

PARASHAT CHAYE-SARA

Eretz Yisrael

By Rabbi Zeev Weitman

1. The Purchase of Ma'arat Ha-makhpela

Most of *Parashat Chaye Sara* deals with the mission undertaken by Avraham's servant, who is sent to find a wife for Yitzchak. However, our focus here will be on Avraham and two separate conversations that he has in which he conducts negotiations pertaining to the land.

The first set of negotiations is conducted between Avraham and the Bnei Chet and Efron, with the purpose of purchasing Ma'arat Ha-makhpela (literally, the "Double Cave") as a burial estate. The second set of negotiations is conducted with his servant concerning the terms of his mission to find a wife for Yitzchak and to bring her to him, with the aim of preventing Yitzchak from leaving the land of Canaan.

What is common to these two encounters is the value and importance of the Land of Israel in Avraham's consciousness. On the one hand, we observe his efforts to purchase a tract of land in which to bury Sara. On the other, we witness his absolute veto on Yitzchak leaving the land. Indeed, Avraham's second conversation in our *parasha* concludes with the words, "Only do not take my son back there." Uttered some 35 years prior to his death, these are the last words of Avraham recorded in the Torah.

In Avraham's negotiations with the Bnei Chet, he insists on buying the land. He is not willing to suffice with receiving their permission to bury Sara even in the choicest of burial places. It is important for him to purchase the plot for full payment and to bury Sara in ground to which he holds complete and absolute legal ownership.

Why it is so important for Avraham to buy land specifically for the purpose of burying Sara? He never demonstrates such stubborn insistence on owning the land upon which he pitches his tent, grazes his flocks, builds altars, or digs wells. Is it more important to buy a plot of land in order to be

buried in *Eretz Yisrael* than it is to buy land in order to live upon it? Is it possible that Jews who live their entire lives in the Diaspora, their only concern concerning Israel being that they will be buried there, have a point?

The *midrash* certainly does not indicate support for this notion. The *midrash* records that Rabbi once saw a coffin that was being taken for burial in *Eretz Yisrael*, the deceased having passed away outside of the country. He declared:

"What good is it to this person, whose soul left him in the Diaspora, and now he comes to be buried in the Land of Israel?" And he recited over him the verses, "You have made My inheritance an abomination" – in your lifetimes. "Will you then come and defile My land" – in your deaths? (*Bereishit Rabba, Vayechi*).

Is the most important goal truly to purchase land for burial in *Eretz Yisrael*? Would it not be more edifying for us to observe Avraham exerting efforts to buy a plot of land in *Eretz Yisrael* in order to build an altar on it or to dig wells in it?

Perhaps the answer lies in what God tells Avraham in the Covenant Between the Parts:

"Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will serve them, and they will afflict them for four hundred years... But you will come to your forefathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. And the fourth generation will return here, for the sin of the Emorites is not yet complete. (*Bereishit* 15-13-16)

God informs Avraham that the inheritance of the land will come about only four hundred years in the future. Until then, he and his descendants will be strangers and sojourners. This being the case, Avraham does not buy land in order to pitch his tent, graze his flocks, or dig wells. At this stage, he knows that he is supposed to be a sojourner in the land. Purchasing land symbolizes and expresses permanent residence, inheritance, and an absolute connection with the land, and Avraham is not yet entitled to inherit the land and settle in it. His residence still retains the temporary nature of a stranger, who has no land under his ownership.

Sara, in her death, is able – for the first time – to make a permanent claim on the land. Avraham is still considered a stranger and sojourner, but Sara must be buried in her place of eternal rest, and there is a promise that their descendants are destined to inherit the land in which she is buried. Only when Avraham himself reaches the time of his death will he join her in that permanent and eternal resting place. Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of God's promise, "You will come to your forefathers in peace, you will be buried at a good old age." This is meant not to reassure him, as it were, that the hardships of exile and servitude will not affect him personally, but only his descendants. Rather, it is meant in the sense that "You, too, will merit to inherit the land at the time of your death and burial, when you come to your forefathers in peace."

3. Yaakov's Purchase of the Field

Until it is time for the inheritance of the land, it is still too early to purchase a plot in *Eretz Yisrael*, aside from a place for burial. This raises the question of why Yaakov decided to buy from the children of Chamor the portion of the field where he pitched his tent and to build an altar to God upon it.

We might perhaps suggest that the episode of this purchase by Yaakov is a complement to and clarification of the purchase of Ma'arat Ha-makhpela by Avraham. The Torah seeks to emphasize that the time has not yet come to establish a permanent home in Eretz Canaan; the purchase of the tract of land is, in the meantime, for burial purposes only. Yaakov – out of his great love for the land and his desire to put down roots and stay, following his return from the long exile – anticipates the future inheritance of the land. He seeks to dwell peacefully and permanently in the land before the time has come. What happens to him, "measure for measure," is that he does not merit to bring his beloved wife for burial in Ma'arat ha-Machpela, which is meant to be the sole permanent holding and inheritance in the land at this stage. Instead, Rachel is buried on the road, where their descendants are ultimately led out of the land, into exile.

Although Yaakov purchases the land for the purposes of living there, ultimately this field, too, is destined to serve as a burial plot:

And the bones of Yosef, which *Bnei Yisrael* brought up from Egypt, they buried in Shekhem, in the section of ground which Yaakov had purchased from the sons of Chamor, father of Shekhem, for a hundred *kesita*, and they became the inheritance of the sons of Yosef. (*Yehoshua* 24)

The burial in this plot took place at the time of the inheritance of the land, when this place could have served as a place to live in. Once again, "measure for measure" – since the plot had been purchased before the time destined for inheritance and settlement, even when that time came, the plot that had been purchased became a burial estate for Yosef.

In another development that is "measure for measure," the Torah goes on to show how Yaakov's grasp on the land before the appointed time leads to an undermining of his residence there, and ultimately to his severance from the land and descent to Egypt. Just after the purchase of the section of the field, and in exactly the same place, his daughter is attacked by the same people from whom Yaakov just bought the land, and ironically, they propose to Yaakov and his sons to become an integral part of their nation – to be full residents in the land, strangers no more:

"And make marriages with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for you. And you shall dwell with us, and the land shall be before you; dwell and trade and have ownership in it." (*Bereishit* 34:9-10)

The Torah hints here that no good will come of possession of the land at this stage; it will bring only trouble. The subsequent events lead to a deterioration of the relations between Yaakov and the inhabitants of the land in which he had sought to lay his claim prematurely. He finds himself fearful of persecution and attacked by the population of the land owing to his sons' deeds.

Then we find that it is precisely to the place which Yaakov had hoped to own that he sends his most beloved son. This dispatch leads to the sale of Yosef and, ultimately, the descent of Yaakov himself to Egypt. It is quite possible that the reason that Yaakov takes pains to instruct his sons to bury him in Ma'arat Ha-makhpela – and he repeats this several times – is that in hindsight he understands the course of events and their significance. In order to make reparation for the premature purchase and possession, which led to an undermining of his sojourning in the land, Yaakov asks to be buried in Ma'arat ha-Machpela, which had been bought as a burial plot and which represents the sole legitimate purchase of land until the appointed time.

4. To follow Avraham or to follow Yaakov?

Whether or not the above interpretation is correct, everyone would agree that after their four hundred years of exile, *Bnei Yisrael* are meant to follow the example of Yaakov, and not the example of Avraham. Today, we are commanded to inherit and take possession of the land; therefore, we are obligated to purchase land in order to live in it, build upon it, cause its desolation to bloom, and serve God in it. We must not suffice with buying land in order to be buried in it.

Nevertheless, perhaps "the actions of the forefathers are a sign for their descendants." From a certain perspective, even when we reach the stage of the inheritance of the land, and even once we are commanded to purchase tracts of land in order to settle and live on it, *Am Yisrael* should still have a certain sense of being "strangers and sojourners" in the land. In *Parashat Behar*, the Torah explains the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* as reminding us "that the land is Mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with Me." We are not strangers in the land of the Hittites, the Canaanites, the Emorites, and the Jebusites; we are the inheritors of the land. Nonetheless, we are commanded to know and remember that we are strangers and sojourners in the land that is God's inheritance; we are not the lords of the land. The Land of Israel does not belong to *Am Yisrael*; rather, it belongs to God, Who, in His kindness, has given us the right and the privilege to live in His inheritance – as strangers and sojourners. In that sense, it is only through burial in the land that we, too, achieve a permanent claim on it.

5. Commitment to the Land and Severance from its Inhabitants

The second set of negotiations that Avraham conducts involves his servant. After making his servant swear that he will not take a wife for Yitzchak from among the daughters of the Canaanites, he commands him to travel to Avraham's birthplace and to bring a wife for Yitzchak from there.

The servant (and attention should be paid to the fact that he is never named throughout the entire *parasha*) asks sensibly:

"Perhaps the woman will not agree to follow me to this land; shall I then take your son back to the land from which you departed?"

Avraham's answer is long and detailed:

"Guard yourself lest you take my son back to there. The Lord God of the heavens, Who took me from my father's house and from the land

where I was born, and Who spoke to me and Who swore to me, saying, 'To your descendants I shall give this land' – He will send His messenger before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. And if the woman does not agree to follow you, then you will be free of this oath of mine; only do not take my son back to there."

Avraham issues two unequivocal instructions to his servant:

- a. Not to take a wife for Yitzchak from among the daughters of the Canaanites.
- b. Not to take his son away from the Land of Canaan.

In what way are the women of Charan superior to those in Canaan? Seemingly, both places are home to idolaters, and Avraham's insistence on this point is difficult to understand. Abravanel formulates the question as follows:

Why did Avraham command not to take a wife [for Yitzchak] from among the daughters of the Canaanites? If it was because they were idolaters – on the other side the river they were too, so what was the point of stipulating this?... And why did [Avraham seek to] distance them, but did not distance the daughters of Betuel and Nachor, who in terms of their beliefs were wicked sinners no less than the inhabitants of Canaan? Most puzzling are his own words, "amongst whom I dwell." In *Bereishit Rabba*, our Sages explain that he referred here to Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei; these were good men, and members of Avraham's covenant. Why, then, did he rule them out?

It appears that the significant advantage of the women of Charan – as most of the commentators agree – is that they are descendants of Shem, who was blessed, while the Canaanites are descended from Cham, who was cursed. The question is if the woman intended as a wife for Yitzchak refuses to journey with Avraham's servant to Canaan, and one of the two terms of the oath must therefore be relinquished, then which will it be? Is it better for Yitzchak to remain in Canaan and marry one of the local women or to leave the land and marry a woman who is a descendant of Shem?

Rashi and Ramban seem to disagree on this point. Commenting on Avraham's words to his servant, "If the woman will not agree to follow you, then you will be free of this oath of mine, only to do take my son back to there," Rashi completes the formulation of Avraham's intention with the words,

"And take a wife for him from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei." If we are correct in our assumption that the only advantage of the women of Charan is that they are descended from Shem and not from Cham, then Avraham is telling his servant that if fulfilling both terms of the oath should turn out to be impossible, then taking a Canaanite wife – a descendant of Cham – for Yitzchak is preferable to having him leave the land in order to marry a wife who is a descendant of Shem. Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei are descendants of Cham – as the text explicitly testifies: "He dwelled in the terebinths of Mamrei, the Emorite – brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner." These three brothers belong to the family of the Emorites, and as we know from *Parashat Noach*, the Emorites are descended from Canaan, son of Cham:

And Canaan bore Tzidon, his firstborn, and Chet; and the Jebusites, and the Emorites, and the Girgashites.

When Avraham tells his servant, "Then you will be free of this oath of mine," he is referring to his previous words: "I will cause you to swear... that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites..." As Rashi understands it, Avraham clarifies here that despite the oath, if the servant is unable to bring a wife for Yitzchak from Charan, then he should find him a Canaanite wife.

Ramban disagrees. In his view, the words, "Then you will be free of this oath of mine" frees the servant from the oath to take a wife for his son, but in no way affects the absolute prohibition on taking a wife for Yitzchak from among the Canaanites. The question is, what is the essence of the oath – the avoidance of taking a Canaanite wife or the taking of a wife from Avraham's birthplace?

Avraham starts out by saying,

"I will cause you to swear... that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. But you shall go to my country and to my birthplace, and you shall take a wife for my son, for Yitzchak."

In other words, Avraham first asks the servant to swear that he will not take a Canaanite wife for Yitzchak and asks him to bring a wife from his birthplace. Seemingly, then, when Avraham goes on to clarify that in the event that the woman is not willing to accompany the servant he is free of the oath, he is freeing him from both clauses – as Rashi explains. In other words, the servant will be exempt from the obligation of bringing a woman from Charan

and also from the oath not to take a Canaanite wife. However, commenting on Rashi's formulation of the intention behind Avraham's words, "... and take a wife for him from the daughters of Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei," Ramban comments:

If they are Canaanites, then heaven forefend that he should do this. And indeed they are descendants of Canaan, for the text notes, "Mamrei the Emorite, brother of Eshkol and brother of Aner." And in *Bereishit Rabba*, *Chazal* explain the words, "That you shall not take a wife [for my son from among the Canaanites]" to mean that he warned him against the Canaanite women, [daughters of] Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, for it was specifically concerning them that he said, "among whom I dwell." For he did not dwell among all the Canaanites, since they were many tribes. His warning therefore concerned those who belonged to his covenant – and how much more so would it apply concerning the others.

Therefore, according to Ramban, the words, "You will be free of this oath of mine" means that the servant is exempt from the obligation of bringing a woman from Charan, in which case Yitzchak will find himself a wife from among the daughters of Yishma'el, Lot, or the other peoples. According to Ramban, then, neither condition can be relinquished: Yitzchak cannot be taken out of the land, and no match can be made for him with a Canaanite woman.

In any event, according to both views – and as is explicit in the text – Avraham is absolutely opposed to having Yitzchak leave the land in order to marry. This is quite surprising, considering that according to Halakha, one of the conditions under which one is permitted to leave the land is for the purposes of marriage. Indeed, we find that Yitzchak himself later instructs Yaakov to go to Charan and to find a wife for himself there.

Chazal teach that Yitzchak, who had been bound as a sacrifice, was imbued with a sanctity that prohibited him personally from leaving the land. This explains why Avraham is insistent on this point. It also explains why, when the land is struck with famine, God prohibits Yitzchak from leaving the land – even though famine, too, is usually considered justification for leaving the land, as indeed both Avraham, his father, and Yaakov, his son, do in times of famine and scarcity.

We might broaden this idea and add that the forefathers imprinted upon their descendants – *Am Yisrael* – the qualities that uniquely characterize

the Jewish nation. This is the deeper meaning of the teaching, "the deeds of the fathers are a sign for their descendants." It is for this reason that they are called "*avot*," fathers. Just as a father transmits his character traits to his children, so our forefathers imbued us with the essential characteristics of *Am Yisrael*.

Avraham, through his actions and his conduct, leaves an imprint of kindness and sacrifice for others. Most of all, his legacy is one of faith that endures even the most difficult of tests. Avraham expresses his great faith in the act of the *akeda*; even in a reality in which God's command and faith in Him contradict logic and cannot be explained or understood, Avraham passes the test, asking no questions. Through his faith, he passes on to *Am Yisrael* the potential to be faithful to God even in an impossible reality, even when *Am Yisrael* is faced with questions that have no answers.

In the same way, it is Yitzchak who bequeaths to *Am Yisrael* a profound connection with the land. By retaining this connection and not leaving the land even in a situation that indicates – or at least permits – a departure, he conveys absolute loyalty to the Land of Israel. It is by virtue of his unbroken connection with the land that *Am Yisrael* retained its bond with the land throughout the long and difficult centuries of exile.

This explains Ramban's question on Rashi. Yitzchak, whose role is to pass on a permanent, abiding connection with *Eretz Yisrael*, remains in the land and does not leave, even at the cost of marrying a Canaanite wife, just as Avraham had been prepared to sacrifice his son even when this contradicted God's own command against murder and negated God's promise to him, "For in Yitzchak shall your seed be called." Both forefathers left the middle path and veered to the most extreme expressions of these principles, since it was only by doing so that their actions would influence all future generations. Avraham bequeaths absolute faith in God – faith that is not dependent on anything – and the attribute of kindness, while Yitzchak, through remaining in the land no matter what, bequeaths the abiding connection of *Am Yisrael* to its land.

Translated by Kaeren Fish