

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

CHAYEI SARA

'I am a stranger, and a citizen... let me have a piece of land for burial purposes' (23:4).

This week's parasha opens with the first of the three tasks that were to confront Avraham Avinu in his old age. The three tasks were:

(a) To bury Sara and thereby acquire a piece of Eretz Yisrael in his own right.

(b) To find a wife for Yitzchak, his aging son, so that his work would continue to the third and further generations.

(c) To produce more children, so that they may also carry his life's work forward.

None of them were easy. All were fraught with tension and tough negotiation. Not all were successful. Yet all were part of the makings of Avraham Avinu and his work, in striving to bring civilization to humanity and ultimately to Am Yisrael.

In the first task, S'forno explains 'a stranger and a citizen' as Avraham Avinu qualifying himself as eligible to buy land. Remember that Avraham made his living as a pastoral nomad, always outside the walls of the city states that made up the Land of

Canaan. He was an outsider, a man of no fixed address in the region. Only urban residents of Hebron were permitted to purchase real estate in the locality. Thus Avraham declared that although he was currently a GER - a stranger, he would in the future change his status to a TOSHAV - a resident. He did not elaborate that several centuries would pass before his descendants would do that on his behalf.

So we may translate the words T'NU LI ACHUAZAT KEVER as 'allow me to buy a piece of land for burial' (c.f. 31:7). That was more than a mere request. It can be argued that Avraham was not just seeking to buy a plot to bury Sara, but that he wanted to use the occasion to start a process that his descendants would take to completion. That was to take possession of the Land that G-d promised him.

As in the following context. His previous experiences with G-d indicated that He does not shower gifts from the heavens, but that He requires great HISHTADLUT: human effort, with which He will eventually interact and grant success. As in trying to settle down to his job in making a living as a pastoral nomad, only to be frustrated with famine and having to quit the area; and yet he returned loaded with the wealth of Egypt. As in his quest for a son worthy of promoting his life's work for

development by the next generation: a long, and at times, despairing wait following the prospect of future destiny coming to an abrupt end as a human sacrifice. Avraham Avinu discovered that not all was what it seemed at the time, and not all was to work out quite in the way he envisioned. Far from the experience terminating Yitzchak life for an unknown higher purpose, the Akeida was to raise Yitzchak as well as Avraham to yet higher spiritual positions to effect the destiny that they were created for. To live and promote a way of life through which ultimately the whole of humanity would be blessed by G-d, and to do it from the base of their possession of Eretz Yisrael. But all required HISHTADLUT - human effort - and involvement in unavoidable and extremely trying situations.

Similarly here, in his old age. His objective was not just to bury Sara, but to get the Hittites to break their own rules. After the usual flattery in their way of doing business, they told Avraham that none of their people would refuse them a burial spot. That meant on their terms, as a guest in their own family plot. But that wasn't what Avraham was asking for. He was there to get ACHUZAT KEVER the possession of a piece of land in his own right - as a TOSHAV - not as a tolerated hanger-on. In his own mind, to obtain a small part of Eretz Yisrael

that in due course would be joined by the rest. And for this he had to struggle. He had to get the AM HA'ARETZ (23:12) - the general Hittite population - on his side. And then pay an extortionate price for the spot, as a rich man paying to bend the rules. But he got through in the end. The Torah elaborately describes that portion of real estate transferring honourably to Avraham Avinu, giving him his first and only piece of actual titled ownership in the Land.

So Avraham's first task in this Parasha was bury Sarah in a manner that would give him a foothold in the Promised Land. The rest of the Parasha tells us about the second and the third task. The second task was to find suitable wife for his aging son, Yitzchak so that his line would not come to an end. The third was to remarry and have more children on his own account to continue his work.

Both involved YISURIM - painful decisions and anxieties. Though he gave strict instructions to his servant to find a suitable partner in the far-off land of his family, he had to depend on the cooperation of that person who, according to Rashi, had conflicting plans of his own. In any case, the servant had tough bargaining to do all the way: with G-d, with Lavan and Betu'el, any one element of which easily could have gone wrong and put a stop to the whole project. It worked out, but only just. In contrast,

his third project did not seem to have worked out at all, though Avraham Avinu did his best. None of the many children he begot in his last years amounted to anything and so he ended up virtually having to pay them to get as far out of the way as possible (25:6), leaving his life's work and supporting wealth to be continued solely by Yitzchak. And learning from the experience that one worthy successor would be quite enough. Quality, not quantity.

Avraham's latter years gave him little rest. He faced and dealt with his challenges to the very end. Even where they turned out disappointing and failed to meet expectations. Yet overall they were crucial elements in achieving a lasting legacy not only for Klal Yisrael, but for humanity.

One may retire from formal work, but never from life. One's later years are not for running away from problems, but facing them and taking the best action possible.

As Kohelet puts it: 'Sow you seeds in the morning and do not be idle in the evening. You do not know which one will bring success, or whether they are both as good as each other' (Kohelet 11:6). 🌱📖