

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH

The National Significance of the Purchase of Ma'aras Hamachpeilah

INTRODUCTION: ELABORATION—AND REITERATION

The opening section of our parsha devotes a full twenty verses to Avraham's purchase of Ma'aras Hamachpeilah from Efron and the Bnei Ches, describing each stage of the negotiations in detail. What is behind this extensive description?

Beyond this, it is noteworthy that every subsequent time Ma'aras Hamachpeilah is mentioned in Chumash Bereishis, the Torah sees fit to add how it was purchased from Efron:

- ▷ This begins in the end of this parsha, in the verses that describe the burial of Avraham, “וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ וְיִצְחָק וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנָיו אֶל מְעַרְתַּת הַמְּכַפְלָה אֶל שְׂדֵה עֶפְרָיִם... הַשְּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם מֵאֵת בְּנֵי חֵת – *Yitzhak and Yishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Machpeilah, in the field of Efron... The field that Avraham bought from Bnei Ches.*”¹
- ▷ Similarly, in Parshas Vayechi, in Yaakov's final words to his sons where he asks them to bury him in Ma'aras Hamachpeilah, he adds, “אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם אֶת הַשְּׂדֵה מֵאֵת עֶפְרָיִם הַחִתִּי לְאַחֲזֹת – *which Avraham brought together with the field from Efron, the Chiti, as a burial estate... the purchase of the field, and the cave that is in it, from the Bnei Ches.*”²
- ▷ This is again reiterated in the following chapter when the Torah describes the burial itself, “וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ בְּמְעַרְתַּת שְׂדֵה הַמְּכַפְלָה אֲשֶׁר קָנָה אַבְרָהָם אֶת הַשְּׂדֵה לְאַחֲזֹת קֶבֶר מֵאֵת עֶפְרָיִם הַחִתִּי עַל פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא – *they buried him in the cave of the field of Machpeilah, the field which Avraham purchased as a burial plot from Efron the Chiti, on the plains of Mamre.*”³

Why is every mention of this location accompanied by a recalling of how and from whom it was purchased?

1 Bereishis 25:9-10.

2 Ibid. 49:30-32.

3 Ibid. 50:13.

NOTICEABLY SILENT

Interestingly, a curious contrast to the above exists in the case of Yitzchak. After his passing, the verse simply says that, “וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ עִשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּנָיו” – *Esav and Yaakov his sons buried him.*”⁴ And that’s it! In his case, not only does the Torah not mention the background to the purchase of Ma’aras Hamachpeilah, it does not even tell us he was buried there! Why would the Torah completely omit in Yitzchak’s case what it went out of its way to mention with the other two patriarchs?

TWO ELEMENTS OF PURCHASE

The key to understanding this matter lies in the fact that, on this occasion, Avraham was looking not only buy a single burial plot for Sarah, but rather, as he expresses it, an “אַחֲזַת קֶבֶר” – burial estate” for his entire family.⁵ This basic idea will enable us to understand the different elements and stages in Avraham’s negotiations, as described at length in the verses. He first approaches the Bnei Ches, who represent the local populace, to secure their permission for purchasing a burial estate in their jurisdiction.⁶ Only after having done that, does he make contact with Efron for purposes of purchasing the specific property of the Field of Machpeilah.⁷ All of this is done, as the verses emphasize, in full view of the local populace, so that no one can later object to his purchase.

Indeed, this will explain to us something else. After having described Avraham handing over the money for the field to Efron, the concluding verses then record Avraham’s purchase twice!⁸ Additionally, there is a discrepancy between these two descriptions. The first verse states that the purchase took place “לְעֵינֵי הַתּוֹת” – *in the view of Bnei Ches,*”⁹ while the second verse states that it took place “מֵאֶת בְּנֵי הַתּוֹת” – *from the Bnei Ches.*”¹⁰ What is behind these two descriptions?

One of the classic commentators among the Rishonim, Rabbeinu Yosef Bechor Shor, explains that these two concluding verses reflect the two things that Avraham acquired on that occasion:

- ▷ Firstly, the verse describes Avraham’s acquisition of the field of Machpeilah itself from Efron, through the means of the money that he paid him. This acquisition from Efron took place “*in the view of Bnei Ches.*”
- ▷ Subsequently, the Torah relates how, through the act of burying Sarah, Avraham secured his right to use that property as a burial plot. This right is one that he acquired “*from the Bnei Ches*” themselves.

FIRST STEPS

In light of all this, R’ Leib Mintzberg¹¹ explains that, although the opening section of the parsha is about the burial of Sarah, it also involves something whose significance goes beyond that event. Avraham was promised the Land of Israel for his descendants. This episode contains the first act of Avraham actually taking legal possession of a portion of the Land, establishing his roots there by purchasing a burial plot in one of its cities. In so doing, it represents the concretization of his presence in and acquisition of the land generally. For this reason, Avraham does not wish to accept the plot as a gift from Efron, so as not to have any residual “fingerprints” left on this land by him as its donor.

4 Ibid. 25:39.

5 See Ramban to verse 4.

6 Verses 3-7.

7 Verses 8-16. See e.g. commentaries of Alshich and Malbim for detailed discussion of these verses in this light.

8 Verses 17-20.

9 Verse 18.

10 Verse 20.

11 Ben Melech, Parshas Chayei Sarah.

This will explain an additional nuance in the concluding verses which, as we saw, describe Avraham's dual acquisition of the field:

- ▷ In verse seventeen, dealing with the purchase of the property itself from Efron, it mentions only that the cave was “לְפָנַי מְמָרָא – near [the territory of] Mamre.”
- ▷ In verse nineteen, it elaborates further on the location of the field, stating that it was “הוּא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן – in Chevron, in the land of Canaan.”

Why is this broader setting mentioned only in the second verse? Indeed, why is it mentioned at all? We already know that the field is in Chevron, and we certainly know that it is in the Land of Canaan! Rather, the matter being dealt with in that verse – the securing of a burial plot – represents an act of acquisition that had implications for Avraham's ownership of the land of Canaan as a whole!

BELOVED MOMENTS

With this in mind, let us return to the numerous repetitions throughout Chumash Bereishis of the fact that Avraham purchased Ma'aras Hamachpeilah from Efron. Our parsha is famous for its repetition of the story of Eliezer finding a wife for Yitzchak, which the sages explain by saying that the Torah repeats things to show how beloved they are. Likewise, the acquisition of Ma'aras Hamachpeilah is repeated at every opportunity, for it reflects the beloved moment when our people's acquisition of the Land of Israel began.

NO MENTION NECESSARY

Moreover, with this in mind, we may now understand why, as we noted, there is no mention of Ma'aras Hamachpeilah at all regarding the burial of Yitzchak. Yitzchak was unique among all the Avos, in that his entire life was lived in Eretz Yisrael. Since the totality of his existence was in that land, this made it unnecessary for our connection with it through the acquisition of Ma'aras Hamachpeilah to be mentioned regarding him.