The Cave of Machpelah

Torah portion: Chayye Sarah
-Only portion bearing a woman’s name
-Only woman in Tanach whose age is mentioned
-Died at 127 seeing Abraham come back without Isaac

Abraham must now bury Sarah. He had been a wanderer in the land for 62 years. The Torah says:

Genesis 23

Abraham...spoke to the sons of Heth, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you. Give me burial property with you, so that I may bury my dead..."

And the sons of Heth answered, "Listen to us, my lord; you are a prince of God in our midst; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves. None of us will withhold his grave from you..."

And Abraham arose and prostrated himself to the people of the land, to the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, "If it is your will that I bury my dead, listen to me and intercede for me with Ephron ben Tzohar, that he may give me the Cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him, which is at the end of his field. Let him give it to me in your midst for burial property for a full price."

...Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham... "No, my lord, listen to me. I am GIVING you the field, and the cave that is in it, I am GIVING it to you. Before the eyes of the sons of my people, I am GIVING it to you; bury your dead."

And Abraham prostrated himself before the people of the land. And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "But, if only you would listen to me. I am giving you the MONEY for the field; take it from me, and I will bury my dead there."

And Ephron replied, "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is it between you and me? Bury your dead."

And Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he had named..., four hundred shekels of silver, standard currency among merchants. 

Welcome to the Middle East!
If you understand this piece, you will understand the Middle East. Typical Oriental bazaar.

-Everybody is very polite and outwardly friendly and hospitable

-Everybody flatters everybody else in public. Abraham is called
  -"A prince of God" -- n'si Elohim
  -"My Lord" -- adoni

-Exaggerated expressions of friendship: "what is it between me and you?"
  -Between two great friends such as the two of us, shall we even TALK about money?
  -Your happiness and satisfaction are the only things that count!
  -Never mind the fact that we just met and belong to different ethnic groups.

-“Listen to me” (Shma’eni) means "Don't listen to me"
  -People don’t speak their true minds. Ephron never intended to give away his property; in fact he exacted a very high price for it

-Ephron said: “I give it to you! Take it!” He said that THREE times! If you believe that, you'll believe anything.

-Always let the shopkeeper quote a price first

-People love to gather and watch others argue and negotiate. Free show!

-Negotiations are always disguised. Yes, they negotiated! Listen:

  -Abraham clearly says at the outset he wants to buy just the cave, "for burial property for a full price."

-Ephron responds:
  - I am GIVING you the field, and the cave that is in it
    -Translation: sorry, you have to buy the field also. Package deal, or no deal
  -"Bury your dead."
    -Translation: remember, I know you need it fast, and so you are in a poor bargaining position (Jewish tradition says we must quickly bury the dead)
    -“Let's not haggle over something worth only 400 shekels of silver”
      -Ephron talks as if the price is low, but it is really exorbitant. He takes advantage of Abraham's grief.

-How do we know the price is exorbitant? Later,
  -King David will pay only 1/8 of that (50 shekels) to buy a site on which to build the Temple! [2Samuel 24:24-25]
  -The prophet Jeremiah will pay only 17 shekels of silver for an entire field [Jer. 32:9]
  -King Omri paid only 6000 shekels for the entire territory of Samaria [1Kings 16:24]
Normally at this point serious negotiations would begin and the land would be sold for a fraction of the asking price. And we know Abraham can drive a hard bargain; we've seen him haggling with God Himself. But Abraham immediately agrees to the price without haggling, and pays:
- Maybe he is overcome by grief and is in no mood for bargaining
- Maybe he feels it's an insult to Sarah's memory to haggle over the price of her grave
- Maybe he feels he can well afford it, and doesn't bargain for sport
- Maybe he feels it is beneath him to argue with such scoundrels as Ephron
- Or maybe he knows the true value of the cave!

Ephron, no doubt, was laughing all the way to the bank after the deal. But if he had taken a peek in the Zohar -- the Book of Jewish mysticism -- (an anachronistic peek, to be sure!) he would have found out WHY Abraham had his heart set on this particular cave. Listen to the Zohar (if you are over 40!):

Zohar, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 127a

Rabbi Yehudah said: 'Abraham recognized the cave of Machpelah by a certain mark, and he had long set his mind and heart on it. For he had once entered that cave and seen Adam and Eve buried there. He knew that they were Adam and Eve because he saw the form of a man, and, while he was gazing, a door opened into the Garden of Eden, and he perceived the same form standing near it. Now, whoever looks at the form of Adam cannot escape death. For when a man is about to pass out of the world he catches sight of Adam and at that moment he dies. Abraham, however, did look at him, and saw his form and yet survived. He saw, moreover, a shining light that illumined the cave, and a lamp burning. Abraham then coveted that cave for his burial place, and his mind and heart were set upon it.

... 

Rabbi Shim'on said: 'When Abraham brought Sarah in there for burial, Adam and Eve arose and refused to receive her. They said: "Is not our shame already great enough before the Holy One in the other world on account of our sin, which brought death into the world, that you should come to shame us further with your good deeds?" Abraham answered: "I am already destined to make atonement for you before the Almighty, so that you may nevermore be shamed before Him." After taking upon himself this obligation, Abraham buried Sara his wife. Adam then returned to his place, but not Eve, until Abraham came and placed her beside Adam, who received her for his sake.

So Abraham wanted that cave because it was the entrance to the Garden of Eden. He wanted to buy Heaven!

**Tradition**
Possession of the Promised Land began with a legal purchase, in front of many witnesses:
- A purchase that is eternal (the dead are not going anywhere).
- This is why Torah dwells on it at length.

So it was with the Zionist movement much later. The Jews bought the land they settled, parcel by parcel. The land may be ours by divine right, but we must still compensate, even generously, those who live there.

Four couples are buried at Machpelah (now known as the Tomb of the Patriarchs): Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.
It is called Machpelah ("doubled") because it has 2 levels.

When Jews immigrate to a new place, their first concern is to buy a plot of land for a cemetery.

Second holiest Jewish site after Temple Mount

History of Me’arat Ha-Machpelah

There is a building on the site:
- It was originally a synagogue, built 2000 years ago.
- Then Byzantine and Crusader conquerors turned it into a church.
- Then Muslim conquerors turned it into a mosque. They did not allow Jews to enter it. Jews were allowed only up to the 7th step on the outside staircase.

When Israel retook Hebron in 1967, it gave control of the site to Muslim authorities. Muslims have unlimited access, but Jews do not.
- There are three rooms: Ohel Avraham, Ohel Yitzhak, and Ohel Ya'akov.
- Jews can freely access Ohel Avraham and Ohel Ya'akov, but have no access to Ohel Yitzhak, the largest one, except for 10 days a year.

Over 300,000 people visit every year.

Actual cave uncovered several years ago under building, revealed artifacts from Early Israelite Period (3000 years ago).

This strong link to Jewish history is why many Israelis insist on retaining that area. They call it, as the Torah does, Kiryat Arba -- the city of the four [couples]!. It is near Hebron.

6000 Jews live there now, amid a sea of hostile Arabs.

The irony is, if Jews own any part of the Land of Israel, surely they own Machpelah, the only one for which the Torah gives a full detailed record of its acquisition. No theology there!
Yet there is a good chance that in any final peace treaty Israel will have to give up this particular area.
Discussion

- Should Israel fight to retain control of Me'arat Ha-Machpelah -- the Tomb of the Patriarchs?
- If yes, should they continue their practice of giving unlimited access to Muslims, but not to Jews?