public square, the city gate,¹⁴ and asks permission to buy land from among them.

Genesis 23:3-4 *And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.*

Let us here address that the sons of Heth are Canaanites.

Genesis 10:15 *And Canaan begat Sidon his firstborn, and Heth.*

The Canaanites were the main occupiers of the land when Abraham dwelt in it. The Canaanites are an idolatrous and perverse people from a cursed line, yet Abraham bows himself before them to ask their permission to bury his dead in their midst. This humiliating circumstance has caused many to question the true intent of this chapter. There are two major and contrasting views among scholars as to how we are to understand this portion. On the one hand, there are those who see this whole transaction as the fulfillment and affirmation of YHWH'S promises to Abraham. Ibn Ezra is one of many sages who teach that this story was included in the Torah "to confirm the word of the LORD to Abraham that this would be his inheritance."¹⁵

Nehama Leibowitz further points out:

In this brief explanation he (Ibn Ezra) expresses the idea that the chapter indicates the beginning of the fulfillment of the Divine promise to Abraham which keeps recurring, commencing from the opening of Lekh-Lekha, "to thy seed will I give this land," through the detailed delineation of the ideal borders of the country at the Covenant between the Pieces (15: 17-18), the promises of greatness and kingship at the Covenant of Circumcision, and ending with the words "and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" at the story of the sacrifice of Isaac.¹⁶

The Ramban likewise dwells on the fact that by the end of this portion, Abraham finally has title to a piece of the promised land.

This chapter was written in order to dwell on the lovingkindness of God to Abraham, who became a prince in the land to which he had come as a stranger. Though he had never told anyone that he was a prince or great man, they nevertheless addressed him by the title "my lord." Even in his own lifetime the Almighty fulfilled for him the promise of "and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing." His wife died and was buried in the inheritance of the LORD. The Torah also wishes to tell us the burial place of our sainted forefathers.¹⁷

¹⁴ Genesis 23:10, 18

¹⁵ New Studies in Bereshit, Genesis, Nehama Leibowitz, LAMBDA Publishers Inc., Pg. 208

¹⁶ Ibid., Pg. 209

¹⁷ Ibid.

But is this truly what the Torah is reporting to us? Let us look closely at the text to see if we should indeed see this as the fulfillment and affirmation of YHWH'S promises to Abraham. First, let us look again at Abraham's request of the sons of Heth and then at the dialogue that follows.

Genesis 23:3-4 *And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, ⁴I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.*

Again, let us recognize that Abraham is in the position of having to ask this perverse and idolatrous people permission to bury his dead in their midst. This in and of itself seems contradictory to the very promises of YHWH to make Abraham great, to give him the gates of his enemies, and to give him possession of the land. Next, let us note that Abraham clearly draws a distinction between himself and those he petitions. Abraham identifies himself clearly to be a stranger and sojourner and not one of them. It is this reality that requires him to ask their permission. But we may also see in this that Abraham would rather take his place among those having no right or entitlement than be counted among their numbers. A similar statement is made concerning Moses.

Hebrews 11:24-26 *By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; ²⁵choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of Elohim, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; ²⁶esteeming the reproach of Messiah greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward.*

So too Abraham would rather remain separated unto YHWH and beg in the world rather than be entitled in the world and be forced to beg before YHWH. Nonetheless, we still see in this situation a sense of humiliation in that Abraham is forced to bow down to these heathen and beg their permission for what was already divinely promised to be his. We must also be clear to understand that Abraham is not simply asking for a hole in the ground. Abraham is asking for a "possession." What Abraham wants is something that will be his and his offspring's after him. This is why the public meeting is necessary. The whole community needs to consider the possible disruption of community continuity if another people start claiming rights to a portion of their land. Recognizing the magnitude of what Abraham is asking of them in his time of great need, the elders of the city respond by offering Abraham a solution to the crisis (his need for a burial place for Sarah) while at the same time protecting their property and saving face.

Genesis 23:5-6 *And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him, ⁶Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead.*

What we must quickly recognize in this passage is that the council is saying "no" to Abraham, although they are doing so in a very gracious and face-saving way. By calling Abraham "a mighty prince among us," they are seemingly elevating Abraham to a status equal to or higher than their own. These comments are nothing more than vain flattery. Abraham is asking for a possession. Instead, the sons of Heth, under the guise of honor, offer Abraham a quick solution to his burial need. The men of Heth are suggesting that he simply cast Sarah's remains in with the decaying bodies of their relatives. Here we need to understand a bit more about Ancient Near East burial practices.

A burial chamber was generally made up of at least two sections. Some suggest that the cave in Ephron's field received its name from this geographical feature. The name Machpelah in Hebrew means "double portion." The cave may have been given this name due to two distinct chambers within it. If this was indeed the case, then the cave would have been an ideal burial place. When a person died, his body was washed, anointed with oils and herbs, wrapped in linen, and placed on a slab in the first chamber of the burial site. In the hot, arid climate of the Middle East the body would decompose very quickly. Eventually the bones would be gathered and either placed in a small box called an ossuary or simply be stacked among all the bones of other deceased relatives in the back portion of the cave. This practice of gathering and stacking the bones is what is known as being "gathered to your fathers." Thus, a burial

ground was of great importance to the identity of the family, assuring that the continuity of the family would remain intact even in death.

Offering Abraham the opportunity to bury Sarah with their own deceased family members would be to mix the lines. The danger in accepting this offer is that future generations might begin to confuse who their "fathers" were and identify themselves as belonging to the idolatrous and perverse Canaanites. We may recall how during the time of Jacob, the men of Shechem were willing to accommodate Israel's request that they be circumcised in order to intermarry with the children of Israel. The hope was that Israel would eventually merge with them and they would all become one.

Genesis 34:20-23 *And Hamor and Shechem his son came unto the gate of their city, and communed with the men of their city, saying, ²¹These men are peaceable with us; therefore let them dwell in the land, and trade therein; for the land, behold, it is large enough for them; let us take their daughters to us for wives, and let us give them our daughters. ²²Only herein will the men consent unto us for to dwell with us, to be one people, if every male among us be circumcised, as they are circumcised. ²³Shall not their cattle and their substance and every beast of theirs be ours? Only let us consent unto them, and they will dwell with us.*

I cannot help but surmise that this same motive is behind the suggested solution of the sons of Heth. If they allow Abraham to bury his dead among them without giving him his own possession, then eventually he and his descendants will become one with them – if not through the living, then through the dead.

But Abraham does not accept their "generous" refusal. Again, Abraham saves face by acknowledging the "appearance of good intent" in their offer but holding fast to his original request. In other words, "offer denied."

Genesis 23:7-9 *And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. ⁸And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar, ⁹that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you.*

Abraham makes it explicitly clear that the issue is not simply somewhere to bury Sarah's body; rather, it is about an inheritable possession for the purpose of burying not only Sarah but the future deceased of his descendants. Abraham makes two very emphatic points in his refusal of their offer. First, he makes it clear that he wants a possession to call his own. Abraham is not looking for mere permission to bury Sarah on their land, but to purchase a piece of land that will legally belong to him and his descendants. The second point Abraham makes is that he intends to become a resident. In other words, by owning a possession in the land, Abraham will become a landowner with rights. The implication is that if you own land, you must be intending to stay. It is this last point that causes caution on the part of the sons of Heth. Abraham's tactic is powerful. If the sons of Heth are sincere about their stated desire to see Abraham bury his dead, then they must honor his request. The ball is now in the court of the sons of Heth. The sons of Heth pass the ball to Ephron, the son of Zohar.

Now the portion moves from the battle of wits with the sons of Heth to the same type of battle with Ephron, the son of Zohar.

Genesis 23:10-11 *And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying, ¹¹Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead.*

Following the lead of the elders of the city, Ephron likewise offers Abraham the use of the cave without offering to sell it to him. We must understand that there is nothing different about this offer from Ephron and the first offer made by the sons of Heth to simply bury Sarah in their sepulchers. Thus, we should understand Ephron's actions and statements as another generous and face-saving "no." With this said, however, we should also note that Ephron's "no" may have a different motive behind it. Ephron changed the bargaining by adding the field around the cave with its trees. In other words, Ephron was saying, "Not just the cave, but the land around it as well." Abraham was asking only for the cave, but now he must address the field. It may be that Ephron is trying to call Abraham's bluff by raising the cost of the property beyond Abraham's ability to pay.

But again, Abraham is persistent, calling Ephron on his display of generosity.

Genesis 23:12-13 *And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land. ¹³And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, But if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.*

Abraham rejects the offer of a gift for the sake of legal right to the land. Remember, this is why this transaction is taking place at the city gate before all the people. In the end, everyone will be witness to the transaction. Note that Abraham calls out Ephron's display of generosity. If Ephron is willing to "give Abraham the land," then surely he will have nothing against "selling Abraham the land."

Genesis 23:14-15 *And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him, ¹⁵My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead.*

Recognizing that Abraham is not going to let him off easy, Ephron then names his price. Note that he does so in a manner that makes both Abraham and himself to be rich and equals. While the price seems exorbitant, Abraham accepts the offer. We should take care to note that at no time during this bargaining does Abraham ever make an offer on the land. For the sake of integrity it is important that Ephron be the one who names the price. Once the price is named, Abraham does not barter for a better price; he pays Ephron the full inflated amount. This is all done in the presence of all the people so that no one can ever claim that Abraham cheated Ephron or that Abraham does not rightfully own the cave and land of Machpelah.

There is a sad irony concerning this piece of land as well as two others. There are three pieces of land in the Tanach that were clearly purchased by Israelites at their full price. The first is the land of Machpelah, as we have just witnessed. The second is the burial place of Joseph in the land of Shechem.

Genesis 33:18-19 *And Jacob came to Shalem, a city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padanaram; and pitched his tent before the city. ¹⁹And he bought a parcel of a field, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for an hundred pieces of money.*

Joshua 24:32 *And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph.*

The third piece of land is the Temple Mount, which was bought by David.

1 Chronicles 21:22-25 *Then David said to Ornan, Grant me the place of this threshing floor, that I may build an altar therein unto YHWH: thou shalt grant it me for the full price: that the plague may be stayed from the people. ²³And Ornan said unto David, Take it to thee, and let my lord the king do that which is good in his eyes: lo, I give thee the oxen also for burnt offerings, and the threshing instruments for wood, and the wheat for the*

meat offering; I give it all. ²⁴And king David said to Ornan, Nay; but I will verily buy it for the full price: for I will not take that which is thine for YHWH, nor offer burnt offerings without cost. ²⁵So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight.

If there is any property in the land of Israel that should not be in dispute, it is these three pieces of land which were not “given” but “purchased” at full price by Abraham, Jacob, and David. Rabbi Yudan bar Simon, quoting Bereshit Rabba, wrote:

This is one of the three places about which the nations of the world cannot taunt Israel, saying, these are stolen lands, and these are they, the cave of Machpelah, the Temple, and the burial place of Joseph (Shechem). The Cave of Machpelah as it is written: (Gen. 23:16) “And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron, and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver”; the Temple as it is written: (1 Chronicles 21:25) “So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold by weight”; and the burial ground of Joseph as it is written: (Gen. 33:19) “And he bought the ground where he had spread his tent, at the hand of Hamor, Shechem’s father, for a hundred pieces of money.”¹⁸

The sad irony is that the Dome of the Rock sits on top of the Islamic controlled Temple Mount, and Hebron is largely controlled by the Palestinians. Joseph’s burial site is likewise in the West Bank area of Nablus, one of the worst of all the Palestinian refugee cities. All three of these pieces of property, purchased at full price by our forefathers, have now been given away. Today, people making pilgrimages to these sacred sites do so at the risk of their own lives. There is indeed something pathetic about this current reality.

While there may be some merit in the notion that YHWH was using the purchase of Machpelah as a means to affirm Abraham as an owner of the promised land, clearly this must be an underlying theme and not the sole purpose of our portion. Instead, I would suggest that this event in the life of Abraham is another example of Abraham’s faith under testing. Nehama Leibowitz writes:

However, a closer look at the story does not give us a picture of Abraham behaving as a prince towards the owners of the land. On the contrary, the chapter is full of Abraham’s petitions and prostrations...In light of this, it is difficult to regard this passage as exemplifying, even in the slightest degree, the promise of sovereignty and majesty which had been promised to Abraham in relation to the land and the inhabitants thereof. It is therefore more plausible to accept the view of our sages that we have here precisely the opposite. No greater contrast could be imagined than that between “and make thy name great,” “arise, walk through the land...for unto thee will I give it,” “and I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession,” and between the story of the humiliation and prostration of the chosen of the LORD in this week’s sidra before the Canaanites—“lords of the land” in which he begs for four ells of land.¹⁹

It is likewise written in the Midrash Hagadol:

Come and see the humility of Abraham our father! The Holy One, blessed be He, promised to give him and his seed the land forever. Yet, now, he could only find a burial place by paying a high price, and yet he did not question the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he did not complain. Moreover, he addressed the inhabitants of the land with humility, as it is said: “I am a stranger and a sojourner with you.”²⁰

¹⁸ New Studies in Bereshit, Genesis, Nehama Leibowitz, LAMBDA Publishers Inc., Pg. 208

¹⁹ Ibid., Pp. 209-210

²⁰ Ibid., Pg. 210

Victor Hamilton helps to put this humiliation into perspective for us.

Finally, the narrative in a very real sense presents another mute affirmation of Abraham's faith. In the preceding chapter the divine promises were reiterated and expanded. Now Abraham faces a harshly contrasting reality: to gain a mere burial plot he must receive permission from the local population and pay out a large sum of money. His insistence on acquiring the estate in perpetuity is an expression of faith that his descendants would indeed inherit the land.²¹

Clearly Abraham demonstrates for us the biblical axiom that the righteous live by faith.

Habakkuk 2:4 *Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.*

Romans 1:17 *For therein is the righteousness of Elohim revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

2 Corinthians 5:7 *(For we walk by faith, not by sight.)*

Galatians 3:11 *But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of Elohim, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.*

Hebrews 10:38 *Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him.*

Abraham has given us a clear example of what these words mean. In spite of what our finite eyes behold and our fallen reason comprehends, we are to live by faith in the character and promises of YHWH, for all things are possible with Him.

Genesis 18:14 *Is any thing too hard for YHWH? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.*

Matthew 19:26 *But Yeshua beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with Elohim all things are possible.*

Mark 10:27 *And Yeshua looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with Elohim: for with Elohim all things are possible.*

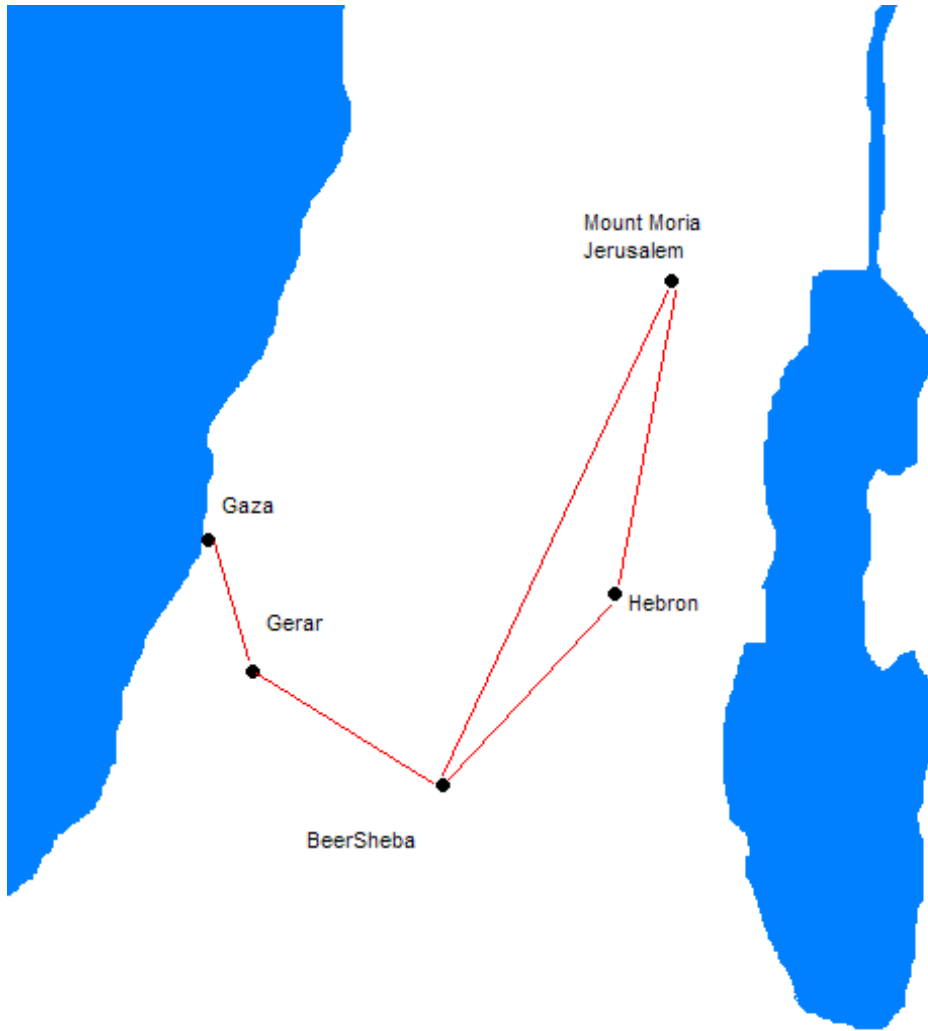
Mark 14:36 *And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt.*

Luke 18:27 *And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with Elohim.*

Two other character traits we should clearly seek to learn from Abraham are complete submission to the will and Word of YHWH in spite of visible circumstances and humility even in the face of our enemies. Abraham did not allow pride to prevent him from accomplishing his goal. We should note that Abraham was willing to bow down before his opposition in order to fulfill what was on his heart to do. Abraham also managed not to compromise with the idolatrous and perverse Canaanites in the process. While Abraham bowed himself humbly before his opponents, he still managed to emerge the victor. Abraham succeeded in finding a way to accomplish what he set out to do without losing face and without degrading his opposition or desecrating the name of the Creator. I believe that these are qualities that were found both

²¹ New International Commentary on the Old Testament, The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17, Victor P. Hamilton, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Pg. 156

in Jacob, who bowed before Esau, and in Yeshua, who offered his back to the smiter to do his Father's will. If we are truly to be the descendants of Abraham and disciples of Yeshua, it would do us well to learn these traits.



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