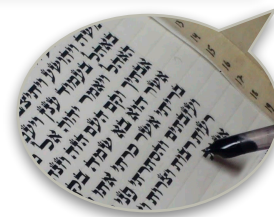




# The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



**Sefer Bereshit**

**Parshat Chayei Sarah**

**Cheshvan 5784 / November 2023**

## A Parsha For Our Time

*By Jeff Kapelus*

Our world changed on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Given what has been going on in this upside-down world since the 7<sup>th</sup>, it was fitting that just two short weeks later, in *Parshat Noach*, Hamas was explicitly mentioned.

I thought, as did many of you that this was not only timely and fitting but perhaps a divine message. Each Shabbat since then, I've reviewed the *parsha*, searching for similar signs and references to Israel's war with Hamas and the current geopolitical landscape.

When I was asked to write this week's Collective Conversation, I accepted immediately. Why? Because on its face, *Parshat Chayei Sarah* tells a series of great stories. It describes Avraham's negotiation and acquisition of a burial plot for Sarah in *Maarat Hamchpelha*, Eliezer's adventure to find a wife for Yitzchak and his encounter with Rivka at the well, and the death of Avraham Avinu at the age of 175 years. These stories would be great fodder for some juicy divrei Torah in any other year.

But this isn't any other year. Israel is at war with Hamas and at war with a false narrative and growing antisemitism. As I have done in recent weeks, instead of seeking a traditional dvar Torah or life lesson, I searched the *parsha* to unearth a connection to October 7<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath.

There is indeed a portion that speaks to current affairs in Gaza and Israel, including the warped, hateful, and ignorant claims made by so many.

When seeking a burial plot for Sarah, Avraham approached the *B'nei Chet*, who directed him to a man named Ephron. Extensive bargaining ensued to establish the terms under which the property might be purchased.

Why is this story told in such lengthy, painstaking detail? Is it simply a lesson in ancient bargaining techniques? Is it a record of the acquisition of a national landmark? What is this story designed to communicate? Whatever the reason for this story, the detailed account is somewhat unusual. Why?

The Ibn Ezra addresses this question as follows: It expresses the fulfillment of Hashem's promise to Avraham that the land will become his inheritance. According to the Ibn Ezra this is the first step of a long process of inheritance that God has promised to Avraham.

Here, we see the first piece of land—in Israel—to pass into Avraham's ownership. Given current events, this comes as reassurance of biblical ties to the Jewish homeland: our great patriarch purchased the land and it is recorded in great detail. This is proof of ownership and residence that dates back to ancient times.

There's another approach to understanding why this story is told as it is. When Avraham approached the Bnei Chet for the burial plot, his introductory words were *ger vtoshav anochi eemachem, I am a stranger and resident among you* (Bereshit 23:4). But aren't these terms mutually exclusive?

Rav Soloveitchik offers a brilliant insight: Avraham's definition of his dual status describes the historical position of the Jew who resides in a predominantly non-Jewish society with profound accuracy. Like

other inhabitants of Canaan, he was a resident, clearly a fellow citizen joining others in advancing the common welfare. At the same time, Avraham, a spiritual Jew, regarded himself as a stranger.

Rav Soloveitchik applies this reading to a far broader context than the 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.” (Reflections of the Rav. Chapter 16)

This dichotomy between *ger* and *toshav* is the key to reading the bargaining narrative between the Hebron community and Avraham.

The Hittites think Avraham will remain anonymous, transient, and a visitor in their society. But Avraham insists that he needs a field that will pass as an inheritance down the line, from father to son and beyond—he wants to become a *toshav*. Avraham wants to establish a permanent and enduring presence.

This dichotomy between *ger* and *toshav* applies to the current war in Israel. Acting as a *ger*, one might think that Israel should heed demands for a ceasefire. But Israel is acting as a *toshav* doing what it is entitled to do in its own land—a land where Jews have been since ancient times.

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Golda Meir said it well: “If we have to have a choice between being dead and pitied and being alive with a bad image, we'd rather be alive and have the bad image.”

**Jeff** and Phyllis, and their son Max, moved to the YIS community a quarter of a century ago. Here, twins Madelyn and Jason were born and were proud recipients of local Jewish day school education. Jeff has been very active in the greater Jewish community, including leadership roles in security and teaching life lessons thru youth sports. Jeff and Phyllis are STILL waiting for a local Kosher sport bar!

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