

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Kalman Moshe ben Reuven Avigdor, Rabbi Kalman Packouz. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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24 CHESHVAN

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

A Universal Loss

Sarah died in Kiryat Arbah, which is in Chevron in the land of Canaan. Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her (23:2).

This week's *parsha* opens with the death of our matriarch Sarah and the details surrounding her burial. The Torah recounts that Avraham came to eulogize and weep for her. The word "weep" is written with a small letter "כ" ("kaf") and Chazal tell us that this hints to the fact that Avraham curtailed his crying (see *Bal Haturim* ad loc). Why did Avraham lessen his crying?

Furthermore, the commentaries (see Riva, Ohr Hachaim, Klei Yakar, and others on this verse) are troubled with three other issues in the construct of the *possuk*: 1) The beginning of the verse informs us that Sarah died and yet the Torah, which budgets its words and letters so carefully, repeats her name again at the end of the *possuk*. Why? 2) Why does the Torah place her name in between Avraham eulogizing for her and his crying? 3) Finally, doesn't crying usually come before the eulogizing? In other words, why didn't the Torah simply write, "Avraham came to weep and eulogize her"?

The name Sarah has its root in the Hebrew word "sar," meaning "prince." Initially, her name was Sarai, but Hashem changed her name to Sarah when she was ninety. The Talmud (*Brachos* 13a) explains why Hashem changed her name from Sarai to Sarah; "originally, she was a princess only to her own nation (i.e. Aram), and in the end she became a princess for the entire world." Clearly, Sarah had gone from

being a locally respected personality to one whose impact was felt the world over.

This public persona was what Avraham was coming to eulogize. Sarah wasn't merely his wife, she was an important person in her own right. Sarah's death left a void in the world. This is why the Torah repeats her name again; Avraham wasn't coming to eulogize his wife, he was coming to articulate a communal loss. He was explaining who "Sarah" was and what she meant to the world. He wanted people to understand what they had lost.

There is an important lesson in this story. Funerals are a meaningful time to reflect on the value of the deceased's life accomplishments. Yet often eulogies mostly reflect personal memories of the deceased (e.g. Bubby's "amazing" cookie recipe). This causes those in attendance to be saddened not by the loss of the deceased, but rather by the grief and loss of the bereaved. Eulogies should ideally extoll virtues of the deceased, thereby making the loss relevant to all.

This is the lesson that the Torah is conveying about what Avraham was trying to accomplish. His personal loss wasn't the focus at this time and therefore he lessened his own weeping. There is always time for personal grieving, but Avraham's goal at that moment was to explain to those in attendance what they had lost by the death of a princess of the world.



Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha*, Avraham purchases the Machpeilah Cave (the "double" cave). He bought the cave from Efron the Hittite for 400 silver shekel so that he could bury Sarah in a proper and respectful manner. Adam, Chava, the patriarchs, and matriarchs (aside from Rochel) were also buried in Machpeilah, as well as Eisav's head (*Sotah* 13a). Here are a few facts we thought you might find of interest regarding the Machpeilah Cave:

1. Adam found this place after he and Chava were kicked out of Gan Eden. After searching in vain for a way back into Gan Eden, they came across this cave. It smelled just like Gan Eden, but when they tried digging further, a heavenly voice told them to stop. Adam therefore chose this place to bury Chava, and their son Shes buried Adam there (*Zohar Chadash*, quoted by *Me'em Lo'ez Chayei Sarah* 1).
2. According to the Midrash (*Pirkei d'Rebbi Eliezer* 36), Avraham approached the Jebusites (Hittites) and requested to purchase the cave from them. They answered Avraham, "We know that your future offspring will try to conquer our home city (Jerusalem). →"

Efron Memorial Gardens?

And Efron's field that was in Machpeilah, which was opposite Mamre, the field and the cave contained therein and all the trees in the boundary around it, was acquired by Avraham as a purchase... (23:17-18)

Avraham Avinu goes to great lengths to acquire a suitable property to bury his deceased wife Sarah. The Torah gives us an unusually detailed account of the negotiation between Avraham and Efron who was the owner of the cave that Avraham wished to buy.

Initially, Efron offers to give it to Avraham for free. In fact, Efron goes a step further; he offers not only the cave but the entire field surrounding the cave as well. Avraham graciously appreciates his offer, but insists on paying for the land. Efron then changes gears and asks for an exorbitant sum (see Ramban ad loc) because he understood that Avraham had his heart set on this piece of property. What made Efron suddenly change from being a benevolent individual to a shrewd businessman?

Additionally, when Avraham dies thirty-eight years later, the Torah makes a remarkable statement: *"His sons Yitzchak and Yishmael buried him in the cave of Machpeilah, in the field of Efron"* (25:9). In

other words, thirty-eight years later the field was still known as once belonging to Efron. Stranger still, 170 years later, when Yaakov Avinu is buried in the cave of Machpeilah by his sons, the Torah once again refers to it as the field that Avraham bought from Efron. What is special about Efron's role here that entitles him to continuously be associated with the cave and its surrounding field?

Sarah's passing wasn't just a loss to Avraham and his nuclear family; it was a communal and national loss (see previous article, "A Universal Loss"). Efron, the consummate businessman, recognized this and had a brilliant insight. He realized that her death was a loss felt by many and therefore her burial site would be significant forevermore. He convinces Avraham Avinu that merely acquiring the Machpeilah cave wouldn't be sufficient to properly pay homage to Sarah. He insists that Avraham needs the entire surrounding area to create a memorial park in her memory.*

Efron genuinely offers to give the entire area to Avraham as a memorial park. Why? Efron wants the honor of donating the land and being eternally remembered in this way, i.e. Sarah being buried in "Efron's Memorial Gardens." But Avraham insists on buying the land because he wants to have her buried in "his" land – i.e. Eretz Yisroel. Once Efron feels that this is solely a business transaction and that Sarah wasn't going to be buried in "Efron's Memorial Gardens," he charges Avraham an exorbitant sum (see accompanying Did You Know column) to remove his name from the deed.

However, Efron still gets credit for the idea of creating a historical site where many people can come and visit forevermore, which is why his name continues to be associated with the transaction throughout the Torah.

*We find the same sentiment regarding the burial site of Lady Diana, a woman who was an internationally beloved icon.

Did You Know Cont.

If you agree to prevent them from taking Jerusalem without our permission, we will sell you the cave." Avraham agreed and signed a contract, which was hung on statues outside the gates of Jerusalem. There are commentators who hold that Joshua did not conquer Jerusalem when he entered Israel due to Avraham's agreement (seen in *Judges* 1:21). Centuries later, King David purchased the Temple Mount from the Jebusites.

3. Currently, this double cave is located beneath a Saladin-era mosque, which had been converted from a large rectangular Herodian-era Judean

structure. Dating back over 2,000 years, the monumental Herodian compound is believed to be the oldest continuously used, and intact, prayer structure in the world, which makes it the oldest major building in the world that is still used and also fulfills its original function.

4. While we know that Avraham paid 400 silver shekel for the cave of Machpeilah, what would that equate to in today's dollars? Here is our attempt to figure it out: Rashi (*Bava Metzia* 87a) explains that these were not normal shekalim, they were equivalent to 2,500 biblical shekalim. The Me'em Lo'ez elaborates on this and states it was 46,875 oz. of silver, or \$803,437 at today's prices. However,

silver was significantly more rare back then (81% of all mined silver was mined only since the 1900's according to the US Bureau of mines in "1930 Summarized Silver Production Data"). We also know from transactions recorded that a sheep in the times of ancient Babylon was only roughly 10 g, or about \$5 by today's cost of silver (Commodities investing: "The Historical Value Of Silver"). Compare that to the average cost of a sheep nowadays of \$200, we find a ratio of 1:40 of the value of silver in those days. If our estimates are correct, we then multiply \$803,437 by 40, which equals \$32,137,480 in today's currency. That's a lot of shekels.



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