



Light of Torah

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A business deal

Chapter 23 of Genesis continues the drama of Abraham's family life. It opens with the death and burial of his wife, Sarah. In traditional Jewish interpretation, the proximity of this scene to last week's Torah reading led to a startling thought: when Sarah discovered that Abraham had intended to kill their son Isaac, she died of a broken heart.

Our focus today, however, is a business deal: Abraham's purchase of a piece of land that will become the family burial plot. Read this passage in 23:1-20.

After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham's possession as a burying place" (Gen.23:19-20).

"After this" says the text. After what? The preceding negotiations over the purchase of the cave and land are curious in their detail. As you read Gen.23:1-20 carefully, perhaps you noticed:

The juxtaposition of emotion ('mourning,' 'weeping') and business terms ('property,' 'price,' 'possession').

The repeated references to the legal witnesses of the negotiations ('in the hearing of,' 'in the presence of'). Abraham, a foreigner, is well regarded by the locals. The interaction between Abraham and Ephron. Ephron offers the land as a gift, but Abraham wants legal title. What else do you notice about this text?

Certainly, from an historical perspective, this passage contains interesting information about ancient eastern burial customs and business etiquette. But how does the Torah's preoccupation with Abraham's land package contribute to the way we relate to God? This is the question that fascinated the sages. From your reading, how would you enter this conversation?

In the discussions of the sages, two insights emerge in creative tension. On the one hand, our Torah passage represents the realization of God's promise to Abraham: "I will give to you, and your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien" (Gen.17:8). Sarah's grave site—where Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah will also be buried—represents the chosen people's first permanent legal foothold in the land of Canaan. The dream is now reality.

Yet this momentous step comes at a high price. As well as being charged a hefty sum, Abraham—a man of wealth and status in his country of origin—is required to humble himself, bowing down not only to Ephron but 'to the people of the land' (v.12). Says Ramban (13th century Torah scholar), Abraham, while respected by the Hittites, was still an alien among them, and required not only the consent of Ephron, but the support of all the people. Thus, the Jewish biblical tradition regards the acquisition of the cave of Machpelah as one of the trials of Abraham, one in which he performed admirably. For through Abraham's humility and unswerving dedication to the task, God's vision became a reality in time and place. •

Table topic: Lofty spiritual visions do not escape the practicalities of living in the real world (e.g., a person of prayer still has to pay the mortgage!). Describe the material-spiritual tensions/opportunities in your own life.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.