

## Chayei Sarah: A Modest Purchase

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The stories of Bereishit chronicle Jewish selection and the birth of our historical mission. Facing a violent world of moral degeneracy and religious chaos, Hashem selected our people to model dignity, morality, and life of commandment. Israel, the land of Hashem, is the theater within this "performance" is staged. Having selected Avraham, Hashem piloted him to this land to amplify the broadcast of this message. However, settling this land would not prove easy for Avraham, nor would the course proceed smoothly.

Avraham's initial acquisition of land in Israel- outlined in parshat Chayei Sara- provides important lessons for future Jewish settlement of our land. Jewish history is cyclical: what happened before will happen again. The formative stories of Bereishit carve out historical patterns which shape Jewish history.

As he journeys to Israel, Avraham is endowed with two celebrated prophecies. Abandoning his family, he is assured that he will form an impressive nation, whose population will outnumber the stars in Heaven. Leaving his biological homeland, he is also awarded the land of Hashem. Two grand promises and two ambitious prophecies propel Avraham into his future.

Though these two prophecies were delivered as one, they materialize in very different manners. The birth of a son to succeed Avraham and who will craft that future nation, occurs with great drama and with significant spectacle. For twenty-five long years Sarah remained barren and Avraham's legacy remained bleak. Unexpectedly, visiting angels arrived, speaking of a future miracle- a son born to a ninety-year old woman.

Exactly a year later, a baby was born to the delight and amazement of a society numbed by laughter. Astonishingly, as this boy grew, Hashem commanded that he be sacrificed, testing Avraham's faith in a divine future. Dramatically, the sacrifice is halted last minute by a lunging angel. Avraham's prophecy children and a flourishing nation is realized with great drama and the guiding hand of Hashem is obvious throughout the process.

Strikingly, the second prophecy about settling the land of Israel unfolds in more tedious fashion. After years of being hosted by local overlords, Avraham finally acquires a modest parcel of land to bury his wife. Even a simple and dark tomb can only be secured after multiple rounds of negotiations. No angels descend and Hashem's role in this process is invisible.

Evidently, settling the land of Israel isn't always supernatural. There is a model for settling Israel which is driven by miracles and infused with overt divine intervention. After wandering the desert for forty years we entered Israel, defeated thirty warlords, and swiftly established a kingdom of Hashem. This wasn't the natural order of settling lands.

However, the book of Bereishit depicts a more gradual and less spectacular model for settling our homeland. Apparently, at least the initial stages of our current return to Israel, will resemble the plodding story portrayed in Bereishit, and not the rapid-fire entry detailed in the book of Yehoshua.

Not only is the process of acquiring land in Israel gradual and tedious it is also "coincidental". You would expect Avraham's first purchase to be resolute and purposeful. After all, this is the land awarded him by Hashem and the launch of this mandate should be provident and visionary. Instead, Avraham's first purchase is based "solely" upon humanitarian concerns. He is

desperate to locate land to bury his dead wife. This acquisition feels more apologetic than prophetic. Given the desperate circumstances, he was fortunate to acquire a small and insignificant parcel of land. Were it not for the humanitarian crisis, he may have remained property-less. Not only must Avraham struggle to acquire this prophetic land but he must also provide an "excuse" to justify his settlement.

We waited for two millenia to return to our homeland. During that long exile, Jewish hearts across the globe were riveted to our city of dreams longing for our eventual return. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries our people rallied around the specter of a glorious return home. Yet despite our grandest visions and despite our greatest devotion to this cause, our state was only established, after the holocaust and, in part, in response to the horrors and after-shocks of the holocaust. Awarding a Jewish state was, partially, a manner of assuaging this terrible guilt which the world community felt having for not checking Hitler's genocidal plans. Additionally, the Jewish state had great practical benefits in solving a modern humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish war refugees had no home. Our collective memory is still haunted by painful images of ocean liners carrying Jewish refugees being turned back from potential host countries. Our return in 1948, felt very 'incidental' rather than prophetic or historic. Shouldn't our return have been more miraculous and more breathtaking? Don't we deserve to marvel? Avraham's pedestrian purchase of land in Israel reassures that there are numerous models for settling this land. Messianic expectations must not convince us that a settlement enabled by larger geo-political factors isn't part of Jewish prophecy. Prophecy has many disguises.

Avraham's modest purchase suggests a third historical pattern. Not only is settlement of Israel gradual, and not only does it

advance under cover of larger geo-political dynamics. Our land should, ideally, be acquired by strictly legal means. Avraham's negotiations are rigorous and thorough. First, he secures the approval of the local Hittite people and then he bargains with a local chieftain who owns the land but who drives a hard bargain. Ultimately, Avraham pays an exorbitant price for a cave unfit for agriculture or any other utility. The land of prophecy must be legally acquired through contracts signed in boardrooms.

The land of Israel is divinely designated for our people to serve as our platform for inspiring the world. Ideally, for that mission to be successful, our presence in Israel should elicit international endorsement. Avraham has long labored to receive public consent for his presence. His 'first city' of Be'er Sheva, was founded upon a covenant of "oaths" and a treaty of seven sheep – each of which is latent in the double-entendre term 'sheva'. Likewise, his plot of land in Chevron is achieved through prolonged and strictly lawful acquisitions.

Evidently, at least at this stage in the process, we are walking down that same trail. At any moment Hashem can shatter the model, and unilaterally allocate His land to His people. In 1967, after twenty years of slow acclimation to our new homeland and gradual developing of national infrastructure, Hashem suddenly accelerated the pace, inviting us to re-inhabit large tracts of our homeland. Since that historical epiphany, we struggle to secure international backing for our divine right. Inherently, our license to this land isn't a product of international opinion, but it seems that Hashem wills us to operate within historical and political norms. Hopefully, some of the recent accords signed with various Arab countries is a harbinger for broader approval in the future.

Resettling the land of Israel after two thousand years of absence is both challenging and intoxicating. It demands defiance, resolve but also perspective. The past provides patterns for the future. What happened before will happen again.