

# THE VALUE OF WORDS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The conversation and negotiations between Avraham and Efron, which comprises the first part of this week's parsha, has always been a puzzling to me. Why does the Torah, which in so many other places is so very chary of words, feel it necessary to record all of the elaborate talk that was involved in Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpela? The Torah could have simply stated that Avraham purchased that gravesite from Efron for four hundred shekel and left it at that. I still don't have any brilliant answer to this question but living in the Land of Israel has given me a different perspective on the issue. In Jewish society, words, spoken words, count for a great deal. The Torah warns us not to cheapen our words, not to be hypocritical, not to slander and tell falsehoods and not to renege on our spoken commitments. The Talmud is replete with stories of great men who kept their spoken word, and even in some instances their unspoken mental commitment to a price or transaction, often to their own personal and financial detriment. Avraham is such a person of integrity and steadfastness.

But as the Torah continually points out here at the beginning of the parsha, he dwells among the Hittites. The Hittites show him great outward respect, even affection. "You are the prince of God who dwells in our midst," they declare to him. But Avraham is not fooled by their compliments and blandishments or extravagant protestations that he can choose any gravesite he wishes and that it will be deeded to him free of charge. Living with the Hittites has taught him how cheap talk is in that society and that the words of his neighbors and erstwhile admirers are not to be relied upon. By recording the entire series of conversations and negotiations that mark Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpela, the Torah warns his descendants that good words are often not to be taken at face value. Better criticism from a friend than compliments from an enemy.

In our time, Jews have proven especially gullible to sweet words of conciliation and hope. What we felt to be a legitimate effort to achieve peace, our enemies turned into a brutal and bloody struggle for our national existence. In a world where the spoken word no longer carries much weight, it would be highly foolish of us not to recognize the true intent of our adversaries. King David said in Psalms: "I speak of peace, but they are determined to wage war upon me." Efron's fawning compliments to Avraham are the prelude to his demanding and receiving an exorbitant price for the Cave of Machpela. The Torah, by recording the incident in its fullness, transforms Efron's immediate and temporary gain into a badge of eternal shame. We have a right to be skeptical of good words alone. Only good deeds and positive actions have the ring of truth and conviction to them.

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