“Sar ah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan, and Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and bewail her” (Bereishit 23:2).

Despite the fact that the Torah portion informs us of Sarah’s death, the name of the portion means the life of Sarah. From this, our Rabbis learn (Kohelet Rabbah 9:5) that Tzaddikim, the righteous, are considered “alive” even after their deaths. It is also fascinating to note that Avraham had no burial place prepared for Sarah, indicating that he never expected his wife, or any other family member, to die at so young an age, or perhaps it suggests that he already knew exactly where he was going to bury her.

Actually, Chevron was Avraham and Sarah’s first permanent home in the land of Canaan. They lived there for some 25 years, relocating to Be’er Sheva only after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the incessant behavior of Lot and his daughters. In Be’er Sheva, Avraham proclaimed G-d’s teachings and (Bereishit 21:33), maintained an Eshel, which the Midrash interprets to mean a food pantry or an inn for wayfarers. Even when living elsewhere, Avraham apparently visited Be’er Sheva frequently.

We now find that Avraham and Sarah have moved back to Chevron and have been living there for approximately 12 years. Why did they return to Chevron?

The Midrash states that Abraham and Sarah had longed to be buried where Adam and Eve had been laid to rest. However, no one knew the exact location of that site. On the day Avraham was informed by the angel that Sarah would give birth to Yitzchak, he went out to his herd to select animals to prepare a feast for his guests. According to the Midrash, one of the calves ran away into a cave. When Avraham followed the calf, he found Adam and Eve resting on their beds and a spiritual light of incredible brilliance burning above them. The entire scene was enveloped in incense-like fragrance. This place was the Cave of Machpelah, in the field of Efron, the Hittite.

As residents of Be’er Sheva, Avraham and Sarah were concerned the Hittites would not allow them to purchase the burial plot in Chevron. So when Sarah was 115 years old, Sarah and Avraham moved back to Chevron, to establish permanent residency there, enabling them to purchase the plot.

Rashi states (Bereishit 23:2) that the city of Chevron was also known as Kiritat-Arba, which means the village of four, because of the four couples who were eventually buried there: Adam and Eve, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka and Ya’akov and Leah. Rashi further states (Bereishit 23:9) the burial place was also known as “Ma’arat HaMachpelah,” the Cave of Machpelah, meaning the double cave, because it consisted of a “bayit,” a lower floor with an upper floor on top. An alternative explanation cited by Rashi explains the cave was “doubled,” with only married couples buried there.

The Ramban cites the Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 55:10, which claims the origin of the name Machpelah may stem from the fact the Almighty is said to have folded the very tall corpse of Adam in half, so it could fit into the cave. Even though the cave was always known as Machpelah, the local Hittite people were unaware of the name’s significance, or that there were graves in the cave. That may also be the reason why the local people refer to the entire area as Machpelah, whereas Avraham refers only to the cave as Machpelah.

The Rashbam claims the entire valley was known by the name Machpelah, which included the field and the cave. Wilhelm Gesenius (1786-1842, German Hebrew grammanarian), maintains the name is of Ethiopian origin, and means a portion or district.

According to the Zohar, both Avraham and Yitzchak recognized the special nature of the Machpelah cave. The Zohar submits that when Avraham first entered the cave, he came upon the entrance to the Garden of Eden. The cave was filled with fragrant smells and a piercing light shone out of the cave. Similarly, when Yitzchak blessed his son Ya’akov, thinking it was Esav, saying “Behold the fragrance of my son is as the fragrance of a field, which G-d has blessed,” he too was referring to the fragrance of the Garden of Eden and to the primordial light of creation emanating from Machpelah.