



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Chaye Sarah 5763  
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Shalom!

### Introduction

This week's *parasha* includes two main stories. The first story deals with the death of Abraham's wife, Sarah. The death of Sarah motivated Abraham to immediately find and negotiate a burial place for his wife in Kiryat Arba -- also called Hebron. The negotiations between Abraham and the local Hittite chieftains for the purchase of the parcel of land is fascinating: The sons of Het, owners of the land in question in Hebron, first offer the place as a gift to Abraham who absolutely refuses to accept it as a gift, but rather wants to pay full price. The family of Ephron the Hittite finally quotes what seems a high price, which Abraham agrees to pay immediately. Another interesting detail in this purchase: Abraham asks to buy the Cave of Machpela, but is told that he has to buy the entire "field" where the cave is, which of course he does. The Cave of Machpela, with the surrounding parcel of land, thus became the first place legally acquired by a Jew in the Land of Israel.

The second story in the *parasha* is how Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, found the woman who became his wife. Actually, he did not find her. Isaac was not to marry a local Canaanite woman. Abraham, therefore, sent his servant to the "old country", where Sarah and Abraham came from, to look for a proper young woman from their old family. The servant found Rebecca, granddaughter of Abraham's brother, at the city well. She was not only beautiful, she was kind, hospitable and willing to leave her family and everything she knew in order to go to Canaan and marry Isaac. Rebecca thus filled the void left by Sarah's death.

### Questions for Your Family's Discussion

- 1) This is what Abraham asked from the Hittites in Hebron:

*“Intercede for me with Ephron, son of Zohar, asking him to sell me the cave of Machpelah that he owns; it is at the edge of his field. Let him sell it to me in your presence, at its full price, for a burial place.”*

This is what they answered him:

*“Please, sir, listen to me! I give you both the field and the cave in it; in the presence of my kinsmen I make this gift. Bury your dead!”*

Abraham replied:

*“Ah, if only you would please listen to me! I will pay you the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.”*

And this is what happened: (The “deed” to the land purchased by Abraham as recorded in our *parasha*)

*“Thus Ephron’s field in Machpelah, facing Mamre, together with its cave and all the trees anywhere within its limits, was conveyed “to Abraham by purchase in the presence of all the Hittites who sat on Ephron’s town council. After this transaction, Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the Cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre (that is Hebron) in the land of Canaan. Thus the field with its cave was transferred from the Hittites to Abraham as a burial place.*

Please discuss the following:

- a) Why did Abraham insist on paying for the cave and not accept it as a gift?
- b) Why did the Hittite sell Abraham more than he asked, not only the cave, but the whole field?

Possible Answer:

The “deed” you read sounded like a real Hittite contract. According to ancient Hittite law, the seller will continue to pay full taxes to the king if part of the property is sold, however, the buyer must carry the taxes if he buys the whole property.

- 2) Abraham’s servant arrived in the evening at the well, outside the city of Nahor (today, on the border of Syria & Turkey) just when women came out to draw water. The servant said the following:

*“Lord, God of my master Abraham, let it turn out favorably for me today and thus deal graciously with my master Abraham. While I stand here at the spring and the daughters of the townsmen are coming out*

*to draw water, if I say to a girl, 'please lower your jug that I may drink,' and she answers, 'take a drink, and let me give water to your camels too,' let her be the one whom you have decided upon for your servant Isaac. In this way I shall know that you have dealt graciously with my master."*

**Please discuss the following:**

- a) What character test does the servant suggest here?
  - b) Picture yourselves as Rebecca. How many times will you have to fill a jug of water so the camels can have their fill? How would you feel after you have done this?
  - c) If you were the servant, what would Rebecca's efforts tell you about the kind of person she is?
  - d) How is Rebecca like Abraham?
- 3) Was Abraham justified in choosing a wife for Isaac?
- 4) The *parasha* ends with the death of Abraham. Both Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury their father at the Cave of Machpela in Hebron next to his wife Sarah.
- a) What do we learn here about the two sons?
  - b) What do you wish for the descendents of Isaac and Ishmael?

**Some Texts to Wrestle With**

I. Below is a story that took place in Jerusalem about 120 years ago. Please read it and discuss how this story is similar and how it is different from the story of Abraham and the Cave of Machpela in Hebron.

**PURCHASING MISHKENOT SHA'ANANIM**

Jerusalem's First Settlement Outside of the Walls

Sir Moses Montefiore was a wealthy and dedicated Jew; he did a lot to improve living conditions in Eretz Yisrael. He lived in England and visited the Holy Land many times, even though conditions for traveling were not easy. He saw that the Jewish community within the walls of the Old City was overcrowded. He wanted to buy a portion of land on which to build a neighborhood. This land would serve as the first settlement outside the walls of the Old City and would help relieve the overcrowded conditions. Sir Montefiore found a piece of land large enough to establish a neighborhood opposite Mt. Zion.

The land belonged to Ahmed Agai Deejar, a friend of Sir Moses Montefiore, and an important minister in the Turkish government. Sir Montefiore turned to Ahmed Agai

and said: "Please sell me the portion of land you own opposite Mt. Zion. How much are you willing to sell the land for?"

"My friend, my brother, the apple of my eye," answered Ahmed Agai. "Take this section of land for yourself, free of charge as a present!"

"No, no, Ahmed Agai. State your price for this portion of land. I will pay for it," countered Sir Montifiore.

But the distinguished Turkish minister said, "My friend, my brother, the apple of my eye, this land that I own, I inherited from my ancestors and they inherited it from their ancestors. This portion of land is my legacy. It has been in our family for many, many generations. I would not sell this land to anyone, not for all the money in the world. But for you, my friend, I will give you the land for free, as a present."

"No, I couldn't accept the land for free," Sir Moses Montefiore said. "I insist upon paying you the full value of the land."

"I wouldn't sell this land, not even for 1000 lire," said Ahmed Agai. "Take it as a present...this land is yours. I, my wife and my children, we are yours. We are like one big family, so take the land!"

Moses Montifiore and Ahmed Agai Deejar argued for many days. One wanted to pay for the land and the other wouldn't hear of it, saying, "Please, take the land as a present. The land is yours."

One day, after a friendly argument which had lasted for many hours, Ahmed got up from his seat and said, "Alright, my friend, my brother, the apple of my eye. Let's exchange presents. You give me the sum of 1000 lire sterling, and we will go to the proper authorities immediately and transfer the ownership of the property to your name."

Montifiore knew that 1000 lire sterling was a ridiculously exaggerated price for the portion of land he wanted to buy. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate for a second. He immediately agreed to buy the land at the price of 1000 lire sterling. He and Ahmed Agai Deejar signed a contract which established that the portion of land opposite *Har Zion* – Mount Zion – belonged to Sir Moses Montifiore. Soon afterwards, Sir Moses Montifiore began to build homes in the neighborhood which was named "Mishkenot Sha'ananim" -- serene dwelling place. This is how the first settlement outside the walls of the Old City was established.

2. Following is a short, quick history of the city of Hebron or as it is pronounced in Hebrew, *Hevron*. After you read it, discuss your feelings and opinions regarding the issue of *Hevron* today.



## **HEVRON**

We first read of Hevron in our *parasha* when Abraham purchases the Cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite, to be used as a burial site for his wife, Sarah. At that time, *Hevron* was a Canaanite city.

David, the second king of Israel, chose *Hevron* to be his royal city. He ruled over the kingdom from there for seven years.

After the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, the Jews of *Hevron* were exiled along with the other Jews of the Land of Israel. *Hevron* became a Jewish city again after the Maccabee revolt.

When Herod was king over Judea he built the wall that still stands around the Cave of Machpelah.

From the time of the Roman conquest, the condition of the Jews in *Hevron* varied according to whom the ruler was at the time. Under some rulers, the Jewish community flourished and grew wealthy. Under others, there were some attacks and destruction.

The last period of substantial Jewish settlement in *Hevron* came during British rule after World War I. However, in 1929 and again in 1936, the Jews of *Hevron* were brutally attacked by the Arabs of the city. Men, women and children were massacred by local Arabs, synagogues and Torah scrolls were burned. After 1936, no Jews remained in the city of *Hevron*.

In 1948, when Israel declared its independence, the armies of the neighboring Arab countries attacked. *Hevron* came under the control of the Kingdom of Jordan. In 1967, as a result of the Six Day War, *Hevron* came back under Israeli rule. Shortly thereafter, a group of Jews decided to reclaim what had formerly been Jewish property in the city. They moved into the heart of *Hevron* where they still live under the protection of the Israeli army. They also established next to *Hevron* a new town called Kiryat Arba.

One of the most serious issues in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian entity is the future of Jewish settlements in the middle of what is today an overwhelmingly Arab city. Some say that because of the Arab majority in *Hevron*, the Jews there should move out and thereby avoid the constant tension of daily contact with the Arabs. Others say that the only reason *Hevron* is an almost totally Arab city is because the Jews there were forced out, and that the Jews have an absolute right to return to their former homes.

As of January 1997, an agreement on the status of *Hevron* has been reached. Most of the Israeli army has withdrawn from the city, except for a small number of soldiers who remain to guard the Jewish settlers still living there. The rest of the city is under the control of the Palestinian Authority and its police force. Since the terrorist war began in September, 2000, there have been a few serious incidents in *Hevron*. Tensions were high. The Israeli Army is back. Negotiations are in full speed. Israel promises to remove its army from the city, provided there will be no more attacks on Jews.

### Towards an Action Agenda

- 1) According to the Midrash, four blessings that Sarah had brought to Abraham's house, returned when Rebecca married Isaac: a) a cloud (signifying the divine presence) hung over her tent; b) the household was blessed with abundance; c) a candle remained lit from Friday to Friday (the Sabbath light kindled Friday afternoon would burn all week); d) the doors were always open wide and food was provided for the poor.
  - What blessings characterize your home now?
  - What blessings do you wish to have in your home in the future?
  - What will you do to bring about these blessings to you and your family?
- 2) You can learn more about the city of Hebray and its history at <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Peace/tiph5.html>

**Shabbat Shalom!**

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: <http://www.bjeny.org/>

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