

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT CHAYE SARA

"Give Me a Possession of a Burial Place with You"

By Dr. JonatHan Grossman

Our parasha opens with the death of the matriarch Sara. The very mention of her passing and the number of years that she lived is surprising, since the Torah does not provide these details concerning the other matriarchs. The death of Rivka is not mentioned explicitly at all. The Sages admittedly explain that the record of the death of "Devora, the nurse of Rivka," following the fulfillment of Yaakov's oath in Beit-El, actually hints at the death of Rivka herself. Nevertheless, this explanation only lends further weight to the surprising phenomenon of the Torah refraining from explicit mention of the deaths of the matriarchs, such that even when the text needs to express this news, it is done only in an indirect way. The death of Leah is mentioned nowhere. Rachel's death is described explicitly, but only because of the importance of the story that accompanies her death: her burial on the way to Beit Lechem (rather than in Me'arat ha-Makhpela in Chevron), and the birth of Binyamin.

Thus, the mention of Sara's death and burial represents an exception to the rule. In fact, this phenomenon is directly related to another question that should be raised in the context of the first section of our parasha: what is the central subject of the story? Does the text really want to tell us about Sara's death and burial, or are these events the background to the real subject of the story – the purchase of Me'arat ha-Makhpela?

Clearly, these two subjects are very tightly interwoven, since the whole purchase takes place only for the purposes of burying Sara, and so it is difficult to separate them. Still, it seems that we may be able to point to one of these two as the principal message that the Torah wishes to teach, while the other is secondary to it.

In the closing verses of this section, the Torah indeed indicates which is the primary subject. First, the text summarizes the purchase of the cave:

"The field of Efron that was in Makhpela, which is before Mamre – the field and the cave that was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, in all of his borders around - were made over to Avraham, in the sight of the children of Chet, before all who entered the gate of his city." (23:17-18)

Following the summary of the transaction, the text summarizes the burial of Sara in the cave:

"Thereafter Avraham buried Sara his wife in the cave of the field of Makhpela that faces Mamre, that is Chevron, in the land of Canaan." (23:19)

This concludes the narratives in both its aspects – the purchase and the burial – and there is a clear expectation, following this conclusion, that this is the end of the story. But, much to our surprise, the text then summarizes the act of purchase a second time:

"And the field, and the cave that is in it, were made over to Avraham for a possession of a burial place, by the sons of Chet." (23:20)

What need is there for this conclusion? It adds nothing to what we were told already two verses previously. Moreover, not only is there no new information in verse 20, but the Torah seems to be repeating exactly the same words that we read in verses 17-18. Here the text focuses on the crux of the matter, without the lengthy contractual-legal formulation that characterized the previous verses. A comparison of the two summaries is easy to present (in a more literal translation:)

First conclusion (17-18)

"And it WAS MADE OVER - the field of Efron that was in Makhpelah, which is before Mamre,

THE FIELD AND THE CAVE THAT WAS IN IT

And all the trees that were in the field in all of his borders around

TO AVRAHAM for a possession

In the sight of the CHILDREN OF CHET, before all who entered the gates of his city".

Second conclusion (20)

"AND IT WAS MADE OVER—

THE FIELD AND THE CAVE THAT IS IN IT

TO AVRAHAM as a possession of a burial place

By the CHILDREN OF CHET".

We note that the first summary includes legal clauses that are absent from the second conclusion: the exact identification of the field ("the field of Efron / which was in Makhpela / before Mamre"); what is included in the act of purchase ("and all the trees that were in the field..."); the purpose is stated in a purely legal perspective ("as a possession"), in contrast to the second summary, where the personal aspect of the purpose is presented ("as a possession of a burial place") [1]; and finally, the children of Chet are presented as witnesses and as bestowing validity on the transaction ("in the sight of the children of Chet"). However, we may still ask what need there is for a second summary of the sale. Nothing new is added in the second account (except, as noted, the personal perspective.)

It seems that the text means hereby to answer the question we posed earlier: the story does not conclude with the burial of Sara, because that is not its purpose. It goes back and records once again the first purchase made by Avraham in the land of Canaan, because this is the whole point of the story: the beginning of Avraham's possession in Canaan. It is with a view to emphasizing this point that the text repeats the summary that has already been presented —

the legal summary, thereby turning the description of Sara's burial into the necessary background for an understanding of this transaction.[2]

According to the above, we can also understand why the Torah has to record Sara's death, in contrast to the other matriarchs. Here, too – as in the death of Rachel – the story of the death and burial are not recorded for their own sake, but rather for a different purpose: as background to the story of Avraham's purchase of Me'arat ha-Makhpela. This is how the Rashbam understands the story, as he notes at the beginning of our parasha:

"Although the length of the lifetimes of other women is not mentioned explicitly, it was necessary to specify this in Sara's case, because of the need to mention her death that led to the purchase of the cave".

Therefore, we must focus on the significance of the story of the purchase. Why is this matter so important, to the extent that the Torah records – at seemingly unnecessary length – the whole process of the negotiations between Avraham and the children of Chet? As a comparison, Yaakov's purchase of the field in Shekhem is described in a single verse (33:19). It is reasonable to assume that in that instance, too, there were lengthy negotiations, like those that we encounter around Me'arat ha-Makhpela, but the Torah nevertheless records only briefly the important final result: "He purchased the field... for a hundred kesita" Even the description of David's purchase of the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi (the future site of the Temple!) is described with great brevity (Shmuel II 24), compared with our narrative.

What, then, is concealed behind the negotiation process that takes place at the gates of the city, that the Torah is at such pains to emphasize?

I would like to focus on an opaque expression of Avraham, at the beginning of the dealings: "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you; GIVE ME a possession of a burial place with you, that I may bury my dead from before me" (23:4). At first Avraham admits that he is a "stranger and a sojourner," and therefore he has no portion of land to call his own, in which he could bury his wife. This fact obviously makes it difficult for Avraham to conduct quiet, calm negotiations: his dead wife lies before him, and he must urgently arrange her burial. He emphasizes this at the outset, thereby causing the rest of his speech to sound like a request for a favor from the children of Chet. This has great significance for an understanding of his next words: "Give me a possession of a burial place with you." How are we to understand this request, "Give me..."? Is Avraham hinting at an outright gift? It is difficult to imagine that this is what Avraham means; it is quite probable that the children of , too, harbored no suspicion that Avraham intended that someone would give him a portion of land for free just because he had to bury his wife.[3]

There is another possibility, which is perhaps the simplest one: "Give me a possession of a burial place," Avraham asks, "in order that I may bury Sara in this possession." These words don't imply any transfer of ownership; the possession of this burial place will remain in the hands of the Hittite family. In other words, it is possible to understand his request as involving only permission to bury. Avraham himself seems to lend support to this interpretation of his words when he adds: "with you." The simple meaning of his words is that he wants a certain family to allow him to bury his wife in their family burial place, "with them," for he needs to "bury his dead from before him".

As stated previously, the very presentation of Avraham as a "stranger and sojourner" at the beginning of his speech lends his whole approach the feeling of asking a favor. If a favor is what he seeks, then the interpretation I have proposed for his words seems the simplest and most obvious one.

Taken on its own, the expression "Give me... with you" is an equivocal one; this fact finds expression in the various translations of this verse. Some offer a literal rendering: "GIVE me a burial plot WITH YOU" [4], while others translate with a view to the broader context of the chapter: "SELL me a burial site AMONG YOU." [5] This latter version, which seeks to take into consideration the situation involved, actually "loses" the possibility of interpreting Avraham's words as a request for permission. As stated, Avraham himself seems to point to this understanding; in any event, this is how the children of Chet perceive the approach:

"Hear us, my lord: you are a mighty prince among us; bury your dead in THE CHOICEST OF OUR BURIAL SITES; none of us will withhold his burial site from you, THAT YOU MAY BURY YOUR DEAD." (23:6)

The children of Chet regard Avraham's request as a great honor, for he is a "mighty prince" among them. In fact, it is quite possible that every family secretly hoped that Avraham would choose its burial ground. This would indicate the formation of an intimate connection with Avraham, who apparently was quite famous, and who – in addition to everything else – was also fabulously wealthy.

The fact that this was how the Hittites understood Avraham's words is reflected in two expressions in the formulation of their response. First, the words "bury your dead in the choicest of our burial grounds" indicate that the burial ground would still remain in their ownership, but that Avraham was invited to choose whichever burial ground he desired. Secondly, their words, "No one (i.e., of us) will withhold his burial ground from you, that you may bury your dead," give the impression that they are giving permission for burial, not considering for a single moment the possibility of transferring ownership. [6]

Thus concludes the first stage of the legal dialogue. Following the accepted custom, Avraham bows "to the people of the land, to the children of Chet" – but then immediately goes on to explain his intention:

"Hear me and entreat Efron ben Tzochar on my behalf, THAT HE MAY GIVE ME Me'arat ha-Makhpela that is his, which is at the edge of his field; FOR THE FULL PRICE LET HIM GIVE IT TO ME among you, as a possession of a burial place." (23:8-9)

Again Avraham repeats this verb, "Give me," but this time he explains right away what he means: "For the full price let him give it to me." With these words, Avraham reveals the subject of his approach to the Hittites for the first time. He desires not the granting of permission "with you," but rather the purchase of the cave "among you".

Obviously, the next stage (following another obligatory round of polite bowing) is agreement on the price of the cave. Efron, in his devious way, somehow brings the whole field into the contract, thereby raising the price considerably, and his is the last word in this regard. [7]

What is the meaning of the confusion that Avraham creates with his initial speech? Why does he not state his true intention openly at the outset – his wish to purchase a plot of land from

them? It seems unlikely that this obscurity is unintentional, for – as we have seen – Avraham encourages the mistaken impression with his own words!

I suggest that this matter should be considered on two different levels. Firstly, regarding the development of the narrative, what does the misleading of the Hittites contribute to the negotiations, to the continuation of the dialogue between Avraham and the children of Chet? But aside from this question, there seems to be a broader significance that exceeds the bounds of the specific situation at hand and seeks to convey some message to us – students of the Torah.

Concerning the development of the dialogue between Avraham and the children of Chet, it seems that the ambiguity created by Avraham is part of the inherent rhetoric of his speech. It is important for Avraham to present the children of Chet as his friends and neighbors – as people who couldn't possibly refuse the favor he asks in his moment of distress. At first, they feel a sense of sacrifice because of Avraham's definition of himself as a "stranger and sojourner." He thereby defines the children of Chet as powerful, implying that he sees himself as being weaker. Immediately thereafter, he pays them a great compliment: the man whom they regard as a "mighty prince" – apparently because of his wealth, on one hand, and his unique traits, on the other – wishes to forge an eternal covenant with them, via a common burial ground. Needless to say, the children of Chet will thereby be eternally linked with the house of Avraham, since it seems likely that Avraham's household will seek to bury Avraham himself, and eventually the whole family, in the family burial ground – even if it is shared with a Hittite family.

After the children of Chet receive such a great compliment, their hearts are open. Even if it turns out that Avraham really wants something else, the first impression has its effect, breaking the ice to facilitate a successful agreement.

Avraham's equivocal speech also contains a message for all generations. In such instances, where one understanding arises on the superficial level but is rejected in favor of another understanding, the rejection of the first possibility stands out starkly and captures the reader's attention. A possibility that is rejected turns into part of the covert message of the story, as a statement rejecting some notion.

It appears that in our context this is indeed the intention of the text. At first it seems that Avraham wants to create a meaningful partnership with the inhabitants of the land, the children of Chet. A partnership that is related to a burial site is an eternal one, for there is nothing more timeless than death. Avraham, it seems, will now not be leaving this place, and it is even likely that solid relations will develop between the burial site and his family, who will visit the site and also, eventually, want to be buried in close proximity to it. The partnership that arises in our minds, then, as we read Avraham's request, is a most significant one.

But as Avraham opens his mouth the second time, we are forced to reject this interpretation of his intentions. Or – more precisely – Avraham himself rejects it. He explains to the children of Chet that he meant for the plot to be given "for the full price." Now our mistake in understanding the expression, "Give me" becomes clear. At the same time, we realize our mistake with regard to the entire hypothesis: Avraham is not interested in creating a partnership with the inhabitants of the land. On the contrary – he rejects their offer to bury his

wife "with them," and pays the full (inflated) price for a portion of land that will henceforth belong exclusively to him and his descendants.

In this sense, the story of the purchase of the cave by Avraham is fundamentally bound up with the subsequent story – the dispatch of his servant to Charan to find a wife for Yi. There again, when Avraham sends his servant off, he emphasizes: "You shall not take a woman for my son from the daughters of the Canaanite in the midst of whom I dwell" (24:3.)

The parasha of Chaye Sara marks the transition from the founding generation to the second. The parasha recounts the deaths of Sara and Avraham, and the ascension of Yitzchak and Rivka as those charged with continuing the building of the family. The final tasks that Avraham takes care of in his life (or, more accurately, the final tasks that the Torah describes to us) represent his severance from the inhabitants of the land: he takes care not to bury his wife with the children of Chet, and not to marry off his son to the daughters of the Canaanites.

Notes:

Rashbam perceives in this difference a chronological discrepancy: first the field and the cave became Avraham's possession, and only after Sara's burial did they become his "possession of a burial site" (commentary on 23:18.)

Compare Ibn Ezra and Ramban on the dual verses of conclusion (23:19.)

However, see Ramban's interpretation of "I am a stranger and sojourner with you".

G.J. Wenham, in his commentary to Genesis 16-50 (WBC, Texas 1994), p. 122, emphasizes that Avraham's use of the term "a possession of a burial place" indicates that he does in fact intend that the ownership be transferred to him: "Abraham is asking for ownership of a piece of land" (p. 127.)

N.M. Sarna, Commentary to Genesis (JPS, Philadelphia 1989), p. 157-158.

Cf. Radak's commentary on 23:4: "Their understanding was that he would ask of them that one of them would give him a place among them in which to bury his dead. But this is not what he was asking; rather, he asked for a possession that would be known to belong to him and his family in which to bury their dead, not that he would bury his dead in the burial place of someone else".

In light of what we have said, we must carefully consider our understanding of Efron's (initial) offer: "The field I give to you, and the cave that is in it – to you have I given it; in the sight of my people I give it to you; go and bury your dead." Theoretically, we may have posited that Efron is going back to his mistaken understanding, but it seems more logical that - at least on the face of it – he is offering the field and the cave as a free gift to Avraham.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

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