Sarah has died and Avraham has a carefully planned agenda for the funeral arrangements. He approaches the local clan and asks to purchase a particular parcel of land owned by a man named Ephron. Ephron offers to give Avraham the plot of land as a gift, free of charge, yet Avraham insists on paying for it. Eventually, a price is set; the sum is apparently exorbitant, especially considering the opening “price” offered by the seller.

While some Jews take pride in their business savvy, Avraham’s negotiation skills seem to have been sorely lacking. He overpays for something he could have procured for free. To make matters even worse, Avraham had been promised this entire land as his inheritance. Why did he insist on paying for something that G-d Himself would eventually deliver to him on a silver platter?

Avraham had not forgotten that this Land would eventually belong to him; in fact, G-d’s promise was precisely the reason Avraham behaved so strangely in this negotiation. Part and parcel of G-d’s promise that Avraham would inherit the Land of Israel was a “price” to be paid: “Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs for 400 years. (At times,) they will be enslaved and oppressed.” This nuanced reading of the text is not always conveyed correctly in translation, but the gist of the verse is that the 400 years describes the duration of time in which they would be strangers or foreigners, devoid of sovereignty. The verse describes a period of time in which Avraham’s descendants would be a political minority in the Land that would eventually belong to them, and not a period of 400 years of oppression and enslavement.

Avraham had a very clear understanding of the promise G-d had made to him; in fact, he made reference to it in his negotiations with the locals: “I am a stranger (or foreigner) and a resident among you, allot for me a burial place among you so that I can bury my dead” (Bereishit 23:4). Avraham understood his political situation and acknowledged his current position as less-than-equal among the lords of the land. He echoed G-d’s use of the word ger to describe his status as an outsider among the locals, indicating that despite his absolute conviction that this Land would eventually belong to his descendants, he and his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren would continue to be “strangers” for 400 years – first in Canaan, then in the house of Lavan, and finally in Egypt. The local Canaanite population will continue to control politics, commerce and the military until the full price for the Land of Israel is paid and G-d’s promise comes to fruition.

And so, Avraham insists on paying for the burial plot. He insists on burying Sarah specifically in that spot because he cherishes the Land. He appreciates its significance and holiness, and he wants to be a part of it. He wants to make an acquisition, to establish a foothold, in this very unique place. He knows he will continue to be a stranger in the eyes of the surrounding population, but he also knows that this acquisition is the down payment on the Land. This is the beginning of ownership of the Land of Israel, which will last forever. Sarah’s burial was, figuratively and literally, the act that planted the roots of the Jewish people – and Avraham would not allow this act to be based on the on-again-off-again largesse of the local Canaanite population.

Ephron must have thought he had hoodwinked Avraham, taking from him 400 silver shekels for a burial plot, but Avraham was sure he had made a wonderful deal. For a mere 400 coins of silver, he had made the first acquisition in the Land of Israel, placing a down payment on the Land that would be inherited by his descendants 400 years later.

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