

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARAH

"There Avraham Was Buried, and Sarah His Wife"

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A. WHY SUCH A DETAILED ACCOUNT?

Biblical narrative is generally characterized by its extreme brevity: it focuses on the information that is necessary, while leaving out "filler." It generally contains no descriptions of nature, of social norms, psychological data or historical background. If any of these elements appears in the narrative, it is either presented very briefly or only hinted at, and even this only if it is vital to the story itself.

There are some rare instances where biblical narrative appears to depart from this general rule, and elaborates on details that seem less than vital to the story. Commentators throughout the generations have noted such instances and have attempted to explain the reason for the departure from the regular biblical style.

The beginning of our parasha details at great length the description of the negotiations between Avraham and the children of Chet (and specifically with Efron). These complicated and multi-stage negotiations occupy the majority of the opening story: sixteen verses (3-18) out of twenty. In what way does this account further the aims of this specific biblical story? Could it not have been shortened and its essence conveyed as follows: Avraham requested a burial plot from the children of Chet, and eventually purchased Me'arat Ha-makhpela, where he buried his wife?

B. "FOR THIS THING ALONE IT WAS WORTHY OF BEING WRITTEN"

In order to understand the purpose of the story, let us examine its stylistic dimension: what are the key words here, that are repeated more often than any others?

Such words are usually called "leading words," since they lead or direct the reader to discover the principal significance of the story, or to discover hidden meanings within it. Usually the number of times that such words appear has its own significance, and most often the number is a multiple of seven. Our study of the leading word of a story requires that we pay attention to each appearance: in what contexts is it mentioned, does the word have a fixed meaning throughout the story or does it have a range of meanings, does it appear in places that have special significance in the story, and how often does it appear in different parts of the story?

The word whose appearance stands out most clearly in our story is the root "k-v-r" (to bury, burial place), which appears on several occasions here both as a verb and as a noun. We will return to its significance soon.

In many stories that center around a single character or a pair of characters, the name of the character/s may serve as a leading word. But sometimes the personal name is exchanged for a title as required by the story, and then we must count appearances of both the name and the title in order to reach the total number. In our story, Sarah's name, and her title "Avraham's deceased," appear many times throughout. On what basis does the text choose to call Sarah by her name or by this title?

The name "Sarah" appears four times at the beginning of the story and once more at the end, while on eight occasions in the middle she is called "Avraham's deceased." The meaning of the distinction is quite clear: Sarah is called "Avraham's deceased" specifically during the course of the negotiations with the children of Chet – both in the narrative itself and by Avraham and the children of Chet. The reason for this seems to be that the children of Chet do not know Sarah by name. To their view, she is "Avraham's deceased" – the deceased relative of someone who is very highly esteemed in their eyes. But in relation to Avraham himself, when he is not standing in front of the children of Chet, Sarah is called by name – both during her life and afterwards, as well as when he eulogizes her and mourns her. Again, after the negotiations are over and Avraham buries her, she is called "Sarah his wife".

The connection between the two leading words, k-v-r and Sarah, is noticeable. It is apparently no coincidence that the two terms occur an equal number of times in the course of the story: it is their combination that defines the subject and point of the story – finding a "burial place" in which "to bury" "Sarah," "Avraham's deceased." You may ask: Does one need an analysis of the leading words to arrive at this conclusion? After all, the fact that this is the content of the story is quite obvious! Indeed, this is so. But the commentators attempt to discover themes in the story beyond its explicit contents (e.g. Ibn Ezra and Ramban), and none of them succeed in adducing stylistic proof – i.e., from the words themselves. The leading words show that the point of the story lies in its explicit contents, and that there is no need to seek out other possible themes that have no basis in the story itself.

But if this is so, what is the explicit story coming to teach us – just that Avraham buried Sarah? Why, then, all the elaboration? Benno Jacob, in his commentary on Sefer Bereishit, writes as follows:

"The purpose of the story is stated explicitly by Avraham himself. He requests a burial place for Sarah his wife, who has died. In the purchase of the cave to bury Sarah, Avraham expresses his love and honor for her. For this alone the parasha was worthy of being written".

We may offer the following two comments:

- a. The main part of the story is the description of the effort invested by Avraham in order to show the proper respect for his wife, for the burial place was not easily acquired. The crux of his effort was in his intensive diplomatic negotiations with the children of Chet, with a rejection of their alternative proposals. The steep price that he was required to pay was also, ultimately, part of his effort.
- b. The depiction of the household of Avraham and Sarah is the first biblical description of a full human life, with the large and small human battles that it involves. The death of Sarah is the first death in the family of the forefathers. Our parasha, then, is the first to describe someone's reaction to the death of the person who is closest to him, and his subsequent

behavior. The parasha therefore has a primal character, instructing future generations as to how to deal with similar human situations (the mitzvot given to Israel at Sinai contain no explicit instructions pertaining to eulogy and respectful burial rites). All of this, then, may be categorized as "teachings of the fathers".

C. A SPLIT STORY

In our discussion of the leading words, we noted that the number of its appearances usually has typological significance. Thirteen is not one of the numbers generally associated with this phenomenon. This presents a difficulty with regard to the two leading words of our story, for two reasons: firstly - this is the number of times that each appears, and this is certainly not coincidental, and secondly – this number is very close to another number that is much more typical for appearances of leading words in the biblical narrative: fourteen.

In order to understand the reason for this, we must first describe a literary phenomenon that is not sufficiently well known, which we call "the split story".

There are stories in the Torah that are not narrated in one place in their entirety, but rather have one part – generally a few verses, but sometimes more – that is narrated somewhere other than in the body of that story. [For some examples of split stories, see the prose framework of Iyov (chapters 1-2, 42); the birth of Shemuel (1:1-2:11, 2:18-21); and the prophecy about Yoshiyahu (I Melakhim 13) and its fulfillment (II Melakhim 23:15-20).] We propose that this story is split, and is concluded only close to the end of the parasha. Verses 7-10 of chapter 25 comprise the section that completes our story:

"And these are the days of the years of the life of Avraham, who lived a hundred and seventy five years. And Avraham expired and died in a good, elderly and full age, and was gto his people. And Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him at Me'arat Ha-makhpela, at the field of Efron ben Tzohar the Hittite, which was facing Mamrei. The field which Avraham had purchased from the children of Chet – there Avraham was buried, and Sarah his wife".

For chronological reasons, it would obviously be impossible to include this earlier. The connection between this section and the story of Sarah's burial is quite apparent, in terms of both content and style:

a. The story of Avraham's death is similar in style to that of Sarah's death, and hence the conclusion of the story echoes its introduction:

"And the years of Sarah were

a hundred years and twenty years and seven years, THE YEARS OF THE LIFE OF SARAH.

And Sarah died..." (23:1-2)

"And these are the days of THE YEARS OF THE LIFE OF AVRAHAM, who lived

a hundred years and seventy years and five years.

And Avraham expired and he died..." (25:7-8)

b. Me'arat Ha-makhpela is mentioned as the burial place of both Avraham and Sarah:

"And after that Avraham buried Sarah his wife

at the cave (me'ara) of the field of Makhpela, facing Mamrei..." (23:19)

"And Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him

at Me'arat Ha-makhpela... that is facing Mamrei." (25:9)

c. Both note the purchase of the field from the children of Chet (23:20 and 25:10.)

d. The strongest and most important connection between the concluding section and the body of the story lies in the repetition of the final words:

"And thereafter AVRAHAM BURIED SARAH, HIS WIFE." (23:19)

"There AVRAHAM WAS BURIED, AND SARAH HIS WIFE." (25:13)

Clearly, then, the concluding words of the concluding section of the story – "There Avraham was buried, and Sarah his wife" - complete the number of appearances of both leading words of our story, the root "k-v-r" in relation to "Sarah." Each leading word now appears in the complete story a total of fourteen times.

D. STRUCTURE OF THE STORY AS A WHOLE

It is not only the stylistic and thematic analysis that confirms the connection between 25:7-10 and the story of Sarah's burial. The structure of the story as a whole now becomes clear, and it is typical of many biblical stories: it is divided into two equal halves, each comprising twelve verses. The second half opens with the third stage of Avraham's negotiations with the children of Chet (the negotiations with Efron, 23:13-18). This stage represents a positive turning point, for it is successful and concludes with a weighing of the money and the purchase of the field from Efron. The two previous stages of negotiations were unsuccessful, since they were met with a polite refusal on the part of the children of Chet and Efron (and a submissive bowing down on the part of Avraham.)

The two equal halves of the story correspond to each other with a developing chiasmic parallel, as follows:

A. (1-2) Summary of the years of Sarah's life, her death, eulogy by Avraham.

B. (3-7) Stage 1. of negotiations: Avraham requests a burial place from the children of Chet to bury Sarah; they refuse.

C. (8-12) Stage 2. of negotiations: Avraham approaches Efron with a request to purchase Me'arat Ha-makhpela at the full price; he is refused.

C1. (13-18) Stage 3. of negotiations: Avraham insists on the payment, is answered in the affirmative, and purchases the field from Efron.

B1. (19-20) Avraham buries Sarah in the burial ground that he has purchased from the children of Chet.

A1. (25:7-10) Summary of the years of Avraham's life, his death and burial in Sarah's burial place.

Let us examine this parallel more closely:

A AND A1: The stylistic correspondence between the opening and closing sections of the story was discussed in the previous section. The development here is clear: when Sarah died there was no respectable place to bury her, but by the time Avraham died, the burial ground in which he had buried Sarah was prepared.

B AND B1:

B (verses 3-4)

"And he spoke to the children of Chet, saying...

Give me a burial place with you,

that I may bury my dead from before me".

B1 (verses 19-20)

"And after that Avraham buried Sarah his wife...

for a burial place

from the children of Chet".

Here, too, the development is clear: Avraham made a request of the children of Chet, which was met with polite refusal (B), but eventually, following stubborn negotiations, his request was fulfilled (B1). The order of events in the description of the realization of Avraham's request in B1 is in reverse order of their presentation in B.

C AND C1: Again, the parallel and the development are apparent. In C Avraham encounters an indirect refusal of his request (in terms of person, property and sum), but after his repeated request in C1 (with a repeat only of the matter of payment, which is the controversial issue) he succeeds, and even beyond his request. He had requested the cave that is at the edge of Efron's field, but ultimately acquired both the field and the cave.

Now we have a clearer picture of the structure not only of the story of Sarah's burial, but also of the section of chapter 25 that is located later at the end of the parasha. That section (excluding verses 7-10, which belong to the story of Sarah's burial) also comprises two equal halves, seven verses in each, and contains the two family branches that descended from Avraham other than that of Yitzchak.

The first half includes 25:1-6 and verse 11, with its list of the names of Avraham's children born of Ketura, whom he distanced from Yitzchak while he was still alive. Avraham gave them gifts and sent them far from Yitzchak to the east, while giving everything that he had to Yitzchak. Verse 11 completes this selection by noting that after Avraham's death, God blessed Yitzchak, his son.

The second half of this literary unit, verses 12-18, lists the names of the children of Yishmael, Avraham's son born of the Egyptian Hagar. As we know from earlier on in the narrative, Yishmael too was distanced from Yitzchak by God's word during Avraham's lifetime, and indeed the place of Yishmael's descendants is "from Chavila until Shur, which is facing Egypt" – far from the borders of the land of Canaan, which was destined for the children of Yitzchak. It is only after the description of these two branches of Avraham's descendants that we begin with the parasha of "the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham".

E. THE FINAL SECTION OF THE SARAH STORY

Does the addition of the final section concerning Sarah's death, 25:7-10, change the definition of our subject, such that it becomes "the story of the death and burial of Avraham and of Sarah"? The answer seems to be in the negative. Twenty verses out of the twenty-four comprising the story are devoted to the death of Sarah and to Avraham's efforts to bury her in an appropriately honorable burial place. The pair of leading words, which we found each to occur fourteen times throughout the story as a whole, likewise testify that the subject is "the burial of Sarah," and not the burial of Avraham.

What, then, is the contribution of the concluding section to the significance of the story in its entirety, as discussed above? This section is of vital importance to complete the description of the love and honor of Avraham towards Sarah at the time of her death. Sarah did indeed deserve to be buried in a private family burial plot purchased at the full price – and this is certainly a most respectable burial. But Avraham continues to be a "stranger and a resident" in the land; he continues as a nomad wandering after his flocks. What guarantee is there, then, that when the time comes he, too, will be buried in the burial place where Sarah is buried? If perhaps he should die far away, and is buried in the place where he died, then Me'arat Ha-makhpela will become, in relation to Sarah, what Kever Rachel is destined to become in relation to Yaakov's beloved wife: the lonely grave of a person who was buried alone at the place where she died.

It is only at the time of Avraham's death, thirty-eight years after that of his beloved wife, when he too is buried in Me'arat Ha-makhpela, that it becomes clear that Sarah did indeed merit to be buried in a family burial plot (25:10) – "There Avraham was buried, and his wife".

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(