

STRANGER OR CITIZEN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Parshas Chayey Sarah records the first Jewish land purchase. In 2084 - 1677 b.c.e., Sarah died at the age of 127 and Avraham had to purchase a burial plot. He negotiated with Ephron the Hitite and bought the Cave of Machpelah for top dollar. This interaction is of tremendous significance for the next 363 years of the Jewish People. Allow me to explain.

In 2018, at the age of 70, Avraham received the prophetic vision known as the "Covenant Between the Halves". This prophecy (Gen.15: 13-17) foretold the future of the Jews, from the birth of Yitzchak till our Exodus from Egypt. Three stages are clearly delineated:

1. (Gen.15: 13) "...your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years..."
2. "...they will be enslaved..."
3. "...they will be oppressed."

Hashem didn't say how long each stage would be, only the total of 400 years. Avraham, and subsequently Yitzchak Yakov and Yoseph, tried to extend the first stage of "strangers in a land not theirs" and limit the last two stages of slavery and oppression. A careful interpretation of the first stage of the prophecy reveals that the stage of "stranger" could be satisfied in relative freedom within the Land of Canaan. So long as the Jews remained "strangers" rather than "citizens", they could remain in the promised land and develop into a nation. The stages of slavery and oppression would be difficult stages for the Jewish People, being that they would be subject to the will and control of another nation. Therefore, the longer the period of "stranger", the shorter the stages of "slavery" and "oppression".

This explains why Avraham's shepherds argued with Lot's shepherds. Lot allowed his workers to posture themselves as if the Land of Canaan was already Avraham's, and could have initiated the second stages of slavery and oppression! Avraham's shepherds, on the other hand, had been properly cautioned to respect the ownership of the local residents and maintain the low profile of the immigrant stranger extending the first stage as long as possible.

When Avraham needed to purchase a burial plot for his beloved Sarah, he approached the local residents with his request. "Either sell me a plot as a "stranger", or else I will have no choice but to demand my rights as a "citizen". I've always had the image of Avraham holding his breath in anticipation of Ephron's answer. "Will he treat me graciously as an honored "stranger", or will I have

to exert myself as a "citizen" and loose my status as "stranger", setting in motion the second stages of slavery and oppression?" As we know, Ephron dealt with Avraham as a stranger, exacting from him an inflated price, which Avraham gladly paid.

The desire to extend the stage of "stranger" motivated much of the action in the coming stories. Yitzchak's non-aggressive conflict with the Philistim over water rights suggested a secondary agenda (Parshas Toldos) and the desire to maintain a low profile. Yakov's critical, but restrained, response to the punishment of Shechem for the incident with Dina (Parshas Vayishlach), suggested a desire to maintain the lowly status of stranger. The conflict between Yoseph and his brothers can also be interpreted from this perspective, considering that Yoseph's sale into slavery (Parshas Vayeshev) heralded the beginning of the second stage of the prophecy. (See Sefer Haparshios by Eliyahu Ki Tov)

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