

FREE LAND *(40,000 SILVER COINS, SERVICE CHARGE)

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

When the time came for Avraham to bury Sarah, he knew the exact location that he wanted (the Cave of Machpela), and its owner: Efron the Hittite. So Avraham goes to the Hittites, and asks to speak to Efron.

During the story of the negotiations and Avraham's purchase, Efron is mentioned some eight times, always spelled Ayin Fey Reish Vav Nun. Except once: when the money is handed over, it says that Avraham gave the money to Ayin Fey Reish Nun - without a Vav.

Why? Rashi explains that this Vav was taken away from Efron, because he said a lot, and did not even do a little. When first approached, he said to Avraham ("in front of all the Hittites, all those that came within the gates of the city"), "No, I don't want you to pay for it! It's a gift, please take it to bury your dead." So in public he declared that he would give Avraham the field for free. Avraham insisted, and Efron then reacted "My lord... what is 400 silver coins between me and you?" So all of a sudden, Efron was asking for 400 pieces of silver, instead of nothing.

The truth is that even this wasn't good enough. When the money was given, it was money that was "good for the money-changer." Apparently, there were certain places where they had very large coins, called Centurions, that were worth about 100 regular coins. When Avraham finally paid, this was the money he gave - essentially, 40,000 silver coins, instead of nothing.

Now, so what? What does it mean to take away a Vav? Does Efron care that the Torah misspelled his name?

The answer is that in Hebrew, the word for dirt is Afar - Ayin Fey Reish. Ayin Fey Reish Nun, which we read as Efron, can also be read "Afran" - a dirt person. Efron was dirt.

In Jewish thought, this means a great deal - because man was born from dust, and from G-d Himself. So which do we choose to emphasize, and what do we choose to be? We ought to be choosing G-dliness over dirt.

Efron was considerate enough to give us good advice on what not to do. We do not want to promise to do great things, and then do nothing at all - because by demonstrating that our final concern is only our own lust for money or power, we show that we are avoiding spirituality, and are similar to dirt. But if we say little, and then follow through with efforts that even exceed our promises, then we demonstrate that we are concerned with giving to others. Our concern for others shows that we are

worthy of being called "G-dly", and this is a worthwhile goal.

Text Copyright © 1994 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis.