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Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARA

The Purchase of the "Burial Possession"

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The story of Avraham's purchase of the "burial possession" (*achuzat kever*) in Chevron is actually two stories with two different messages.

In this *shiur* we shall examine chapter 23 of *Bereishit* using the exegetical methodology known as "*shitat ha-bechinot*," or theory of aspects, an approach developed by my rabbi and teacher, Rav Mordekhai Breuer. Rav Breuer presents this approach and the commentary upon which it is based in his books, "*Pirkei Mo'adot*," "*Pirkei Bereishit*," and "*Rav Mordekhai Breuer's Shitat ha-Bechinot*." According to this approach, God wrote the Torah in "layers," with narratives (or halakhic sections) paralleling one another, each reflecting a different aspect or message, and each of which may be read independently, so that they contradict one another. Often, these narratives are interwoven so as to create a contiguous story. The contiguous story blurs the transition seams between one narrative and the other, but preserves the difficulties posed by those transitions. Each narrative expresses independent content with independent significance, and there is some relationship between them justifying their integration into a single story. By means of the difficulties arising from the combination of these narratives – such as repetitions or contradictions – we are able to expose the two independent "aspects," and then to examine their respective significance. Here, as stated, we shall attempt to apply this methodology to the story of Avraham's purchase of the burial possession in chapter 23 of *Sefer Bereishit*.

The text reads as follows:

(1) Sara's life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of Sara's life. (2) And Sara died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan, and Avraham came to eulogize Sara and to weep for her.

(3) And Avraham arose from before his dead, and he spoke to the children of Chet, saying: (4) I am a stranger and a sojourner with you; give me a burial possession with you, that I may bury my dead from before me.

(5) And the children of Chet answered Avraham, saying to him: (6) Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince in our midst. Bury your dead in the choice of our tombs; none of us shall withhold his tomb from you from burying your dead.

(7) So Avraham arose and bowed to the people of the land, to the children of Chet. (8) And he spoke to them saying: If you are willing to bury my dead from before me, hear me and speak on my behalf to Efron, son of Tzochar, (9) that he may give me the cave of Makhpela which is his, which is at the edge of his field. For the full price he shall give it to me in your midst for a burial possession.

(10) And Efron dwelled among the children of Chet.

And Efron the Chittite answered Avraham in the hearing of the children of Chet, [and] of all who entered the gate of his city, saying:

(11) No, my lord, hear me: The field I give you, and the cave that is in it I have given to you. In the sight of the sons of my people I have given it to you; bury your dead.

(12) And Avraham bowed before the people of the land.

(13) And he spoke to Efron, in the hearing of the people of the land, saying: But if you [agree], please hear me: I am giving the price of the field; take it from me, that I may bury my dead there.

(14) And Efron answered Avraham, saying to him:

(15) My lord, hear me: a plot worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is it between you and me? And bury your dead.

(16) Avraham hearkened to Efron, and Avraham weighed for Efron the silver of which he had spoken in the presence of the children of Chet – four hundred shekel of silver in accepted currency.

(17) Then the field of Efron which is in Makhpela, which is before Mamrei – the field, and the cave that is in it, and all the trees that are in the field, that are

within all the borders around it - was established (18) as Avraham's, for a purchase, in the presence of the children of Chet, before all who entered the gate of his city.

(19) And afterwards Avraham buried his wife Sara in the cave of the field of Makhpela which faces Mamrei, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan.

(20) And the field and the cave that was in it were established as Avraham's as a burial possession from the sons of Chet.

We shall start by noting several textual difficulties. Thereafter we shall see that separating this unit into two "aspects" causes these difficulties to disappear. Finally, we shall attempt to understand the significance of each aspect.

The unit presents us with three main types of difficulties:

a. In verse 7 we read, "Avraham arose... (*va-yakom*). From where did he arise? He was in the middle of conversing with the children of Chet! The Ibn Ezra suggests that the conversation took place with everyone sitting, and that at this point Avraham stood up in order to "bow" with his head. But doing this in the middle of a conversation where everyone is sitting seems odd.

The expression, "Avraham arose," appears earlier in the unit, in verse 3, where the context is clear: after eulogizing and weeping over Sara, "Avraham arose from before his dead." Biblical parlance appears to perceive eulogy and weeping as being related to lying or sitting (as in the expression, "sitting *shiv'a*,") and leaving this state is a process of "arising" from mourning (once again echoed in the expression still accepted today – "getting up" from *shiv'a*). It seems that the expression may be meant in the same sense in verse 7, too. But if this is so, why does the text need to twice note the fact that Avraham arose from mourning? This repetition demands some explanation.

b. The expression "*kima*" is repeated elsewhere in these verses. In verses 17-18 we read: "The field of Efron was ESTABLISHED (*va-yakom*)... as Avraham's," and then again in verse 20: "The field and the cave that was in it was ESTABLISHED as

Avraham's." Why does the text note twice the fulfillment of Avraham's purchase of the field and the cave?

Admittedly, each of the verses contains something that is missing from the other, but they could easily have been combined into a single verse, along the lines of: "The field of Efron that was in Makhpela, which was before Mamrei, was established - the field and the cave that was in it and all the trees that were within all of its borders around – as Avraham's, as a purchase of a burial possession by the children of Chet, in the presence of all those who entered the gate of his city." Thus it is not clear why the Torah notes twice, in two separate verses, the fulfillment of the purchase.

Aside from being repetitions, these verses are also contradictory. In verses 17-19 there is an emphasis on Avraham burying Sara only after the field is established as his. But in verse 20 it seems that the field was established as his after the burial.

The Rashbam and the Ibn Ezra explain that two different stages of "establishing" were involved. First, the purchase was fulfilled by means of the sale, as we read in verse 18: "As a purchase." At this stage, the field was considered Avraham's property, but it was not yet considered a burial possession. Only when Avraham actually buried Sara in the cave did the field and the cave become a possession of a burial place.

But this explanation is not satisfying. First, earlier in the *parasha*, in Avraham's two appeals to the children of Chet, he asks: "Give me a burial possession" (4) and "He shall give it to me in your midst for a burial possession." Thus, the "giving" itself was supposed to be the giving of a burial possession; there is no hint that Avraham would thereafter have to convert the field himself into a possession of a burial place. Second, if verse 20 is meant to describe the conversion of the field into a burial place by means of Avraham burying Sara there, then the verse should not mention "From the children of Chet"! These words prove that verse 20 is talking about the fulfillment of the purchase of the field from the children of Chet. Thus, we return to our question: why is the fulfillment of the purchase described twice, and was the purchase fulfilled before the burial or afterwards?

c. *Chazal (Bava Metzia 87a)* and the commentators note that there is an inexplicable transition in Efron's position: he starts off willing to give the field to Avraham for free, but then demands payment. At first he declares, "No, my lord, hear me: The field I give you, and the cave that is in it I have given to you. In the sight of the sons of my people I have given it to you; bury your dead" (11). Not only does he not demand payment, but he appears to regard this gift as something obvious and already effected. Avraham insists on paying: "But if you [agree], please hear me: I will give the price of the field. Take it from me, that I may bury my dead there" (13). In light of Efron's initial generosity, we would expect that even if he accepts payment from Avraham, he would suffice with a nominal amount. Instead, he suggests the considerable sum of four hundred silver shekels: "My lord, hear me: a plot worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is it between you and me? and bury your dead" (15). By comparison, four hundred shekels of silver is eight times the value of a virgin for marriage (see *Devarim 22:29*).

Lest we imagine that Efron's latter words mention the value of the field as a mere aside, with no expectation of actually receiving this sum, the Torah testifies that Avraham understood Efron's intention perfectly: "Avraham hearkened to Efron, and Avraham weighed for Efron the silver of which he had spoken in the presence of the children of Chet – four hundred shekel of silver in accepted currency" (16). From *Chazal's* teachings it seems that from the outset Efron never really intended to give Avraham the field for free. But if this is the case, the Torah should have said so. Furthermore, if Efron's seeming generosity is no more than a bargaining trick, why does the Torah not adopt its usual brief style, rather than take pains to describe each stage of the dialogue?

Let us now propose a separation of the unit into its constituent "aspects."

The first two verses provide necessary background for the whole chapter, and include no repetitions or contradictions. Therefore they should be regarded as an introduction that should not be divided between the "aspects," but rather remains common to both.

As mentioned, the "arising" (*kima*) in verse 7 should be interpreted as Avraham arising from before his dead. This "arising" must come as an immediate continuation of the end of verse 2, and it represents a repetition of verse 3. Therefore everything that comes after verse 2 and before verse 7 should be categorized as belonging to one aspect (henceforth to be referred to as aspect A), and verse 7 itself as another aspect (aspect B).

In B, verse 7 introduces Avraham's appeal to the people of the land. This appeal is described immediately thereafter, in verses 8-9. Therefore verses 8-9 should be grouped together with verse 7, in aspect B.

Already at this stage we can see a difference between the two aspects concerning Avraham's request.

In A, Avraham asks: "Give me a burial possession with you, that I may bury my dead from before me." He makes no attempt to purchase any specific field; he simply seeks a way of burying his dead. The children of Chet, understanding this as the crux of his request, answer: "Bury your dead in the choice of our tombs; none of us shall withhold his tomb from you for burying your dead." In other words, since your request is to bury your dead, you do not necessarily need a possession of a burial place which you will own; you can suffice with burying your dead in one of the tombs of the children of Chet. It is not clear whether this would indeed have satisfied Avraham, but it is clear in any event that the children of Chet understood that Avraham's main objective was to bury his dead.

In B, on the other hand, Avraham notes in his first appeal (as part of this aspect, disconnected from A) to the children of Chet that he is specifically interested in the cave of Makhpela belonging to Efron, son of Tzohar, and that he wishes to pay "the full price" of it. Clearly, aside from burying Sara, Avraham also seeks to effect a purchase of the site.

Before we return to grouping the verses according to the two aspects, let us join the verses that are clearly connected to one another into units. First, attention should be paid to the fact that verse 10 contains two sentences (hereafter to be referred to as

10a and 10b): "And Efron dwelled amongst the children of Chet," "And Efron the Chittite answered Avraham in the hearing of the children of Chet and all who entered the gate of his city, saying." We shall address each of these sentences separately. It is clear that 10b is continued in verse 11, and therefore we shall treat 10b-11 as a single unit.

Verse 16 – "Avraham hearkened to Efron, and Avraham weighed for Efron the silver of which he had spoken in the hearing of the children of Chet – four hundred shekels of silver in accepted currency" – clearly relates to what Efron says in verse 14-15, "Efron answered Avraham, saying to him: My lord, hear me: a plot worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is it between me and you? So bury your dead." Therefore, verses 14-16 must be joined together as part of the same aspect.

Verses 12-13 – "And Avraham bowed before the people of the land. And he spoke to Efron, in the presence of the people of the land, saying: But if you [agree], please hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it from me, that I may bury my dead there" – invite a response on Efron's part. This response comes only in verses 14-15 (which we have already connected with verse 16). Therefore verses 12-16 are a single unit belonging to one aspect.

As we pointed out earlier, verses 11 and 15 contradict one another with regard to Efron's intentions: in verse 11 he offers the field for free, while in verse 15 he asks an exorbitant sum. Moreover, verses 11 and 15 are the only verses in the chapter in which Efron agrees to supply the field to Avraham, and each of the two aspects must therefore include one of these two verses. Therefore, verses 10b-11 should belong to one aspect, and verses 12-16 to the other.

It would seem logical to attribute verses 10b-11 to aspect A and verses 12-16 to aspect B (we shall return to the matter of 10a below). The reason for this attribution is that from Avraham's very first appeal we already discern a difference between the two aspects. The difference is that in A, Avraham requests – or at least seems prepared to accept – a free gift, while in B he insists on paying the full price for the field. Therefore, verses 12-16, in which Avraham insists on paying (in verse 13), should be regarded as a continuation of his first request in B, while verses 10b-11, in which

Efron proposes a free gift to Avraham (and his proposal is accepted; Avraham expresses no opposition) should be categorized with aspect A.

As regards verse 10a, it is difficult to establish its place with certainty, but it appears to belong to aspect B. The reason for this is that if this verse were to belong to A, it would mean that the text first refers to Efron simply by his name, "Efron" (in this verse), and thereafter "introduces" him as "Efron the Chittite." It is more logical that in A, the first time that Efron is mentioned is in 10b, where he is introduced to the reader for the first time, as "Efron the Chittite." In B, Efron has already been introduced in Avraham's words as "Efron, son of Tzohar," and thereafter he may be referred to simply as "Efron."

It seems that the significance of 10b in aspect B is that it explains why Avraham appealed to the children of Chet in the first place, rather than applying directly to Efron: it was because Efron "dwelled amongst the children of Chet"; he was a Chittite citizen, and according to ancient custom, burial required public approval (see A. Y. Beror, in "*Beit Mikra*" XI, 4 (5726)). Avraham spoke with the children of Chet not merely in order to ascertain where Efron could be found (the Torah would certainly not record such a trivial conversation), but rather because he needed their approval to bury Sara in their midst. For this reason, it seems, Avraham mentions only the cave in speaking to them, and not the field – since the purchase of regular land did not require public approval.

As stated, verses 17-18 – "Then the field of Efron which was in Makhpela, which was before Mamrei – the field, and the cave that was in it... were made over to Avraham, for a purchase, in the presence of the children of Chet, before all who entered the gate of his city," are repeated in verse 20: "And the field and the cave that was in it were made over to Avraham, as a burial possession, by the sons of Chet." Verses 17-18 should therefore be grouped with aspect B, it seems – first, because in these verses the location of the field is noted in detail, while in A thus far the text mentions a nondescript field with no indication of its exact location. Only in B does Avraham ask, in his first appeal to the children of Chet (9): "Plead on my behalf to Efron, son of Tzohar, that he may give me the cave of Makhpela which is his, which is at the edge of his field." This matches the detailed summary in verses 17-18, and

therefore verses 17-18 should be grouped under aspect B and verse 20 should be grouped under aspect A.

Verse 19, as we have mentioned, comes to emphasize that Avraham buried Sara after his purchase of the field had been fulfilled, in the wake of the description of the realization of the purchase in verses 17-18. Therefore verse 19 belongs to B. Verse 20, on the other hand, describes the fulfillment of the purchase in A, while A makes no mention of the burial of Sara.

We can now summarize the division of the chapter as follows:

Common to Aspects A-B:

"Sara's life was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, the years of Sara's life. And Sara died in Kiryat Arba, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan, and Avraham came to eulogize Sara and to weep for her."

Aspect A:

(3) And Avraham arose from before his dead, and he spoke to the children of Chet, saying: (4) I am a stranger and a sojourner with you; give me a burial possession with you, that I may bury my dead from before me.

(5) And the children of Chet answered Avraham, saying to him: (6) Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince in our midst. Bury your dead in the choice of our tombs; none of us shall withhold his tomb from you for burying your dead.

(10a) And Efron the Chittite spoke to Avraham in the hearing of the children of Chet, [and] of all who entered the gate of his city, saying:

(11) No, my lord, hear me: The field I give you, and the cave that is in it – I have given it to you. In the sight of the sons of my people I have given it to you; bury your dead.

(20) And the field and the cave that was in it were established as Avraham's, as a burial possession, from the sons of Chet.

Aspect B:

(7) So Avraham arose and bowed to the people of the land, to the children of Chet. (8) And he spoke to them saying: If you agree that I bury my dead from

before me, hear me and speak on my behalf to Efron, son of Tzochar, (9) that he may give me the cave of Makhpela which is his, which is at the edge of his field. For the full price he shall give it to me in your midst for a burial possession.

(10) For Efron dwelled among the children of Chet.

(12) And Avraham bowed before the people of the land.

(13) And he spoke to Efron, in the presence of the people of the land, saying: But if you [agree], please hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it from me, that I may bury my dead there.

(14) And Efron answered Avraham, saying to him:

(15) My lord, hear me: a plot worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is it between me and you? And bury your dead.

(16) Avraham hearkened to Efron, and Avraham weighed for Efron the silver of which he had spoken in the presence of the children of Chet – four hundred shekel of silver in accepted currency.

(17) Then the field of Efron which was in Makhpela, which was before Mamrei – the field, and the cave that was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, that were within all the borders around it - were established (18) as Avraham's for a purchase, in the presence of the children of Chet, before all who entered the gate of his city.

(19) And afterwards Avraham buried Sara, his wife, in the cave of the field of Makhpela which faces Mamrei, which is Chevron, in the land of Canaan."

Let us now examine each aspect, each narrative, and explain its significance in accordance with what it contains.

In aspect A we find the following elements:

a. As noted, this aspect lacks the emphasis and detail concerning the location of the place – both in Avraham's request and in the description of the fulfillment of the purchase. Even the name of the place, "Makhpela," is omitted here. Avraham's request is simply, "Give me a possession of a burial place with you, that I may bury my dead from before me."

b. The progression of the narrative is as follows: Avraham appeals to the children of Chet, requesting a burial place. The children of Chet, understanding that

the crux of the request is for a way to bury Sara, propose that she be buried in one of their tombs, and emphasize that any of them would readily agree to this possibility. One of the Chittites in the area is "Efron the Chittite"; he volunteers to give Avraham his field and the cave that is in it. Efron even emphasizes that the gift is definite and takes immediate effect: "Before the children of my people I have given it to you; bury your dead." By means of this public declaration the field and the cave are established as Avraham's, as a possession of a burial place by the children of Chet.

c. Avraham does not insist here on paying for the field; he accepts the free gift.

d. Avraham is treated with great respect by the Chittites ("You are a mighty prince in our midst"), unlike his treatment in B. Accordingly, he does not need to bow before them.

e. In this aspect, the actual burial ceremony is not mentioned; the reader is left to assume that it did take place.

Thus, the essence of the narrative in A is the story of how the Chittites, and Efron, go out of their way to help Avraham with his request. The request itself is not the focus of the narrative, since the event of the burial itself is not even mentioned. Rather, the focus is on the fact that when Avraham needs something from the local people, he is given great respect, assistance, and a significant gift.

What this means is that God performed a kindness for Avraham in elevating his status in the eyes of the local people, thereby enabling him to purchase a burial place. This narrative, then, is about God's kindness towards Avraham, and perhaps also the beginning of the fulfillment of God's blessings to him – the blessings of making his name great and of the inheritance of the land (see Ibn Ezra and Ramban on verse 19).

In aspect B we find the following elements:

a. Emphasis on and details of the name of the field ("Makhpela"), and of its location, both in Avraham's request and, even more so, in the description of the fulfillment of the purchase.

b. Avraham's insistence on paying the full price for the field.

c. Avraham is subservient to the Chittites – he needs to ask their permission to purchase a possession of a burial place; he needs – twice – to bow before them.

d. Here the Chittites are also referred to as "the people of the land" (three times), a title that appears nowhere in aspect A.

e. The progression of the story is as follows: Avraham must apply to the children of Chet, who own the place – "The people of the land" – with his request for license to purchase a possession of a burial place in their midst, in Efron's cave. Thereafter he asks Efron to sell him the field. Efron answers in an exploitative and scornful tone: You might as well not quibble about buying land for four hundred shekels of silver; the main thing is that you bury your dead. Avraham is forced to accept Efron's dictates, and pays the sum that he demands. Avraham's purchase of the field is therefore fulfilled, and only afterwards is he able to bury Sara there.

Clearly, in B the focus of the story is the purchase of the land. The narrative emphasizes and reinforces the ownership of Avraham and his descendants over the field of Makhpela, taking pains to note its description and its exact location, and that Avraham paid in full for this land, in the presence of those who were, at the time, "the people of the land."

Aspect B also emphasizes the difficulties that Avraham had to overcome in order to be able to purchase the land: the subservience to the Chittites and the dictates of Efron, and the exorbitant price that he had to pay. These difficulties, and Avraham's great efforts to overcome them, contribute towards strengthening his ownership: the plot is purchased through Avraham's suffering.

Aside from the independent significance of each aspect, we need to understand why the Torah chooses to present these two themes together in the same chapter. In other words, what is the meaning of the combination of these aspects?

The answer to this question is dependent on a broader understanding of the Avraham narratives. Avraham is commanded to leave his birthplace, where a secure and successful future awaits him, and he is promised a number of times that in the land of Canaan he will be blessed with descendants and with inheritance of the land. But throughout his life he is forced to deal with various difficulties and tests. The blessing is fulfilled only very slowly and partially, such that the bulk of it is fulfilled only later on, through his descendants (see Ibn Ezra and Ramban on verse 19).

The Torah makes no explicit mention of why the blessing is not fulfilled with Avraham himself. With regard to the inheritance of the land, there is some sort of explanation: "For the sin of the Emorites is not yet complete" (15:16). But no reason is given for why Avraham does not bear many children, like Yaakov, so that the blessing could start to be fulfilled already during his lifetime. Concerning the land, likewise, it seems that he could have inherited more than he did in fact.

For this reason, the reader may be led to believe that the postponement of the fulfillment of the blessing had something to do with some deficiency in Avraham, who was not worthy of having the blessing fulfilled in his own person. It seems that it is precisely this sort of thinking that the Torah wants to prevent.

The Torah interweaves two narratives within its description of the same event. One emphasizes that God shines His countenance towards Avraham and seeks his success, while the other emphasizes that Avraham must deal with difficulties and delays, and purchase the land through the legitimate means of human society – "the full price" – so as to effect an absolute and clear purchase of the land – a purchase that is accepted in the eyes of the "people of the land" and which is eternally to be a possession of a burial place. This story also gives rise to an explanation as to the fulfillment of the blessing in general during Avraham's lifetime: Avraham is certainly worthy of having the blessing fulfilled during his lifetime, and God would gladly see him multiplying and inheriting the land personally. But if Avraham receives the land quickly and easily, it will be a temporary, transient ownership – "easy come, easy go." In order for the purchase by Avraham's descendants – in each and every generation – of the land in general to be a clear and absolute purchase, they must invest effort and experience suffering, and must also affect an acceptable, legitimate purchase (see Rambam, Laws of the Temple 6,16), in a process that is spread over generations. Only thus can they truly be worthy of a clear and eternal purchase of the land.

Translated by Kaeren Fish