

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



CHAYEI SARA

The Spirit of the Deal

This week's Torah reading opens with the first Jewish purchase of land in Eretz Yisrael. This milestone is celebrated every year with Shabbat Chevron, when up to 50,000 people gather around Ma'arat HaMachpela, the piece of real estate which Avraham bought. Sadly, last year this event was canceled because of the ongoing war. Which brings me to the point of this piece: While we celebrate the milestones of Jewish return to the Holy Land, the rest of the world yawns with studied boredom.

The central verse recording this land deal goes like this: So the field of Efron changed owners. This field was in Machpelah, near Mamrei. Avraham became the owner of the field, the cave in it, and all the trees in the field (B'reishit 23:17).

The Hebrew term translated above as 'changed owners' is VAYAKAM. This translates literally as 'and it rose'. Many commentaries explain that word usage to mean that this piece of land rose to a higher spiritual level by transferring to the possession of Avraham Avinu. Rashi explains that this 'rise' resulted from transferring

to a 'king' from a 'commoner'. The Zohar suggests that this 'rise' was the introduction of souls ascending to heaven after death. This miraculous new possibility was also bestowed upon Adam and Chava, who at this moment also gained immortality.

Cool! This seemingly mundane real estate deal was really a major spiritual event in the annals of human history. Professor Everett Fox noted this jarring dichotomy between humdrum transaction and spiritual opportunity: The long conversations and considerable formality of the chapter are not unusual in an ancient Near Eastern context. The narrative strikes a curious balance between the emotional reality of the situation (e.g., the repetition of "dead", "presence", and "bury") and the requirements of legal procedure ("Hear me", "give title", and "holding").

Perhaps, that's the point. We mix the legalistic with the spiritual; the contractual with the sacred. When we look more closely at the text, we miss words like KONEH (acquire). Our section clearly describes the making of a deal, but the dialogue sounds more like a dance routine of polite banter. And the biggest question: Why 20 verses on this?

When Ya'akov buys part of Shechem (eventually, the Tomb of Yosef),

there's one verse (B'reishit 33:19), and when King David buys the Temple Mount ('threshing floor of Aravna') it takes 4 verses (Divrei HaYamim Alef 21:22-25). Again, so why so much space here?

Rav Yoel Elitzur explains: Avraham has been residing in the land for many years, but has not yet been able to acquire land. God had promised that "to your offspring I will assign this land" (B'reishit 15:18). But despite this promise, and the great wealth that Avraham had amassed, he was still essentially a stranger in a strange land... The Canaanites greatly respected Avraham... But despite that, the people of Canaan would not, under any circumstances, sell him any land. When Sara dies, Avraham decides to take advantage of the opportunity to realize God's promises, by making his first real attempt at acquiring land from the Canaanites... Avraham is announcing that he will not bury Sara until he is sold a burial site as an inheritance... Avraham alone knows the truth: This is not just a plot of land, but a manifestation of his entire life's purpose - "Go forth... to the land that I will show you"; "To your offspring I will assign this land." ...Avraham finally achieved his goal: He became a legitimate landowner in the Promised Land.

So, this moment is really historic and epochal, but the conversation is truly

banal. Five times the speakers tell their listeners, 'Listen to me (verses 6,8,11,13,15).' It's as if even the participants in this drama were nodding off.

I think, though, that something momentous is being alluded to, and that is: sadly, people don't really listen to each other. Many conversations are really simultaneous monologues. Sad, perhaps tragic. But another reality is also being described: Throughout history no one listens to the Jews.

We Jews have had many astute observers of reality in our history, but most often no one cares or pays attention. For example, watch almost any international news broadcast about our war on many fronts. You mostly hear about Israeli attacks on Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, etc. The number of missiles fired at Israel daily are rarely mentioned outside Israeli sources.

We often hear about countries and international bodies pleading with Israel to do something. Never do you hear that if Hamas would return the hostages, and Hezbollah and the Houthis (and now Iraqis) would stop shooting rockets and drones at us the wars would end immediately.

It's just like our parsha. No one listens when a Jew speaks. The verbal fencing only ends in verse 16 when Avraham listens! I'm glad we listen,

but wouldn't it be nice if non-Jews would listen, too.

Our chapter is two simultaneous narratives. The more famous is the glorious moment when Jews first came to own a piece of the Holy Land. The other is, perhaps, more significant: No one cares!

We've been here in Eretz Yisrael for 3800 years, and yet the world little notes nor little remembers that reality. The neuroscientist and thinker Sam Harris warns that today the world's fundamental choice is between either conversation or violence. I don't know how to deal with that reality, but I'd like to declare to my fellow Jews: Let's celebrate our presence, and somehow learn to ignore the world's indifference. 🙏