

Parshat Chayei Sarah 5778

Negotiating over the Cave of Machpelah After travelling from Be'er Sheva to Chevron to mourn and eulogize for Sarah, Avraham avinu turned from his tears to organise Sarah's burial. He approached the descendants of Heth, the son of Canaan and asked them to grant him a plot of land suitable for a cemetery. The plot of land that Avraham sought to purchase belonged to Efron; why did Avraham additionally approach the children of Heth? This question is even more pronounced later, where the Torah describes the Cave of Machpelah as "**the field that Avraham acquired from the children of Heth**" (25/10). Was Avraham supposed to negotiate with the children of Heth or with Efron?

The **Brisker Rav** (Yitzchok Zev Soloveitchik, 1886-1959) suggests that Avraham had to negotiate with both the local community and with Efron as he had two distinct goals in mind when he set about procuring Machpelah as a burial site for Sarah - to purchase the land from its owner (Efron) and to have the site recognised by the local population (children of Heth) as a permanent burial plot that would never be expropriated by the local government.

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** zt"l suggests that Avraham had to negotiate with Efron to attain private ownership of the land and with the local community to attain national ownership to be able to pass it on to future generations.

"I am an immigrant and a resident among you" Whilst negotiating with the Hittites to sell him a burial plot, Avraham describes himself as "**an immigrant and a resident among you**" (23/4)? How can Avraham be at the same time an immigrant and a resident?

Rashi initially explains that there is no contradiction. Avraham was previously an "immigrant" from a foreign land and now a "resident" who had taken up residence in Canaan. However, Rashi then quotes a midrashic interpretation which accepts that "immigrant" and "resident" are in fact mutually exclusive; Avraham was saying that he would act either in the role of an immigrant or in the role of a resident. If he was to be sold the burial site, then he would be like an immigrant and would purchase it for its full price; whereas if he was to be given the plot of land, then he would be like a resident.

Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (1903-1993) points out that Avraham's expression "I am an immigrant and a resident among you", represents a fundamental dilemma. Did

Avraham view himself as a citizen of their society or did his value system clash with theirs, resulting in an identity which is distinctive and autonomous?

It is clear that the Hittites respected Avraham. In fact they displayed profound reverence towards him – "**Hear us, my lord. You are a prince of G-d in our midst**" (23/6) However, a tense balance pervades the entire dialogue. There was an implicit condition attached to the offer made by the Hittites – "**In the choicest of our burial places bury your dead**". Their language suggested that Avraham would have to give up his right to keep himself apart from them, saying, in effect: Avraham, you are part of our society and as one of us; you must bury your dead in a burial site that belongs to us.

Rav Soloveitchik notes that Avraham expressed the dual role that every Jew must play. On the one hand, he was a resident of his country and as such was required to work and pray for its welfare. On the other hand, Avraham would always be an immigrant, for his allegiance was to Hashem. In resisting the surrounding culture and maintaining his unique responsibility, a Jew also views himself as an immigrant. When the Hittites failed to understand this, Avraham responded with sternness and precision. He told them, in effect: Your offer is generous but I cannot accept it. Instead, he asked for a burial plot that was located at the edge of the field, apart from the other graves, one that would be legally his own. Here, Avraham asserts the concept of "kever Yisrael", burial in a Jewish cemetery.

The tenth test of Avraham "**Avraham Avinu was tested with ten trials and he withstood all of them, to make known how deep was our father Avraham's love of Hashem**" **Pirkei Avos (5/3)**. It is generally accepted that the ten tests which Avraham faced were progressively more difficult. It is also generally accepted that the tenth and most difficult test was the Akeidah. However, **Rabbeinu Yonah** (1200-1263), in his commentary on Pirkei Avos, lists the Akeidah as the ninth test.

According to Rabbeinu Yonah, the tenth and most challenging test for Avraham was being forced to pay an exorbitant sum for a burial plot for his wife. Avraham had just achieved the spiritual heights of the Akeidah and had also been promised five times by Hashem (within chapters 12-17) that the Land would be given to him and his descendants. Therefore, on being forced to buy a plot from Efron for a large sum of money, Avraham could have reacted instinctively by raising his voice and complaining but he did not. According to Rabbeinu Yonah, through paying a full price for the burial plot, without in any way questioning Hashem, Avraham avinu demonstrated that being a faithful "eved Hashem" is the work of a lifetime.