

# OUR PUBLIC FACE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

This week's Parsha begins with the first recorded land purchase in the Torah. In order to secure a burial plot for Sarah, Avraham purchased the Cave of Machpelah and its surrounding field. He negotiated with Ephron Hachiti who priced the field on the high end of the market, 400 newly minted silver shekels. Avraham agreed to pay the asking price and immediately paid Ephron. The transaction was dully ratified and witnessed by the gathered community.

Why did the Torah devote so many verses to this acquisition? Why emphasize that Avraham immediately paid the asking price? Why is it important for us to know that the community witnessed the transaction?

Parshas Chayei Sarah is the third installment in the developing story of Avraham and the Chosen People. The story began in Lech Lecha when Avraham was 75 years old. His escape to Egypt, the separation from Lot, his victorious battle against the Four Kings, his encounter with Avimelech, his circumcision and the foretelling of Yitzchak's birth, the attempted defense and decisive destruction of Sodom, the covenant with Avimelech and Phichol, and the Akeidah, are but moments in the life and times of Avraham Avinu. In no way can they be construed as a history of his life. Therefore, each incident as well as the collective presentation of these moments was specifically intended.

Avraham had two missions in life. 1. Teach monotheism and reveal G-d's presence in the universe. 2. Give birth and raise the next generation of Jews. The two missions were linked to each other because it would be the subsequent generations of Jews who would continue the work of teaching monotheism and revealing G-d's presence.

Avraham and Sarah were uniquely suited for their mission. Their passion, resourcefulness, intelligence, compassion, tireless self-sacrifice, and above all else belief in G-d had been purified and tested from the fires of Ur Kasdim to the altar on Mt. Moriah. They attracted the ignorant innocents of their generation and reformed them in the image of the Creator.

More so than their historic accomplishments in teaching monotheism was their success in raising their son. Thirty-seven years of joyous love and vigilant attention produced a human being, the only one in all of history, who would earn the accolade of "perfect". A wholeness of spirit and body, a creation of such perfection that even the angels had to cry.

However, there is more to the job of teaching monotheism than personal perfection. Teaching and

influencing demands outreach and availability. Students must have access to their teachers and teachers must be prepared to open their personal lives to their students. Interpersonal dynamics must be manifest in a manner that guarantees a continued relationship after the first impression.

The Jew was clearly intended to be different and apart. In last week's Parsha Avraham sought advice from his friend Mamrei as to whether or not the Bris should be a public or private event. Avraham was concerned that "becoming different" would interfere with his ability to teach. Others would associate his moral and religious teachings with his being physically different and that would create a bias against accepting his moral instructions. Mamrei encouraged Avraham to embrace the difference and trust in the power of G-d's command and his own monumental Chesed. They would carry the message of belief in a single G-d far more than any assumed similarities or differences.

However, first impressions are of paramount importance especially when there are external differences in dress and behavior. The external differences between Jew and non-Jew would interfere if they weren't mitigated by some other initial factor.

Going back to Noach and the Mabul, we were taught that the moral depravity of the antediluvian generations could be summed up under the heading of "Chumus - thievery." Although murder and idolatry were also rampant, they were judged and destroyed because they were thieves, not because they were murderers and idolaters.

Basically, a society that does not respect personal property and individual rights is a society that will murder and deny the existence of G-d. Therefore, the rebirth of the post-diluvian world had to be predicated on respect for the personal belongings of all individuals. So long as society embraces the rights of individuals to be individual, society will continue to exist. So long as the individual respects the property of his fellow human being, all other individual differences become acceptable.

In order for Avraham to be the teacher of monotheism the very first impression the world would have of him had to be uncompromised honesty and integrity. His word had to be his bond, and his deeds had to be above suspicion.

In 13:3, Rashi referenced the Medresh that emphasized Avraham's honesty. When fleeing Canaan because of the hunger, Avraham's wealth had been totally spent on feeding the hungry. He couldn't afford to pay the innkeepers on the way to Egypt and they extended to him the necessary credit. Upon returning from Egypt, once again wealthy, he made sure to pay back each and every one of his debts.

In 13:7 Rashi referenced the Medresh that details the argument between Lot and Avraham. Avraham instructed his shepherds to pasture his flocks in public fields and never allow them to graze on private lands. Lot, on the other hand, allowed his herds to graze on properties belonging to others. Therefore, Avraham had to separate from Lot. Only by complete disassociation from Lot's thievery could he maintain his reputation for absolute uncompromised honesty and integrity.

Upon Avraham's victorious return from the battle against the Four Kings, the king of Sodom offered Avraham the recaptured wealth of Sodom. Avraham refused and said, (14:24) "So you (king of Sodom) shall not say, It is I (the king of Sodom) who made Avram rich."

Why didn't Avraham want Sodom's wealth? He had not refused the wealth of Egypt? Avraham refused because it was the wealth of Sodom. The moral depravity of Sodom was reminiscent of the antediluvian generations. They too could be summed up under the heading of "Chumus - thievery." Therefore, Avraham could have nothing to do with the wealth of Sodom. It was tainted with dishonesty and thievery. No one would be able to point a finger at Avraham's wealth and say, "His wealth is really my wealth!" Egypt on the other hand might have been immoral in other ways, but not because of Chumus - thievery." Therefore Avraham accepted Pharaoh's offer but not Sodom's.

In this week's Parsha Avraham had to negotiate with the residents of Chevron for Sarah's burial plot. The entire negotiation emphasizes Avraham's insistence on paying full price for the property.

(23:9) "Let him grant it to me for its full price."

(23:13) "Rather, if only you would heed me! I give you the price of the field, accept it from me!"

(23:16) "Avraham weighed out to Ephron the price which he had mentioned... 400 silver shekels."

Despite Ephron's initial statement of generosity, (23:11) "No my lord, heed me! I have given you the field as well as the cave that is in it!" Avraham insisted on paying top Shekel. Furthermore, the entire proceeding was done in the open. There were no back room negotiations over hot cups of tea and baklava. All dealings between Avraham and Ephron were done in view of the general public. (23:18) "The field and the cave within it... was confirmed as Avraham's as a purchase in the view of the children of Ches, among all who came to the gate of his city."

A new generation was about to come into its own. Yitzchak and Rivkah were to become the new Avraham and Sarah. Sarah's burial site would also be Avraham's and it would remain as the sole monument to their monumental accomplishments. It became imperative that their final resting place reflect the nature of their influence and teachings. Therefore, all negotiations and the actual purchased had to be, as per Avraham's insistence, public and without question. No one would be able to question Avraham's integrity and honesty, not during his lifetime or after his passing.

The face of the Jew must always be clean. Integrity, honesty, and the keeping of one's word must always be the world's first impression. Regardless of the truths we live and teach, if the other nations do not perceive us as honest and forthright we will have failed in carrying on the mission of Avraham and Sara.

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