

Parshat Chayei Sarah

Life After Sarah

This week, we will look at one of the more famous stories of the Torah - the acquisition of the cave of Machpela.

Chavruta:

1. Study the parsha of the Cave of Machpela Ch.23.
* Ask yourselves some questions. Which phrases stand out as strange? What is the purpose of this entire story?
2. Do you feel that Benei Chet were sincere or was Ephron just pushing up the price?
Look at passuk 15. Can you bring a proof either way?
* See Rashi. What is his view?
* Look at the Ramban on verse 15 .How does he differ with Rashi?
Who is more in line with the language of the passuk? Who is more in line with the context of the passuk?
* See the Ramban on verse 8. What does he explain about Avraham's tactics? Does Abraham expect Ephron to give him an easy time?
3. See passuk 19. Look at the IBN EZRA and the RAMBAN there.
They both give reasons for the length of this story.
* See if you agree with the Ramban's attack on the Ibn Ezra.
* Which explanation fits in better with the language of the parsha?

The Shiur Section:

Our Parsha is called Chayei Sarah - The Life of Sarah. The irony is that our parsha describes her death rather than her life. Her death is mentioned in but a single line. What follows are three stories.

1. Avraham's acquisition of a burial plot for his wife
2. Finding a wife for Sarah
3. Avraham's second marriage to Keturah.

These stories make up the entire content of our parsha. They are also everything that we know of the last forty years of Avraham's life. We may well ask, is there any common thread which links these stories? What is it about these three episodes that they should be all the information that we need to know about Avraham's final years?

We will discuss the Parsha - examining it story by story - and we will begin to see a pattern unfolding through the pages of our chumash.

THE BUYING OF THE CAVE OF MACHPELA

Avraham approaches the B'nei Chet who send him on to a man named Ephron. There is extensive bargaining regarding the terms under which the plot may be purchased. The negotiations result in the sale of a field containing the burial cave, in exchange for four hundred silver shekels.

Now, we all have read this story, and the same question crosses our mind each time. Why is the story told in such

painstaking detail? Why the length? the formality? Is the Torah presenting us with ancient bargaining techniques? Does the Torah need to give such a detailed description of the negotiations to buy the cave? Even as the acquisition of a focal national landmark, the lengthy negotiations painstakingly recorded here seem somewhat unusual. What is this story trying to communicate to us?

THE LAND OF ISRAEL

This question was not lost on many of our classic commentators. They offered their own answers.

The Ibn Ezra writes :

“This Parsha is intended to demonstrate the special status of Eretz Yisrael over all other lands for both the living and the dead. It also is the expression of the fulfillment of God's promise to Avraham that the land will become an inheritance for him”

The Ibn Ezra stresses two points. The first, that the Land of Israel has a certain benefit for even the dead. Even nowadays, Jews around the world have been known to issue a request to be buried in Israel. (one estimate has it that over 60% of El Al planes carry a dead body to be buried in the land of Israel.) Apparently the common wisdom has it that even if Israel may not be the place to live in, maybe it will be a good place to be buried. Ibn Ezra sees this parsha as support for this widespread teaching.

He adds a second dimension. That here we see the first piece of land to pass into Avraham's ownership. This is the first step of a long process of inheritance that God has promised to Avraham.

A PRINCE OF GOD IN THE LAND

The Ramban rejects these lessons of the Ibn Ezra for seemingly good reason:

“I do not understand the words of Rabbi Avraham (Ben Ezra) when he talks about the supreme status of Eretz Yisrael for the dead. How does this story demonstrate the supremacy of the land - he would not have taken her to another land to bury her! And as for his second point; the promise of inheritance of the Land refers to the land in its entirety and this was fulfilled later in time to his descendants.”

The Ramban offers his own interpretation of the significance of this story:

“This parsha is written to inform of God's kindness to Avraham. He came to the land to be but a sojourner, but he has become “ a prince of the Lord” in the land. Both individual and collective refer to him with a title of reverence although he had never indicated to them that he was of great stature. He experienced, in his own lifetime, God's promise “And I will make your name great.(12:2)”

The Ramban is of the opinion that this story expresses Avraham's widespread renown and acclaim. Indeed, the account of this story in the Torah seems to be replete with expressions and gestures of honour and veneration for Avraham. The Hittites do not wish to have “the elect of God amongst us” pay them a fee. It would be an affront to him, beneath his dignity. The Ramban would seem to be correct. Avraham seems to be a well-respected man.

But in the same way that Ramban found fault with the Ibn Ezra, we may well ask, why all the repetitive detail? Does this story

really prove inconclusively that Avraham was well-respected? We may suggest that all the posturing and respectful language is nothing more than oriental courtesy and bargaining technique. And we return to our original point is this lesson so important as to warrant a story twenty verses in length?

STRANGER AND RESIDENT

A comment by Rav Soloveitchik in one of his public lectures leads us in a very different direction:

“The first Patriarch, Avraham, introduced himself to the inhabitants of Canaan with the words, ‘I am a stranger and a resident among you’ (23:4). Are not these two terms mutually exclusive?

Avraham’s definition of his dual status, we believe, describes with profound accuracy the historical position of the Jew who resides in a predominantly non-Jewish society. He was the resident, like other inhabitants of Canaan, sharing with them a concern for the welfare of society, digging wells and contributing to the progress of the country in loyalty to its government and institutions. Here, Avraham was clearly a fellow citizen, a patriot among compatriots, joining others in advancing the common welfare.

However, there was another aspect, the spiritual, in which Avraham regarded himself as a stranger. His identification and solidarity with his fellow citizens in the secular realm did not imply his readiness to relinquish any aspects of his religious uniqueness. His was a different faith and he was governed by perceptions, truths, and observances which set him apart from the larger faith community. In this regard, Avraham and his descendants would always remain ‘strangers.’” (Reflections of the Rav. Chapter 16)

Rav Soloveitchik applies this reading to a far wider context than the specific story of Avraham. He sees it as a paradigm of the paradoxical position of every Jew living amongst the nations.

“ Like other people, the Jew has more than one identity. He is part of a larger family of mankind, but he also has a Jewish identity which separates him from others. Each identity imposes upon him particular responsibilities. As a citizen of a pluralistic society, the Jew assumes social and political obligation to contribute to the general welfare and to combat such common dangers as famine, corruption, disease and foreign enemies...freedom, dignity and security of human life.. These are concerns which transcend all boundaries of difference.

The Jew, however has another identity which he does not share with the rest of mankind: the covenant with God which was established at Mt. Sinai three thousand years ago. ..This identity involves responsibilities and a way of life which are uniquely Jewish and which, inevitably set the Jew apart from non-Jews. It is particularistic, rather than universalistic...

There is an inevitable tension in trying to uphold these two identities.” (ibid)

Rav Soloveitchik is not simply interpreting one phrase of the Parsha. It is possible to read the entire Hittite-Avraham discussion along the lines of this dialectical position.

CROSSED LINES

I believe that this dichotomy between Ger and Toshav is the

correct manner in which to read the bargaining between the Hebron community and Avraham.¹

From the perspective of the Bnei Chet clan, Avraham is indeed a Ger, a transient person. He lived in Hebron (see end of ch.13, 18:1) and then left for Beer Sheva and Gerar. He is now back, with his wife, but his two sons don’t even live with him (see 24:62). What future does this man have? They respect him – Yes! He is a “prince of God”, a holy man of religion, but a fixture? A family who will join the fabric of the Hebron community? When he dies, there will be no one to continue his family line! Why should he need to purchase his own burial cave, his own burial site? They tell him:

“You are a prince of God in OUR midst, just choose whichever of OUR caves you desire in order to bury your wife. For a man like you, no family will deny their burial cave.”

Again, they are honest. It WOULD be an honour for any family to have Avraham and Sarah buried in their cave. But from their perspective, in contrast to their sprawling families with many children and more numerous grandchildren, in which there was a necessity for a collective burial site for the clan, Avraham and Sarah were an elderly, lonely couple; strangers, with no continuity. Why waste the resources on a field and cave which will become derelict and abandoned after their death?

However, Avraham does not see things this way. Avraham approaches the Hittites with a request to buy land:

“Let me bury MY dead BEFORE ME.”

He wants to make an acquisition and purchase land. He wants to become a TOSHAV! He wishes to establish a permanent and enduring presence, a foothold, an “Ahuza.” But the Hittites don’t understand him. They cannot perceive Avraham as a Toshav. He is a respected GER, a respected man on the outside, but not an insider. Why would he need to own the land?

Avraham bows in respect to their generous offer. But he presents his case to purchase Ephron’s field and cave. Once again, he is met with the same response! Ephron offers him the cave for free. Once again, we are dealing with villagers who have been there for centuries, who have raised families and their own tribes. Avraham is a lonely elderly gentleman. He does not have a whole lineage, a family around him. The notion of a continuation to Avraham of a nation emerging from him is the height of absurdity! Why should he need his own burial ground?

Ephron responds by offering the cave for FREE. After the man dies, he can use it for another purpose! But when Avraham insists that he wants to pay and buy the land “with the FULL PRICE,” it is fixed at 400 shekels which is the going market rate one imagines, and the cave changes hands.

The entire parsha is carefully ensconced in the legal terminology and ceremonial formality of the ancient methods of the business transaction. But what lies underneath the dialogue is a fundamental clash of perspectives. Avraham is unexpectedly and surprisingly adopting a NEW ROLE, the role

¹ I think that the theme of Ger and Toshav are present throughout Sefer Bereshit. See for example 37:1 and the Rashi there where Yaakov’s “vayeshav” in place of his “meGURei” is criticized in most severe terms.

But maybe clearer and closer for us are the Israelites, who on approaching Pharaoh to gain permission to live in Goshen, present themselves as “laGUR Baaretz” (47:4) – as transient non-residents. And yet later (47:27) They LIVE in Goshen “VaYEACHZU bah” – they were gripped by the land. Here in our parsha we also talk about an ACHUZAT Kaver”. The aim is to have a kever which will generate a gripping of the land, a deep connection of ownership and belonging.

of the TOSHAV, rather than the mode in which he has functioned up to this point the GER. And I do think that this goes a long way in explaining the lengthy and deliberate language here.

The Hittites think that Avraham will remain anonymous, transient, and a visitor in other people's society. Avraham insists that he needs a field which will pass as an inheritance down the line, from father to son, to his son.

BURIAL AND PERMANENCE

Why now? Why does Avraham feel the need to make an acquisition of property at this particular juncture in his life? Why did he not make this statement previously?

We might venture the following answer. A person can live in any number of places. Today, in an age of global mobility, people move country with their job, students study abroad, we are able to feel at home in many places. But a person expresses his belonging to a place not necessarily by where he lived but rather where he wants to be buried. How many times do we hear about the desire of a deceased relative to be buried in the family graveyard, even if it means transporting the body many thousands of miles? **Where a person is buried expresses where they expect the next generation to be.** They want their grave to be recognised and remembered by the next generation. The place where a person chooses to be buried is the place that expresses permanence.

It is interesting that this very acquisition of the Machpela cave - the ancestral burial ground - became a vital link; and maybe the sole link; with the Land of Canaan. Not only are Isaac and Rebecca buried there but Jacob; when he has already been resident in Egypt for seventeen years; makes Joseph take an oath to bring him back to the land of Canaan to the Cave of Machpela:

“Do me this favour, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty; please do not bury me in Egypt. When I lie down with my fathers, take me up from the Egypt and bury me in their burial place.” (47:29-30 and see also 49:29-33)

This may have influenced Joseph in his own request to his children, not to be brought to final rest in Egypt. Rather he commands them to bring his bones to the Land of Israel when they eventually leave Egypt (50:24-25). Joseph - the man who leads Egypt and draws the entire family to that country - still feels that his homeland is the Land of Israel. This expresses itself not in his life but rather in his death. A man expresses true belonging in the choice of place in which he wishes to be buried.

It is when it comes to the time of burial that Avraham expresses a definite desire to acquire a lasting inheritance. By buying the Cave of Machpela, Avraham is stating unequivocally that he is a permanent feature on the Canaanite landscape. He is no wandering stranger. He, and his offspring, will remain eternally committed to this land!

SECTION II – A WIDER LOOK AT A TRANS-PARSHA THEME

We have spoken at length about the business transaction of the Cave of Machpela, but what of our other two stories? Let us look at them. First; the mission to find a wife for Isaac.

A FOREIGN WIFE FOR ISAAC.

Avraham is getting old (24:1) and feels a need to do his fatherly duty of finding a wife for his son and heir. He

approaches his servant and requests that he find a wife for his son Isaac. He is strict about his stipulations. First, the wife must not be a local girl but rather, should come from Avraham's birthplace. Second; even if a suitable girl is found outside the confines of Canaan, she must be willing to join Isaac in Canaan. Under no conditions is Isaac to leave the country.

AMONGST WHOM I DWELL

Avraham's command is phrased in a manner which arouses the curiosity of the commentators. He says to his servant :

“I will make you swear by the Lord ... that you will not take a wife for my son Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites amongst whom I dwell” (24:3-4)

The Kli Yakar asks about the double expression here. Avraham says not to take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Why add “amongst whom I dwell”? -We know that Avraham lives in Canaan amongst Canaanites!

The Kli Yakar reads this phrase as a reason rather than an instruction. Do not take a girl from Canaan BECAUSE I dwell amongst them. He explains Avraham's logic in the following way:

“ He said to himself; If my son marries a girl from Canaan, since we live amongst them, my son will frequent their homes and will learn from their (idolatrous) ways. Furthermore if my son marries of the daughters of Laban and Betuel and will go to live with them, there is also a probability that he will be influenced by their actions. By marrying a woman from abroad who will come to live here, there is no worry at all.”

Avraham knows that the nations who live around do not share his high ethical standards and his monotheism. How is he to ensure that the future generations will continue the traditions that he has set? The only way is to isolate the estate of Avraham.

If Isaac were to marry a woman from one of the local tribes he would need to visit the in-laws, attending their family celebrations. Even if he found a perfect wife, he would be exposed to their culture and open to influence. This is a chance that Avraham prefers not to take. Rather he opts to protect Isaac from the surrounding culture. As regards the wife for his son - his son's lifelong companion and fellow believer - Avraham insists that there can be no compromise. Maybe this 'perfect couple' can go out and face the world together as a unit, but the core must be well protected and properly cultivated.

KETURA

The final story of our parsha is interesting. Avraham remarries to a woman named Ketura. They have a number of children. Avraham's children and grandchildren from his second wife are all listed. But then we see a strange thing:

“Avraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Avraham's sons by concubines Avraham gave gifts while he was still living and sent them away from Isaac his son eastward to the land of the east.” (25:5-6)

We have just heard about the marriage and no sooner do we know of children and grandchildren we are told that they are sent away. Why would Avraham send his own children away? What is he doing? What parent sends their children away from home?

The key to understanding this episode lies in one phrase. The children of Ketura are sent “away from Isaac his son.” Are they

not all his sons? Apparently some sons are of greater significance than others. Isaac is the heir to Avraham's legacy.

In truth, we cannot read this parsha without remembering the story of Avraham and Yishmael (21:8-21). The two stories bear a striking resemblance. In that story, Sarah tells Avraham to send Yishmael away - "for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance of my son Isaac" (21:10). Avraham is greatly upset by this incident. How can he send his child away from home? In that story, God commands him to listen to Sarah rather than following his moral-fatherly instincts and Avraham obeys, sending Yishmael away. (The Midrash draws an interesting parallel between the two stories by suggesting that Ketura is in fact Hagar - mother of Yishmael!)

In the light of that parsha, we may strengthen our question. What has changed in Avraham? Why does he seem unbothered by sending his children away here - he initiates it - whereas with Yishmael, he was so troubled? What has changed?

SECURING THE FUTURE

What has changed is the death of Sarah. Sarah's death brings certain values into focus that might not have been clear previously.

When we look at the parsha as a whole, we realise that the three stories of our parsha share a common theme. They all deal with securing the future. Each story is one of isolating or strengthening the future of the Avraham-ic household in some way.

The story of the buying of the burial plot expresses Avraham's individuality, his stranger status, his unique mission. The aim is to establish a foothold, a statement of belonging for generations to come. The search for a wife for Isaac, once again emphasizes the desire to secure the future. He wants to know that Isaac has a family, that there will be an ongoing continuity. He also wishes to isolate Isaac. The future of the Jewish people lies in Isaac's ability to continue Avraham's ethical monotheism. He must set up a home which can be hermetically sealed against the buffeting cultural currents of Canaanite practice. This is also the objective that Avraham sets himself when he gives Isaac all his inheritance and distances all his other children. He decides that a statements must be made. Isaac is my heir. He is the heir to my spiritual path and he is also heir to my wealth. The two are not to be separated so as not to allow any misunderstanding.

The parsha has a singular theme. Securing the future of Avraham's legacy.

SARAH - THE BACKBONE OF THE FAMILY.

Why does Sarah's death precipitate this reaction?

Maybe it is the reality of mortality that gives Avraham a jolt which activates his concern with securing the future. Sarah's death brings Avraham's mortality into focus and he now feels a need to set his house in order; to ensure that Isaac is married and that the family mission will continue.

But maybe this change in Avraham is linked to Sarah's unique personality.

When we review Sarah's life, we see in every story that she is mentioned, that she is a woman who is ready for self sacrifice: She sacrifices her security and peace of mind to travel across the middle east to fulfil her husband's mission. She is willing to risk sexual advances by kings and leaders to protect her husband's life. She is even willing to allow another woman into her husband's bedroom to give Avraham his much desired son.

Throughout Sarah's life, she experiences personal hardship. All these hardships have a single purpose. She is dedicated to the mission of Avraham and she is fully committed to it. She will protect Avraham even at great personal cost. She will ensure that Avraham has a child even if it affects her marriage. She will assist Avraham in every way in order to secure the future of the Jewish mission.

This explains her insistence that Yishmael be sent away. She is not a heartless callous woman. But she does realise that the "covenant will be established through Isaac" (17:21) and thus Yishmael has to be sent away : "for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance of my son Isaac" (21:10). If Isaac is to be heir to Avraham's lifework, there must be no other competitors for that title.

In this trait, Sarah is a perfect partner for Avraham. Avraham and Sarah are a team. Avraham's central trait is kindness; Chesed. He welcomes every stranger into his home. He is open to everyone, he overflows with goodness and giving. He prays on behalf of sinners. He finds it difficult to see the bad in people. Sarah is the counterbalance. She has a certain shrewd realism about her which balances Avraham's openness. Sarah is the tough woman who makes the difficult decisions in the house. She decides that Yishmael must go, and God approves of her decision. Avraham with all his Chesed will not let Yishmael go, but God tells him that this is not the place for Chesed. Sarah's decision is correct "listen to her" (21:12).

With Sarah's death, Avraham realises that he has lost a side of his personality. All the time that Sarah was alive, Avraham could exercise his open welcoming lifestyle because he knew that Sarah would spot any potential trouble. Avraham was the soft side of the family and he knew that Sarah's sharp incisive mind would ensure that his blind faith in human goodness would not lead him to ruin.

But now Sarah is dead. Avraham has to adopt her role. The three stories that we are told after Sarah's death are all about Avraham assuming Sarah's role. He spends his time ensuring the successful future of the Avraham-ic dynasty. He has to act in a Sarah- like manner.

Maybe then, this parsha is more appropriately named than we originally assumed. This parsha is a true expression of "Chayei Sarah" - the life of Sarah.

Shabbat Shalom.

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