

TORAHSCOPE: Chayei Sarah (Sarah's Life)

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Genesis 23:1-25:18
2 Kings 4:1-37

“Respecting the Local Customs”

“Now Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years; *these were* the years of the life of Sarah. Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:1-2).

Even though the title of this week's Torah portion is “Sarah's Life,” the bulk of the narrative is devoted to the events that follow her death. As the beloved wife of Abraham and matriarch of the faithful followers of the One True God, she has always been held in high esteem. This reverence has been given not only for her godly qualities, but also for her character traits that most likely epitomized what is later described in Proverbs 31. The author of Hebrews mentions her as an important figure of faith, as she and Abraham were seeking a country and city that reached beyond this Earth:

“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. **All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.** People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:11-16, NIV).

As we examine *Chayei Sarah*, we discover that we are at a period in time when the life of Sarah comes to a climax. As the helpmate of Abraham, she had witnessed and participated in an extraordinary life with the man that God chose to give special promises to. He took his responsibility very seriously, and although his imperfections and lack of patience had resulted in a premature copulation with the handmaiden Hagar, resulting in the birth of Ishmael—at the ironic suggestion of Sarai—his true love and partner for life was the faithful Sarah. Now as she predeceases him, Abraham desires only the best available burial site in the land that he was promised by God.

Provisionally at her death, Abraham and Sarah were residing in the environs of Hebron in Canaan, which was then dominated by the Hittites. Noah said that descendents of Canaan would be “slaves” or “servants” (Heb. *evadim*, עֲבָדִים) to the descendents of Shem:

“When Noah awoke from his wine, he knew what his youngest son had done to him. So he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants He shall be to his brothers.’ He also said, ‘Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let [H]im dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant’” (Genesis 9:24-27).

As a result of this word, some from the local Hittite population, including the elder servant Eliezer of Damascus, were certainly included among Abraham's many servants. Whether the Hittites were literal “slaves” of Abraham and Sarah or not is unimportant, because there is certainly an indication that they had an innate recognition that Abraham was a blessed man of the Creator God. Read the following statements of honor that were bestowed upon Abraham by his neighbors at the time of Sarah's death:

“I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight.’ The sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, ‘Hear us, **my lord, you are a mighty prince among us**; bury your dead in the choicest of our graves; none of us

will refuse you his grave for burying your dead.' So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth" (Genesis 23:4-7).

By referring to Abraham as "my lord" (Heb. *adoni*, אֲדֹנָי) and declaring that he was "the elect of God among us" (NJPS), it is apparent that the indigenous population understood that Abraham had a unique connection with the Almighty. You also might note that Abraham treated his neighbors with great respect, declaring that he was a sojourner, bowing before them and honoring the local inhabitants. This mutual respect pays great dividends as Abraham elicits his good will to secure a revered burial site for his beloved Sarah. There is no indication that Abraham was necessarily proselytizing his neighbors, except those who had become a part of his household, to join him in the worship of his God. Apparently, this "stranger" who crossed over the Jordan and became the first Hebrew, conducted his life in such an exemplary manner that he gained great admiration from his neighbors. This is a great example of how his spiritual descendants, who likewise worship his God, should conduct their lives in whatever environment they happen to live.

Obviously, the natives were aware of the great wealth that Abraham had accumulated during his lifetime. But the status achieved through wealth did not affect his treatment of his hosts in their native land. He was still humble enough to display sincere humility by deferring to many of the local customs and accepting their norms for conducting affairs. The blessing of assets consisting of flocks and servants indicates that he had received great tangible favor from the Almighty. But what is most admirable—and certainly recognized by the Hittites—is his genuine respect for others no matter where they stood in society. This attitude is confirmed many times throughout his life, especially when we are given glimpses of his interactions with Eliezer.

This is especially important when you consider that Abraham adhered to all the local customs when he paid an exorbitant price (400 shekels) to secure and purchase the caves. As we read the account of the transfer of ownership, which in its own right could be considered a legal written contract of sale, it is speculated by the Jewish Sages that the owner, Ephron the Hittite, clearly understood the value of the property. In an interesting exchange of comments, the negotiations were such that Abraham utilized the favor of the local people to approach the owner:

"So Abraham rose and bowed to the people of the land, the sons of Heth. And he spoke with them, saying, 'If it is your wish *for me* to bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and approach Ephron the son of Zohar for me, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah which he owns, which is at the end of his field; for the full price let him give it to me in your presence for a burial site'" (Genesis 23:7-9).

We then learn that when Ephron heard the initial open-ended offer, he tried to save face in deference to Abraham's popularity among the locals, by back-handedly stating that he would make the transfer of ownership as a gift to the esteemed "prince of God":

"Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth; *even* of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, 'No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.' And Abraham bowed before the people of the land. He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, 'If you will only please listen to me; I will give the price of the field, accept *it* from me that I may bury my dead there.' Then Ephron answered Abraham, saying to him, 'My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you? So bury your dead'" (Genesis 23:10-15).

However, in a clever, but apparently customary way, Ephron with witnesses was able to place a price on the property without directly asking for compensation. Even though the price was a ridiculously high price, Ephron was able to appear magnanimous, while still establishing the amount. But Abraham, knowing the local customs, understood in his grief what was being communicated. Without hesitation, he weighed out the purchase price before witnesses and consummated the transaction:

“Abraham listened to Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, commercial standard” (Genesis 23:16).

Four hundred shekels of silver may not sound like a tremendous amount of money given Abraham’s means. However, as the Talmud describes this translation, these were large shekels that had the weight of 2,500 ordinary shekels (b.*Bava Metzia* 87a). The price that Abraham really paid for the burial cave of his wife was most likely one million ounces of silver. This is a considerable sum of money for such a small plot of real estate. But Abraham had his priorities right, and we can conclude from the lack of negotiations and hesitation, that the Lord wanted this generous sale recorded for future generations to consider. Incidentally, He was also responsible for the prosperity that Abraham enjoyed in order to come up with the required sum!

As we consider the life, death, and final burial place of Abraham and Sarah this week, we have some serious things to consider concerning our own personal faith and how we interact with others. If we are foreigners in a community of people, will we show them respect and defer to some of their local customs? In Messiah Yeshua, we are told that “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). What other manmade distinctions could we place there? We have the important responsibility as members of the Body of Messiah to be generous to others, and if necessary, show respect to the pagans we encounter just like Abraham did. Do we do this? Do we demonstrate the goodness of the God we serve through our attitudes—even if we may be “shafted” sometimes?

The rewards for us demonstrating the good character of God in the world are not just being blessed by Him in our lives today. It especially includes our knowing that the ultimate blessing will come when His Kingdom of God is restored and Heaven comes to Earth, something that the Patriarchs eagerly anticipated:

“And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. **But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them**” (Hebrews 11:15-16).

May the Heavenly City always be our focus as we seek to serve the Lord and testify of His goodness until the end of our strength and days!

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