Visiting Was A Big Deal

Erev Rosh Hashanah, pre-lockdown, we at Yeshivat Hakotel were blessed to receive permission to take our talmidim to Ma’arat HaMachpelah to daven on behalf of the Jewish people.

I have visited the Ma’ara many times, but this time was very different. There was an eerie silence as the place was almost completely empty. We were allowed inside in small groups, each for a short amount of time. We were of the few able to beseech our avot and imahot up close to daven for us on the night when selichot focus on asking Hashem to remember His covenant with them.

To reinforce the details of Avraham’s accomplishments, the Torah methodically summarizes the story in three segments:

1. Pesukim 17–18: Avraham purchased the land (delineated in detail).
2. Pasuk 19: (Only) after the purchase, Avraham buried Sarah there.
3. Pasuk 20: (After and as a result of these two actions) the land became Avraham’s achuzat kever.

The Deal’s Significance

The Midrash teaches that others cannot accuse us of having stolen Ma’arat HaMachpelah (or Har HaBa’yit and Kever Yosef) because it is a precious site that our ancestors purchased. Sadly, many do dispute our rights to these places. Nevertheless, Avraham’s purchase – and the subsequent burial of our ancestors there – should heighten our internal sense of our irrefutable right to ‘the city of our ancestors.’

We Continue to Connect To Chevron Through Burial

In 1975, soon after the Jewish return to Chevron, little Avraham, Sarah Nachshon’s four-month-old son, died of SIDS. His mother decided to bury him in the ancient Jewish cemetery of Chevron. No Jews had been buried there since the 1929 pogroms and the Arabs had desecrated it. The government sent soldiers to stop her, but they could not hold her back as she carried her dead baby in her arms and marched to Chevron on foot.

As she buried her son, she said, “3,800 years ago, Avraham buried his wife Sarah in Chevron, thus beginning the Jewish settlement there. I now bury Avraham the son of Sarah, and this will be the beginning of the rebirth of this Jewish city.”

Looking Forward

My students and I were lucky to visit on the eve of the day we commemorate our ancestors’ commitment to avodat Hashem. May our own commitment to avodat Hashem and to our ancestral homeland soon afford us the ability to once again visit Chevron and all of Eretz Yisrael without any limitation at all.

1 To emphasize their point, Bnei Chet mention kevura (burial), as opposed to achuza (estate) five times (Bereishit 23:6).
5 Bereishit Rabbah 79:7.

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Parashat Chaye Sarah focuses on two detailed narratives – Avraham’s purchase of a field with a cave as a burial place for Sarah, and his mission – via his servant Eliezer – to find a wife for his son Yitzchak. The former is Avraham’s initiative to secure the promise of Land (Brit bein HaBetarim), stated five times, and the latter is Avraham’s response to the promise of children (Brit Mila), also assured to Avraham five times. Avraham does not wait for G-d to fulfill these promises but realizes G-d is waiting for him to facilitate their fulfillment. But why wait for Sarah’s death and not purchase land or search for a wife for Yitzchak earlier?

The Torah teaches us – “And the life of Sarah was 100 and 20 and seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.” Avraham was not waiting for the death of Sarah. He was inspired by Sarah’s life of active commitment to the aforementioned promises to continue her legacy.

At the climax/transition in the narratives of Avraham Avinu, the Torah tells us a story of Sarah Imeinu (Bereishit 16). This is the story that will catalyze the fulfillment of Hashem’s promises, of Land and descendants, merits her to become Am Yisrael’s first Matriarch.

Immediately after this story, the Torah tells us of the Brit Mila, a covenant forged with Avraham and his descendants through the sign of circumcision. And Sarah is to be the mother of Yitzchak through whom the covenant will continue! Sarah’s willingness to sacrifice her future status to actively catalyze the fulfillment of Hashem’s promises, of Land and descendants, merits her to become Am Yisrael’s first Matriarch.

The Netziv explains that although Avraham received direct messages of prophecies from Hashem commanding him to leave his father’s home, and later to sacrifice his future hopes through the binding of Yitzchak, Sarah surmounts similar challenges through ruach haKodesh – Divine inspiration and pure faith in the ways of Hashem. She willingly undergoes her own “sacrifice” of a child before Avraham is told by Hashem to do so. This is Sarah Imeinu’s legacy.

Upon her death, Avraham is inspired and determined to perpetuate Sarah’s life and legacy. Without any prophetic commands, he struggles with focused willpower to catalyze the fulfillment of Hashem’s promises to secure Land and children for the future. Sarah understood that Divine promise is not a statement that G-d will act, but “an invitation from G-d to Avraham and his children that they should act,” with commitment and willingness to sacrifice, and G-d will help them. Sarah understood the challenge of fulfilling Hashem’s covenant. She acted with faith, not passivity, overcoming overwhelming personal obstacles to secure the future of Hashem’s nation. She inspired Avraham to get up and do the same. May her legacy provide us, her children, with the strength to persevere and act to secure the future of our Land and nation!

Sarah’s Sacrifice

Sarah’s willingness to sacrifice her future status merits her to become Am Yisrael’s first Matriarch.

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4. Literally in the middle of the narratives, as highlighted through chiasmus in the Avraham stories.
8. Bereishit Rabbah 41 – “Avraham left (Ur Kasdim) in promise, I (Sarah) left in faith.”

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