

Chayei Sara

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

*It is as if God wants to make sure we understand exactly where this purchase is – in Hebron.
There is no mistaking it – this land was purchased by our forefather, Abraham.*

This week's Torah reading opens with the death of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, in Hebron (Genesis 23). Abraham mourns his wife and then immediately goes about the business of burying her. He approaches the Hittites, the native residents of Hebron, and identifies himself as a stranger and resident among them, a foreign resident in modern terms. He asks to purchase a piece of land to bury his wife. The Hittites, recognizing Abraham as an important man, offer to allow him to bury his wife on their land, for free. Abraham refuses their offer, however, and insists on purchasing the land at its full price. In fact, he knows exactly which piece of land he wants – the Cave of Machpela and its accompanying field. The purchase is a public affair, carried out at the gates to the city, in the presence of the Hittites.

The transaction is spelled out in great detail, with special emphasis placed on certain words and phrases. In verse 2, we learn that Sarah dies “in Kiryat Arba that is, Hebron in the land of Canaan.” In verse 17, the transaction is sealed and the location of the field and cave are spelled out:

The field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area. (Genesis 23:17)

In verse 19, the location is spelled out yet again: “the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre that is, Hebron in the land of Canaan.” It is as if Scripture wants to make sure we realize that Kiryat Arba and Mamre are synonyms for Hebron and that this is in the Land of Canaan. The landmark is so important and its geography is so important – lest we forget!

Unusual emphasis is also placed on the exchange of money: Abraham insists on paying the “full price” (Genesis 23:9). In verse 13, Abraham repeats the fact that he is giving money for the purchase. In Verse 16, Abraham transfers “four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.” It is almost as if Abraham knows that he had better make sure this transfer is done properly, according to the books, or the land will be taken from him. And the way Scripture records it, is as if God wants to make sure we understand exactly where this purchase is – in Hebron, in the Land of Canaan. There is no mistaking it – this land was purchased by our forefather as a family burial plot.

It is amazing therefore, that one of the most disputed places in Israel today is Hebron. Even as hundreds of Jews live in the old city of Hebron, thousands of Jews live nearby in Kiryat Arba, and tens of thousands live in the surrounding hills of Judea, international opinion dictates that Hebron belongs to the Arabs.

For many years now, a wonderful tradition has developed in Hebron on the Shabbat when we read this Torah portion. Jews from all over Israel converge upon Hebron for this Shabbat. Every home in Kiryat Arba and Jewish Hebron opens its doors to friends and relatives. Teen-agers come from all over the country and sleep on the floors of schools and other public buildings. Shabbat meals are great gatherings and logistical nightmares. No one knows how everyone fits in, but somehow they do. On Shabbat morning, guests and residents alike stream to the Machpela Cave and there, on the very spot where Abraham buried his wife Sarah, the very place which Abraham purchased thousands of years ago, they read this chapter and praise God for His bounty.