



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 5: Parshat Hayyei Sarah - The Mortal Body

Genesis 23

בראשית כג:א ויהי חיי שרה מאה שנה ועשרים שנה ושבע שנים שני חיי שרה. ב ותמת שרה בקרית ארבע הוא חברון בארץ כנען ויב' א אברהם לספ' ד לשרה ולבכ' תה. ג ויקם אברהם מעל פני מתי וידבר אל-בני-חת לאמר ר. ד גר-ותושב אני כי עמכם תנו לי אחזת-קבר עמכם ואקברה מתי מלפני. ה ויענו בני-חת את-אברהם לאמר לו. ו שמענו אד' ני נשיא אל' הים אתה בתוכנו במבחר קברינו קבר את-מתך איש ממנו את-קברו ל' א-יכלה ממך מקבר מתך. ז ויקם אברהם וישתחו לעם-הארץ לבני-חת. ח וידבר אתם לאמר אם-יש את-נפשכם לקבר את-מתי מלפני שמעוני ופגעו-לי בעפרון בן-צ' חר. ט ויתן-לי את-מערת המכפלה אשר-לו אשר בקצה שדהו בכסף מלא יתננה לי בתוכם לאחזת-קבר. י ועפרון י' שב בתוך בני-חת ויען עפרון החתי את-אברהם באזני בני-חת לכל באי שער-עירו לאמר. יא ל' א-אד' ני שמעני השדה נתתי לך והמערה אשר-בו לך נתתיה לעיני בני-עמי נתתיה לך קבר מתך. יב וישתחו אברהם לפני עם הארץ. יג וידבר אל-עפרון באזני עם-הארץ לאמר אך אם-אתה לו שמעני נתתי קסף השדה קח ממני ואקברה את-מתי שמה. יד ויען עפרון את-אברהם לאמר לו. טו אד' ני שמעני ארץ ארבע מאת שקל-כסף ביני ובינך מה-הוא ואת-מתך קבר. טז וישמע אברהם אל-עפרון וישק' ל אברהם לעפר' את-הכסף אשר דבר באזני בני-חת ארבע מאות שקל כסף עבר לס' חר. יז ויקם שדה עפרון אשר במכפלה אשר לפני ממרא השדה והמערה אשר-בו וכל-העץ אשר בשדה אשר בכל-גבלו סביב. יח לאברהם למקנה לעיני בני-חת בכל באי שער-עירו. יט ואחרי-כן קבר אברהם את-שרה אשתו אל-מערת שדה המכפלה על-פני ממרא הוא חברון בארץ כנען. כ ויקם השדה והמערה אשר-בו לאברהם לאחזת-קבר מאת בני-חת.

¹ Sarah's lifetime-the span of Sarah's life-came to one hundred and twenty-seven years. ² Sarah died in Kiriath-arba, now Hebron-in the land of Canaan; and Avraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her. ³ Then Avraham rose from beside his dead, and spoke to the Hittites, saying, ⁴ "I am a resident alien among you; sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial." ⁵ And the Hittites replied to Avraham, saying to him, ⁶ "Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold his burial place from you for burying your dead." ⁷ Thereupon Avraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites, ⁸ and he said to them, "If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron son of Zohar. ⁹ Let him sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me, at the full price, for a burial site in your midst." ¹⁰ Ephron was present among the Hittites; so Ephron the Hittite answered Avraham in the hearing of the Hittites, all who entered the gate of his town, saying, ¹¹ "No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it; I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead." ¹² Then Avraham bowed low before the people of the land, ¹³ and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "If only you would hear me out! Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there." ¹⁴ And Ephron replied to Avraham, saying to him, ¹⁵ "My lord, do hear me! A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver-what is that between you and me? Go and bury your dead." ¹⁶ Avraham accepted Ephron's terms. Avraham paid out to Ephron the money that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites-four hundred shekels of silver at the going merchants' rate. ¹⁷ So Ephron's land in Machpelah, near Mamre-the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field-passed ¹⁸ to Avraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town. ¹⁹ And then Avraham buried his spouse Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre-now Hebron-in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ Thus the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Avraham, as a burial site.



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Context

Sarah dies. Avraham mourns her, then arranges to bury her in a cave that he purchases from Ephron, a Hittite neighbor. Realizing how old he is growing, Avraham calls upon his faithful servant to find a spouse for Yitchak among the people of his land, a non-Canaanite. The servant, named Eliezer in midrash, prays for a sign of divine caring to demonstrate that he has fulfilled his charge. Rivkah appears to draw water from the near-by well, immediately offering Eliezer water, and waters also his camels. Eliezer seizes the moment, gives her gifts of betrothal—a gold nose ring and bracelets, and asks about her family—she is the grand-daughter of Avraham's brother Nachor. Rivkah offers Eliezer food and lodging at her home. Feeling blessed that he has received a divine sign, Eliezer asks her family for permission for Rivkah to accompany him back to marry Avraham's son Yitzchak. Given the opportunity to choose, Rivkah clearly states her will to go, and receives a blessing for fertility, a blessing that is often offered by a parent to the bride before the wedding ceremony.

Rivkah and Yitzchak fall in love at first sight, and she comforts him after Sarah's death. They settle near Beer-lahai-roi with God's blessing.

Avraham marries Ketura who bears descendants to whom Avraham gives gifts. He sends them away so that Yitzchak will be his only inheritor. Avraham dies, and is buried by his two sons together, Yitzchak and Ishmael. Ishmael produces many offspring, twelve chieftains, and dies.

Explorations

Burying Sarah is a complicated process that touches on some of the challenges of being human and mortal. Mourning his spouse of so many years, and so much shared life together, Avraham has strong feelings about what is fitting to do with her body, the last remnant of her. After he has cried, he sets out to find a place to honor her remains.

Out of hospitality, respect, and compassion, Ephron the Hittite offers to give Avraham any site that he likes. He sees the gift as a token of the mutual trust that marks their friendship and the closeness of their tribes. Every member of his community is ready to give his or her plot, he claims. Avraham settles on a *cave, ma'arat ha'machpela*, located on a field owned by Ephron. Ephron wants dearly for Avraham to accept it without payment. He offers the entire field, not only the cave, so that there is no doubt about free access to the actual burial site. Though a midrash suggests differently (see Study Links below), it seems evident that both Ephron and Avraham are wealthy enough that the money value of the field and cave is not significant to either of them. The money is not the point, but rather the symbol of the exchange.

The talmud cites this biblical incident in a discussion of the Jewish marriage ritual. In Tractate Kiddushin (2a), the [gemara](#) asks,



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Why does our Mishna say a woman is *acquired*, and the [another] Mishna says that a man *sanctifies* her?

Answer: Because our Mishna teaches that one of the methods [of marrying] is by means of money;

We learn [that] money [is an acceptable method] from [a comparison of same words,] "*kichah-kichah*" [taking-taking] from the purchase of Ephron's field, and "*kichah*" is called *kinyan* [acquisition] as it says in Gen. 49:30, “The field which Avraham *acquired* from Ephron”.

In this text, the act of purchasing the field and cave is compared with the act of acquiring a female spouse. The sages learn that both are accomplished by means of an exchange of money between a man and a person who holds a claim over the desirable object—a cave and a woman. This comparison is not coincidental. Some interpret the text to mean that marriage consists of the purchase of a woman like a field, like property. Feminists make strong objections to marriage as acquisition, and create alternative ceremonies that remove the acquisition aspect from Jewish wedding ceremonies.

At the same time as critiquing and revising the concept and practices of acquisition, we appreciate the mortal longing that the purchase of the field represents for Avraham. The agreement Avraham makes with Ephron is not about the money, nor even ownership. Avraham is striving for immortality at a moment when he is most reminded of mortality. Though Avraham himself is an impermanent resident in the land, an “alien”, he wants permanent lawful status over the burial site for Sarah. He insists on ownership, a long-term claim as an antidote to the painful evidence of Sarah's decomposing body. For the sake of his principle—his claim, Avraham humbles himself before Ephron, prostrating, and offering the silver as payment for his hope to extend his life and deeds toward eternity. According to tradition, *ma'arat ha'machpela* is the burial place of Adam and Eve, and for most of the couples of patriarchs-matriarchs.

Questions for Discussion

In your view, what does Avraham's purchase and claim on the field and cave represent? Of what is the cave a symbol, and how is it appropriate or inappropriate for Sarah?

Like Sarah's burial, marriage aspires to the infinite, forging a bond that transcends the limits of individual life. Marriages often produce children who carry finite life toward the future. How do you feel it is most appropriate to express these yearnings in ritual, and in life?

When we lose a dear one, relative, friend, or animal, we face death and our own mortality. Every religion suggests ways to respond to that difficult encounter. How does this passage help, challenge, or trouble you about these topics?



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Study Links

Click [here](#) for a traditional midrash explaining a meaning of *machpela*-- *doubling*, in the name of the cave.

The cave of *machpela* has been a contested site, sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For a brief sketch of its troubled history, click for the Wikipedia entry [here](#).

Click to browse Judith Romney Wegner's [Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah](#).

For a comprehensive and critical discussion of alternative Jewish wedding options, click on Danya Ruttenberg's site, [Kiddushin Variations](#).

Check [this site](#) about Jewish ways to deal with dying and death—click around to find an extensive and helpful bibliography, and [this site](#) to compare other religious traditions about death and mourning.

[Here](#) is an interpretation of the political-national significance of the purchase of the field and cave of *machpela* from the perspective of one teacher at an Israeli yeshiva.

Summary of Issues

Avraham tries to resolve his mourning for his spouse Sarah by buying a burial cave for her. His interactions with his neighbors evoke some of the challenges of facing the meaning of marriage and mortality.

Methods & Observations

This purchase and sale scene documents an intercultural encounter between a patriarch and his neighbors. In the narrative, we witness a highly formal exchange between partners who are striving to understand, respect, and coexist with one another during a life transition. This text gives some of the flavor of inter-ethnic biblical relationships.

The talmudic passage about marriage suggests two aspects: acquisition and sanctification. The acquisition aspect refers to the purchase of the field and cave in our parasha. In this text, we witness the sages trying to make sense of an important institution of society by looking at the lives of biblical characters. By asking their question about sanctification, they reveal their interest in an alternate model. Perhaps it remains for us to fulfill the transition from acquisition to sanctification of marriage bonds.

Contact

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