

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

[Death is for Mankind the great unknown and so all religions and cultures have concerned themselves with it and in its wake with the issue of preserving the corpse and the memory after its death. The whole culture of Ancient Egypt for example, centered around the life after death; witness the great financial and human cost involved in building the Pyramids, that are after all nothing more than tombs of the Pharaohs. Priests, witchdoctors, temples, and shamans of all shades and identities have arisen throughout time to satisfy human fears and spiritual issues concerning death and burial. Judaism is the only religion that denies a place to its priests, the Kohanim, in all that relates to death and mourning. The burial place of Moshe who led us out of Egypt, brought down Torah from Heaven and led us to the Promised Land was kept hidden from human knowledge. So, it is interesting to follow Abarbanel's treatment of Ma'arat Hamachpeilah as a burial site].

The parsha opens with the negotiations made by Avraham for a burial place for the Matriarch Sarah after describing her death. We can easily understand Avraham's mourning for her and the concern of Bnei Chet for his sorrow. After all Chazal taught (Sanhedrin 22), "One whose wife's death precedes his own, it is as though the Bet Hamikdash were destroyed in his time". Less obvious is his feeling the essential need for a special place for her burial and the importance of the Ma'arat Hamachpeilah in that need. Why should Avraham acutely feel that need? Why bother with burial at all; surely the body could simply be left to rot? And if it is necessary what difference does it make to the dead or to the living, where that place is? A philosopher of the nations [probably as was customary he is referring to one of the ancient Greeks] said that if the dead are aware then their burial would only cause them much sorrow and if they feel nothing why bother?

Burial is beneficial to Mankind both as far as the body and the nefesh are concerned. Since the body of a person without the soul is far more useless than that of an animal which does not possess one anyhow, the human body decomposes far quicker, the smell is more noxious and therefore the [environmental] damage to other people, incurred by leaving it lying around unburied, is far greater. [Halakah cast smell as a major form of damages; there is no chazakah in its undisturbed use and despite the sanctity of contracts these may be broken in this respect, since people can claim that they thought they could stand it but now find that they cannot (Magen Giborim, Choshen Mishpat, sec 38). In urban planning: "The abattoirs and graveyards must be moved from the city 50 amot" (Bava Batra, Chapter 2, mishnahg). The Torah commanded not to leave the body of one punished by hanging, on the tree [gallows] without burial, so as not to cause impurity to the land (Devarim, 22:23).

[Contrast his prosaic treatment of this verse in environmental terms, to its treatment by Sefer Hachinuch and Rabbi S. R. Hirsch]. Death indeed, marks the decomposition and transformation of the body back into the physical components that it was formed out of, however, it also marks the return of the soul to its spiritual source. "And the dust shall return unto the earth from where it was taken and the soul unto the Lord who granted it". Yet the severance between the two is not immediate as the soul cannot return on high until the body has become completely reduced to its components. "12 months a dead mans body continues to exist and the soul rises and descends from heaven. At the end of that time the body may be negated and the soul ascends without descending again" (Shabbat 122). So through burial the body is granted time till it disintegrates into the materials from which it was formed and the soul is finally released.

Now the entity that is a human being, body and soul, bears the tzelem of G-d, so it is a place for the Shechinah to reside, has divinely granted wisdom, is the pinnacle of the whole creation and has a connection with Him. It is not fitting therefore that after death it should be treated with dishonor, disrespect and abuse, to be cast aside like redundant garbage. That is why Hashem did not want that the people should witness the death of Aharon apart from Moshe and Elazar, while there were no human witnesses to the death of Moshe. So burial is needed in order to give the dead that honor and respect due to a person's divine origins.

The honor rendered by proper burial is directly commensurate with the moral, social and religious status of the person. So we find that Shaul, who was not the founder of Jewish Kingship, was simply buried together with his forefathers, since now in death he was their equal. However, David whose dynasty was to continue forever, was not buried in Bet Lechem, his hometown, but rather in Zion, Ir David, that was the burial ground of all the House of David, the King. If Israel will sin and forsake G-d's commandments then the "Land will vomit you out just as it did, [because of its sanctity] owing to their sins, the nations that lived there before you (Vayikra, 20:23-24)". When a body was cast in haste into the grave of Elisha, because of the approaching enemy, we find that that grave cast it out; the sanctity of Elisha could not tolerate the body of the simple person (Melachim Bet, 13:21).

For all these reasons Avraham saw it fitting that there should be a significant place for Sarah's burial. So he busied himself with buying ground in Hevron that was, as the text tells us, in Eretz Canaan that is the Holy Land promised to him and his children as distinct from Eretz Pilistim. In that place where Adam and Chava were both buried, then her bones would never be mingled, even by accident with those of the evil Canaanites or other nations.

[Then Avraham sets about finding a wife for Yitschak. So important is this that 67 verses are devoted to it, as many as dealt with the Creation, Gan Eiden and the sin of Adam and Chavah].

Why did Avraham not want the daughters of Canaan, preferring those of his family? After all both

were bad in their ideologies, both being idolaters. Also Avraham specifically excludes those presently surrounding him, even though they were good (24:3); "They were Aner, Eshkol and Mamrei, his allies" (Bereishit Rabbah, Lech Lecha, 42).

The Canaanites were descendants of Ham and an accursed breed (Ber.9:25), whereas the daughters of Betuel, Lavan and Haran were descendants of Shem who was pure and beloved of G-d. It was not only because of his spiritual and intellectual stature that Avraham did not desire to mingle, what is destined to be Hashem's People, with a spiritually degenerate seed. We must bear in mind that that People was destined also for the Holy Land, so that intermarriage with the daughters of Canaan would mean that ultimately that cursed breed would inherit that Land; that would mean its desecration. In addition, there is the praiseworthy idea expressed by the Ran (Rabbi Yonah Mi Gerondil) that explains Avraham's antagonism to the daughters of Canaan.

"The mitzvot and the sins determined by the Torah have 2 perspectives, namely those connected to the body and those connected to the nefesh. Those of the body are connected to pride, anger, gassut ruach, bloodshed and robbery since these are related to the bodily needs. Then there are the spiritual needs like ideas, beliefs and moral judgments. Those of the body are transmitted in essence automatically from the parents to their children whereas those of the nefesh, being of the mind and the spirit are not necessarily passed on from one generation to the next; rather they are matters of free choice. So while the Canaanites inherited the evil traits that had characterized their ancestors the descendants of Betuel and Lavan would not necessarily be idolaters like their parents. Therefore there was a possibility of educating their daughters to be fit wives for the sons of Avraham".

As to his allies, Avraham feared that Eliezer, awed by their wealth, residence in the land and their noble status, would influence Yitschak in their direction, even though that very status made them unsuitable. Therefore he made him take an oath not to take their daughters as wives; preferring the poor daughters of Haran, who would in addition, be strangers in the Promised Land and as such not be prevented by their status from being suitable for Yitschak.

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