YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

The Purchase of the Cave of Machpelah

By Rav Michael Hattin

Introduction

This week's Parasha, which opens with the death and burial of Sarah, continues with the travels of Avraham's servant to his birthplace in search of a wife for Yitzchak, and closes with the death of Avraham, is very much about the ceaseless cycles of life. The exalted spiritual revolution wrought by Avraham and Sarah is assured of its continuity through the marriage of Yitzchak and Rivka, who will ultimately show themselves to be fitting successors. Death followed by marriage, life's final act supervened by the potential of new progeny committed to the cause, is a juxtaposition that undeniably indicates the attainment by Avraham and Sarah of their life's objective. And in the background of that mission, always present and palpable, is the Land. The land of Canaan, seven times promised and seven times sealed, is the fertile ground upon which the pageant of these productive lives is played out.

The acquisition of the Cave of Machpelah, so painstakingly portrayed at the opening of the Parasha, raises many questions. In order to fully analyze the incident, it will first be necessary to acquaint ourselves with a protracted section of verses. I would therefore ask the reader to kindly turn to Bereishit 23:1-20 and to scan the contents so that the running quotation of such a lengthy passage can be avoided.

We may conveniently divide the twenty-verse section into five separate segments, marked by repeating motifs and phrasing:

1. 1 – 2: an introductory passage which recounts Sarah's life span, and records her death in Kiryat Arba, known as Chevron. Avraham mourns and eulogizes her.
2. 3 – 7: Avraham, expressing interest in securing a burial plot, approaches the Hittite inhabitants. They respond with an offer of the finest plot gratis, and Avraham, in a mark of deference, bows.
3. 8 – 12: Avraham requests of them to approach and convince Efron the Hittite to allow him to secure the Cave of Machpelah, situated at the edge of Efron's field, at full price. Efron, who is present, offers the site as a gift and again, Avraham bows in respect.
4. 13 – 16: Avraham insists on payment, Efron suggests the sum of 400 shekels of silver, and Avraham complies.
5. 17 – 20: The Torah narrates that the field of Efron and the cave within it are purchased by Avraham, who then buries his wife Sarah. The plot becomes the family sepulchre.

The Securing of Land

Taken at face value, this passage does not appear to provide any penetrating insights. The ongoing dialogue between Avraham and the Hittites seems loquacious and overly formal. The rationale for Avraham's reluctance to accept their repeated offers of a complimentary plot is not readily apparent. Nor can we easily reconcile Efron's successive displays of generosity with the singularly negative portrayal of the man and his motives afforded by the traditional sources.

One thing, however, is striking. Sarah at her death, we are told, is 127 years old. As we outlined in last week's discussion, this indicates that Avraham and Sarah have been in the land of Canaan for more than sixty years (excepting the brief sojourn in Egypt recorded at the beginning of Parashat Lekh Lekha). How unusual that during the course of all this time, during which Avraham amasses herds, flocks, servants and precious metals (see Bereishit 12:15; 13:2; 20:14-16; 24:1), the acquisition of a plot of land for burial is overlooked. Only after the death of Sarah does Avraham tardily undertake the task. Why has Avraham been remiss in not securing it earlier?

In the Talmudic and Midrashic sources, the incident of Sarah's burial is understood as a further trial of Avraham's spiritual mettle. In a homiletic passage in Bava Batra 15a, the Satan himself is forced to acknowledge Avraham's great trust in God: "…the Satan exclaimed: Master of the Universe, I have traversed the whole earth and have found no servant of Yours as faithful as Avraham. Did you not enjoin upon him to "arise and travel the length and breadth of the land, for to you shall I give it"? Nevertheless, though he was not able to secure a place to bury his wife Sarah except for the exorbitant sum of 400 shekels of silver, he did not doubt Your words. " In a parallel passage in Sanhedrin 101a, the trust that Avraham displays in this difficult circumstance, is regarded as being superior to that displayed by Moses under less trying conditions. How are we to understand the nature of this trial?

The Semi-Nomadic Life

Although they resided within the borders of Canaan, the lives of Avraham and Sarah seem to have been singularly unsettled. Thus, we find the two pitching their tents all along the central hill country, the Negev, and the lowlands east of the coastal plain. The place names associated with their journeys include Shechem, Elon Moreh, Bet El, Shalem, Chevron, Elonei Mamreh (all located along the crest of the central hills of "Judea and Samaria"), Gerar (a Philistine region) and Be'er Sheva in the arid south. There are no indications in the text that Avraham is engaged in agriculture which would tend to connect him to a particular region of land (in contrast to Yitzchak who is described in Bereishit 26:12 as "planting in the land of Gerar and harvesting a hundred fold"). His wealth, rather, is concentrated in flocks of sheep, cattle, camels, and donkeys. His life is therefore the life of the semi-nomadic tribesman, who grazes his flocks in an area of pasture and then moves on. Or as Rashi (11th century, France) phrases it: "Avraham's dwelling patterns were transitory. He would remain in a particular location for a period of a month or so, and then move on and pitch his tent elsewhere" (see Bereishit 12:9). A careful study of these place names on a map indicates, in fact, that Avraham and Sarah tended to avoid the well-populated coastal and northern plains, and were instead associated with the more sparsely-populated hills.

This fact seems doubly strange, for Avraham and his ancestors hail from Ur, a major urban and commercial center situated along the southern extremity of the Euphrates River. Having followed God's command to forsake homeland, birthplace and family, why has Avraham additionally renounced the life of the city to become a wanderer and migrant in his new home?

The answer to this question is abundantly clear. Avraham and Sarah are semi-nomadic herdsmen because, notwithstanding Divine promises to the contrary, there is as of yet no Hebrew nation to settle the land. While associated with Canaan, their direct connection to the land is tenuous and fragile, because Avraham and Sarah personify the earliest stages of a new nation being born. Only one thing anchors them to this place, and that is the word of God. Actual possession and settlement, the true possibility of a national destiny being realized, is for them far off in the future. For now, the land is firmly in the hands of the indigenous inhabitants, the Canaanites.

Understanding the Trial

It will be recalled that as soon as Avram enters the land, God appears to him promising that "to your descendants shall I give this land," and indeed variations of this promise appear in almost every exchange that takes place between them. The twin promises of offspring and land, which form the two critical components of a national destiny and mission, constitute for most of Avraham's lifetime, empty and hollow words. A child is denied him until late in life, and the land so lovingly proffered remains a distant dream. Thus, there is a disquieting dichotomy between what God has promised him, and the reality that Avraham sees with his own eyes. His wife Sarah is dead, and Avraham lacks even a plot of land within which to bury her!

Avraham, however, forever resolute in steadfast trust, possesses the far-reaching perspective of the visionary. He can continue to believe in the Divine oath because he can see a future in which his descendants will constitute a nation with a land. He is not perturbed by his lack of even a burial ground, because he knows that one-day his progeny will checker the land with cities and fields. The true revolutionary, who is absolutely convinced of the inevitable success of his cause, can bear even the pain of not witnessing its accomplishment during his lifetime.

Overtures

With this introductory analysis in mind, it is now possible to appreciate the exchange that takes place between Avraham and the Hittites. Following the death of his wife and the performance of the customary rites of mourning, Avraham approaches the inhabitants of the land. The ensuing exchange is actually full of legal terms and formularies, for as we shall see, this narrative actually describes an official transaction carried out at the level of local government.

"I am a stranger (Ger) and a sojourner (Toshav) with you. Provide me with a burial plot (Achuza) among you so that I might bury my dead." Introducing himself as a "ger" and a "toshav" Avraham spells out the nature of his predicament. These terms are indicative of one who is not an indigenous inhabitant of a place but rather has come to dwell there from another locale.

In a brilliant observation, R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (11th century, Spain) remarks that the Torah frequently compares the "Ezrach" or citizen, with the "Ger" or convert: "A single law shall apply to all, whether citizen or convert, for I am the Lord your God" (VaYikra 24:22). In another context, in which the word "Ezrach" signifies a species of tree, David sees the flourishing success of the wicked wither away: "I perceived the powerful wicked ones, who were firmly rooted as a leafy tree ("ezrach ra'anan"). In a moment, they had disappeared…" (Tehillim 37:35-36). In other words, explains Ibn Ezra, the citizen is compared to the rooted tree, for he is firmly connected to a place. He has the advantage of family, friends and the extended network of community, which conceptually much resemble the spreading branches and leaves of the "ezrach."

The "ger" or convert, in contrast, comes from somewhere else. He has consciously uprooted himself from his kindred in order to join a new society. Conceptually, he is like the "gargir" (from which is derived "ger"), the single berry or kernel that has fallen from the cluster, for he initially lacks the benefit of a firm attachment to people or place.

Securing a Family Sepulchre

"I possess no land of my own here," says Avraham, "for I have come from another place. Kindly allow me to secure a burial plot for my dead." A piece of land that serves as a family crypt is perhaps the strongest notion of being linked to a place that human beings recognize. The family sepulchre expresses in very tangible form the intense connection to a land, a clan, and even a way of life. To be buried in a place is to be part of that place. What Avraham seeks to establish is not simply a cemetery, but rather an undisputed and irreversible foothold in the land of Canaan. The Divine promise might take generations to be realized in its entirety, but the progenitor of the people is ideologically driven to initiate the process during his lifetime. Avraham's goal is to effect a fundamental change in his status and, more significantly, the status of his posterity. They are to cease being considered as aliens and to begin being regarded as citizens. As Ramban (13th century, Spain) explains: "the prevailing custom was for each family to have its own cemetery, and for the foreigners to be buried in a common plot. Avraham explained to the Hittites that having come from another land, he did not inherit a family sepulchre in Canaan. His intent now, however, was to become a permanent dweller in the land. Therefore, he wanted to secure a burial plot for future generations, so that he might be considered an inhabitant like them." (Verse 4)

The Hittites, genuinely courteous and generous, seemingly respond in the affirmative. "You are a prince of God among us," they exclaim, "choose the best of our burial plots ("bemivchar kevareinu") for your own." The careful reader might already detect a foreboding tone to their words, which is borne out by Efron's subsequent offer: "Sir, hear me," he exclaims to Avraham, "I hereby give you the field and the cave. In sight of all assembled here I give it to you, so that you may bury your dead." How can we not but be impressed by these munificent words in which Efron echoes the sentiments of his kinfolk and offers the desired land free of charge? Why then is Avraham reluctant to accept such a benevolent offer? Has he not in the past accepted gifts from Pharaoh (Bereishit 12:16) and Avimelech (Bereishit 20:14-16)?

Avraham's aversion, I believe, stems from the fact that he realizes (as do the Hittites) that legal ownership secured through purchase, differs markedly from legal ownership that is the result of a gift. The former entails no ongoing relationship with the seller and involves no necessity of acknowledging favors. A gift, on the other hand, creates a dependence on the benefactor, and often involves the imposition of conditions on the recipient which tend to lessen the latter's absolute and incontrovertible claim to ownership.

The Hittites and Efron are more than willing to provide Avraham with the burial plot that he desires, free of charge. Although this offer can certainly be interpreted as a magnanimous gesture on their part, it simultaneously contains a threatening undercurrent. This is because the provision of the burial plot (indicative of official status) as a gift will actually undermine Avraham's attempt to secure undisputed legal deed to the land as well as the status as a citizen that goes with it. Therefore, Avraham refuses.

Efron finally relents and agrees to Avraham's desire to buy the cave. By attaching such an outrageous price to it, though, he is in effect again attempting to dissuade Avraham from trying to attain deed through purchase. But Avraham is undeterred and immediately agrees to the terms of the sale, thus succeeding in establishing an eternal connection with the land that can never be severed.

The lessons of this passage are clear. The abiding faith and foresight demonstrated by Avraham Avinu in securing the cave of Machpelah, teaches us much about our own connection to the Land of Israel. It is a link that exists primarily as function of God's everlasting promise but also because of our own investments of effort and capital. At the same time, our mission in this land has not changed since Avraham and Sarah's day: to build a society founded upon the ideals of justice, righteousness, and truth, and predicated on an intense and intimate relationship with God.

Shabbat Shalom

For further study: See the portentous Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 79:7 in which three purchases of land in Israel are singled out: the Cave of Machpelah, the plot of land at Shechem, and the site of the Temple. How do the above themes apply to these cases as well? Compare the Midrash with the account of land purchase described in Yirmiyahu Chapter 32.