



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Chayei Sarah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

November 15, 2014
Chayei Sarah

Who Owns Israel?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

We, the Jewish people, are one family. It does not matter how different our geography, affiliation, or politics might be – we are family. This past Monday, two of our siblings were murdered, stabbed to death. Sergeant Almog Shiloni, 20 years old, was brutally attacked in Tel Aviv, and 26-year-old Dalia Lemkus was slaughtered at the entrance to the Gush Etzion community of Alon Shvut, some 15 miles south of Jerusalem, and this happened but a stone’s throw away from where the three boys, Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah were abducted and murdered.

Isn’t it enough? What can we do to stop this malevolence? What can we do preempt such atrocities? Is there something, anything we can do? Is there a precedent for us to follow?

Perhaps the cure to this darkness in our midst is found in two real estate transactions, the first of which happened 3,691 years ago in Hebron, the second of which happened 2,883 years ago in Jerusalem.

Why did Abraham insist on purchasing a small parcel of land in Chevron?

Being proud of our land – the land promised and given to us by God – is the antidote to any challenge to our right to it or to our existence.

The whole world knows that Israel, the Temple Mount and the Machpelah Cave belong to the Jews – that is why our enemies attack us. And it is high time we Jews knew it too, and proclaimed it as well.

THE GREAT REAL ESTATE QUESTION: WHO OWNS ISRAEL?

1. Compassionate Landlord

A big, burly man came to visit the Rabbi's home and asked to see the Rebbetzin, the rabbi's wife, well known for her charitable impulses.

"Rebbetzin," he said in a broken voice, "I wish to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a poor family in this district. The father has passed away, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are starving. They are about to be turned into the cold, empty streets unless someone pays their rent, which amounts to \$1,400."

"How terrible!" exclaimed the Rebbetzin. "May I ask who you are?"

The sympathetic visitor applied his handkerchief to his eyes: "I'm the landlord."

2. One Family

This is a bit of humor, meant to make us laugh; but really all we want to do is cry.

We, the Jewish people are one family. It does not matter how different our geography, affiliation, or politics might be – we are family. This past Monday, two of our siblings were murdered, stabbed to death. Sergeant Almog Shiloni, 20 years old, was brutally attacked in Tel Aviv, and 26-year-old Dalia Lemkus was slaughtered at the entrance to the Gush Etzion community of Alon Shvut, some 15 miles south of Jerusalem. And all this happened but a stone's throw away from where the three boys, Naftali Fraenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah were abducted and murdered.

Isn't it enough? What can we do to stop this evil? What can we do preempt such wickedness? Is there something, anything we can do? Is there a precedent for us to follow?

Perhaps it is found in the Torah portion we just read.

3. Parshat Chayei Sarah

Alon Shvut is situated at the halfway point between Hebron to the south and Jerusalem to the north. This stretch of earth is the most biblical and historical part of Israel. It is not some mysterious outer-galactic planet that the ignorant of the world try to write off as “the West Bank.” It is the very heart and soul of the Holy Land.

And it is in this very place that the events of our Torah portion are located.

We just read that exactly 3,691 years ago, a man called Abraham lost his wife, Sarah. And he went looking for a cave to bury her (as was the custom in his day).

And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to eulogize Sarah and to bewail her. And Abraham arose from before his dead, and he spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, “I am a stranger and an inhabitant among you. Give me your burial property, so that I may remove my dead for burial.”¹

Abraham was not indigenous to the region; he was born in Ur Kasdim in modern-day Iraq and only came to Israel once God told him to. Thus he had no burial place for his wife.

And the sons of Heth answered Abraham, saying to him, “Listen to us, my lord; you are a prince of God in our midst; in the choicest of our graves bury your dead. None of us will withhold his grave from you to bury your dead.”²

The children of Heth encouraged Abraham to bury Sarah in one of their own Hittite cemeteries.

*And Abraham arose and prostrated himself to the people of the land, to the sons of Heth. And he spoke to them, saying, “If it is your will that I remove my dead for burial, listen to me and entreat on my behalf with Ephron the son of Zohar. That he may give me the Machpelah Cave, which belongs to him, which is at the end of his field; for a **full price** let him give it to me for a burial site in your midst.”*

¹ Genesis 23:2-4.

² Genesis 23:5-6.

Now Ephron was sitting among the sons of Heth, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the sons of Heth, of all those who had come into the gate of his city, saying, "No, my lord, listen to me. I have given you the field, and the cave that is in it, I have given it to you. Before the eyes of the sons of my people, I have given it to you; bury your dead."³

Abraham desired the Machpelah Cave in Hebron. He offered Ephron, one of the Hittite, the full price for the property. Ephron refused Abraham's payment offer and instead offered him the real estate as a gift, free of charge. All of this was happening while the Hittite were listening and witnessing.

And Abraham prostrated himself before the people of the land. And he spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, saying, "But, if only you would listen to me. I am giving you the money for the field; take it from me, and I will bury my dead there." And Ephron replied to Abraham, saying to him, "My lord, listen to me; a land that is worth four hundred shekels of silver – what is it between me and you? Bury your dead." And Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, at the going merchants' rate.⁴

Once again Abraham insisted on paying full price, pleading for Ephron to listen to him. Finally Ephron agreed to sell Abraham the desired real estate for 400 silver shekels, an exorbitant amount. Again, this all happened in the presence of the children of Heth.

Why does the Torah, a book of divine wisdom, whose every word is meant to instruct our lives, share with us in such minute detail the negotiations of this real estate deal? There doesn't seem to be anything spiritual or informative for us to learn here – what does this really come to teach us?

³ Genesis 23:7-11.

⁴ Genesis 23:12-16.

4. The Midrash

There is an enthralling Midrash⁵ that explains the inner workings of the negotiations between Abraham and Ephron.

Abraham did not trust Ephron. Ephron was unscrupulous and dishonest. If Ephron gifted the Hebron property to Abraham, free of charge, what would stop him from reclaiming the property at a later date? Abraham required a lock-proof guarantee that the land would be his and his children's forever. Therefore, Abraham insisted, in front of many witnesses, all of the children of Heth, that Ephron take full payment for the land. This way, if the time would ever come that anyone would challenge the land's ownership, there would be proof that Abraham lawfully acquired the land.

Ephron did not trust Abraham either, but for different reasons. Ephron was no idiot. He understood that if God, the Creator of the world and all the real estate therein, promised Abraham the Land of Israel, then that promise would surely come to fruition. Ephron was afraid that if he sold this piece of land to Abraham, sooner or later the descendants of Heth, Ephron's family, would have to relinquish the rest of their lands to the Jews as well. Ephron therefore preferred to gift the land to Abraham, without relinquishing ownership.

When Ephron saw how committed, persistent and insistent Abraham was, he agreed to sell but on one condition: Abraham had to commit to a pact that, when one day his descendants would one day inherit all of the Land of Israel, they would never supplant the Hittite who were living in a nearby city, called Yevus.

Abraham agreed to this and the purchase of the Machpelah Cave was complete.

To memorialize this pact, the residents of Yevus (Jebus) – the Yevusi (Jebusites) – constructed bronze statues (resembling, according to some commentaries, the faces of Abraham and Isaac⁶) inscribed with the treaty that Abraham and Ephron had agreed upon.

What is this city of Yevus?

⁵ Midrash Hagadol on Chayei Sarah 23:13. See also Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer 36.

⁶ See Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer ibid.

5. Yevus

Yevus was the name for ancient Jerusalem.

Some 800 years after this treaty, when the Jews came to the Promised Land and conquered the whole area, they were careful to honor the pact between Abraham and Ephron, and they left alone the inhabitants of the city called Yevus. As states the Book of Judges:

And the Yevusi,⁷ inhabitants of Jerusalem, were not driven out by the children of Benjamin. And the Yevusi dwelt with the children of Benjamin until this very day.⁸

Upholding the pact, the Jews and the Yevusi lived together in Jerusalem. Until the crowning of King David in the city of Hebron:

And all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron, and David made with them a covenant in Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David as king over Israel, according to the word of the Lord by the hand of Samuel. And David and all of Israel went to Jerusalem, that is Jebus (Yevus), and there were the Jebusites (Yevusi), the inhabitants of the land. And the inhabitants of Jebus said to David, "You shall not come here," and David captured the Citadel of Zion, that is the City of David.⁹

King David was crowned king in Hebron. But King David knew that God's Temple must be built upon Mount Moriah – the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – and that Jerusalem would be his capital.

When he came to the city of Yevus, he saw the bronze monuments with the inscribed bond and turned back without conquering all of the city.¹⁰

⁷ These are descendants of Heth and were called Yevusi because they lived in the city of Yevus, but not to be confused with the Nation of the Yevusi, descendants of another one of Canaan's sons, named Yevus.

⁸ Judges 1:21.

⁹ I Chronicles 11:3-6.

¹⁰ See Pirkei d'Rab Eliezer *ibid*. David did order the destruction of these monuments however. There are different reasons given for why. The Holy Land is a land of God. The Yevuis would bow and pray to these bronze statues. King David could not bear this idol-worship in the place that was meant to be God's home. He therefore instructed for these statues, upon which were inscribed the Abraham and Ephron's agreement, to be destroyed. But, even after their destruction, the bond was maintained and the Jews under King David still did not rule Yevus (Jerusalem) and did not control the Temple Mount.

He captured the stronghold of Zion, in what is today the City of David, but he left Mount Moriah, what is today, the Temple Mount alone.

In order to acquire Jerusalem, which was an obvious prerequisite for building the Temple and establishing the Kingdom of Israel, King David took a page out of Abraham's playbook. He began to negotiate with Ornan, the leader of the Yevusi.

*And Ornan said to David, "Take it for yourself, and may my lord the king do what seems good in his eyes. See, I have given the cattle for burnt offerings, and the threshing tools for wood, and the wheat for a meal offering; I have given everything." And King David said to Ornan, "No, for I will buy it for the **full price** for I will not take what is yours for the Lord, and offer up burnt offerings for nothing. And David gave to Ornan for the place shekels of gold weighing six hundred."¹¹*

As did his ancestor Ephron in the negotiation with Abraham, Ornan offered King David Mount Moriah for free, as a gift. King David politely but adamantly refused. Instead, David collected 50 shekels from each of the 12 tribes and purchased the mountain, which would become the Temple Mount.

And David built an altar there to the Lord, and he offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and he called out to the Lord, and He answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of the burnt offerings... At that time, when David saw that the Lord had answered him on the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he sacrificed there.¹²

This is how the most important part of Jerusalem came into the hands of the people of Israel and how God's promise to Abraham all those years before came to fruition.

¹¹ I Chronicles 23-25.

¹² I Chronicles 26, 28.

6. *Kesef Molei* – Full Price

It is uncanny how both Abraham and King David, and their counterparts across the negotiating table, Ephron and Ornan, used the exact same technique some 800 years apart. Abraham desired to acquire a cave in Hebron, Ephron offered it for free, Abraham insisted on paying full price. David desired to acquire Mount Moriah, Ornan offered it for free, David insisted on paying full price.

Indeed, in the telling of these two stories, the Hebrew Bible uses the same unique terminology – *b'kesef malei*, that is “full price” or “full value” – as if to draw attention to the parallel.

What is the significance of this parallel?

Before we answer that question though, we have to ask another – and much more obvious – question:

If God promised the Land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants, the Jewish people, why did both Abraham and King David feel compelled to purchase pieces of the land for full price? If anything, Abraham’s and David’s negotiations would seem to indicate that these lands weren’t theirs! Would you pay full price for a house that the owner – in this case, God – already promised to give you for free?

7. Message for Us Today

Within the answer to this question is contained a most profound message for us all today, the family of Abraham and King David, how to approach the Land of Israel and preempt any more bloodshed or opposition to what is rightfully ours.

Of course, Abraham and King David knew that the Land of Israel was the land promised to them by God, and moreover, Ephron and Ornan knew it as well. For this reason, Ephron and Ornan were hesitant in selling it. They understood that when God’s promise was fulfilled, they would be marginalized.

But Abraham and Kind David knew better than anyone that a promise is one thing, and the realization of that promise is another thing. If they had accepted the gifts of Hebron and Temple Mount, there might be room to suppose that, sure, God promised Israel to the Jews but the land is really owned by other people who can give it away if they so choose.

Ephron and Ornan were basically saying: “Here, take it, just don’t make it so official. We are gifting you the land, so you don’t have to demonstrate to the whole world that you possess it.”

To which Abraham and David said: “What, you think we’re ignorant? Don’t you think we realize that in a few years – or a few thousand years – there will be people that claim the land as theirs, that we are here illegally, illegitimately, that it was just ‘gifted’ to us by the world for whatever reason? Thanks but no thanks. God promised us this land, and we will purchase it from you for full price, if that’s what it take to demonstrate to the world this fact. We are not apologetic. This is ours and we are here to stay.”

8. Fast Forward to Modern Times (Optional)

Fast forward to modern times.

Here is a fascinating dialogue published in *The New York Times Magazine*, between Jeffrey Goldberg, a Jewish journalist, and Faisal Husseini, the senior Palestinian in charge of Jerusalem affairs. Goldberg writes:

Could he [Husseini] envision, I asked, a day in which the Muslims acceded to Jewish demands to at least be allowed to pray on the Temple Mount? Such a compromise on the part of Muslims could serve to temper Israeli fears about Palestinian control of Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem, for instance.

But Husseini laughed. “Do you have a wife?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you have a problem if you saw her with me here?”

“Doing what?” I asked.

“Having an interview.”

“No.”

“But what if you had information that I want her? Would you take the same position?” he asked.

I gave him the answer he wanted.

“Here is what I say about the *Haram al-Sharif* [Noble Sanctuary, i.e. the Temple Mount]. People go in, tourists take pictures of the [golden] dome. This is no problem. But why do the Jews talk about ‘sharing’? Why do they want to share my wife?”

“A Jewish person,” I say, “looks at the Temple Mount and says: ‘That’s my wife. You took my wife.’”

“First of all, I am a Palestinian. I am a descendant of the Jebusites, the ones who came here before King David. This was one of the most important Jebusite cities in the area.”

Huh?

“Yes, it’s true. We are the descendants of the Jebusites.”

I decided not to slip farther down this slope; after all, there’s no arguing with a Jebusite.¹³

In a 2004 *National Geographic* article, Yasser Arafat was reported as claiming to be a descendent of the Canaanites, and later to have narrowed it down to being a descendant of the Jebusites.¹⁴

¹³ http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/03/magazine/israel-s-y2k-problem.html?page_wanted=all&src=pm.

¹⁴ http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/10/1028_041028_jerusalem_conflict_2.html.

This is exactly why Abraham 3,691 years ago and David 2,883 years ago insisted on demonstrating to the entire world that Hebron and Jerusalem belong to the Jews as promised to us by God and acquired by our ancestors.¹⁵

Abraham insisted on purchasing a small parcel of land in Chevron to pre-empt all the demands and accusations we are hearing today. One man made a purchase over three millennia back – and provided us with the answers for the Temple Mount and Jerusalem controversies today!

9. The Dispute

Today, the Temple Mount, the core of Jerusalem and the Jewish people, is being disputed. But this time the challenge comes not from the Arabs – who laid their claims back in 1948 by going to war with the State of Israel – but from the Jews. Many Jews do not want to deal with this core issue. But until we do there will be no peace.

They do not realize that we empower our enemies when we show doubt in our ownership of Hebron and Jerusalem, the Temple Mount and the Cave of the Machpelah.

In addition to our direct ancestors – beginning with Abraham – lived in Israel for over 3800 consecutive years (besides for the few when we were exiled), God promised and gave us the Land of Israel.

The Arabs, the Muslims, the descendants of Ishmael, only arrived here in the 7th century C.E.

¹⁵ Besides for the fact it is extremely unlikely that the Arabs living today in Israel, calling themselves Palestinians, are in fact descendants of the children of Heth, who comes from Canaan, who comes from Ham. The descendants of Ishmael, come from Shem and Abraham, not from Canaan and Ham. The Arabs come from the Arabian Peninsula and came to Israel in the 7th century C.E. with the rise of Muhammad and Islam. The Jebusite were definitely not Arabs, and they sure didn't worship in a mosque on the Temple Mount. They were completely pagan, to the extent that they had bronze statues of Abraham and Isaac in their streets.

If we erroneously believe that we have been “given” this land for free by some manmade entity – like say the United Nations – then we are missing the whole point, the point that our father Abraham and our king David tried to teach us:

Israel is a spiritual place much more than a physical one. Nothing spiritual comes free. If someone says, here, take this cave for free, or here take this mountain for free, it could never be for real.

The “full price” that both Abraham and David paid for the centers of Israel, Hebron and Jerusalem, were indeed physical purchases but also spiritual lessons.

The only way for us to be secure in our land is if we are all in – if we pay the full price spiritually. We must realize that Israel isn’t ours because we want it, earned it, or occupied it – Israel is ours simply because the Creator of the Universe said so.

The Hittite knew this, the Jebusite knew this, and even the Arabs know this – that is why none of them have ever wanted to give it up.

It is time we Jews knew this as well.

10. The Landlord of Israel (Conclusion)

There is one landlord of Israel and that is God. The world may try to evict us, but there is only one problem: they don’t own the property. God does, and He gave it to us. This is the only fact on the ground.

It is time for us to overcome our many issues, our insecurities, our self-deprecation, our foolishness, complexes, and self-denial. It is time for us to state, unequivocally, why we are in the Land of Israel and what we are doing in the Land of Israel.

We aren’t here because the UN decided to ease their guilt and our pain in 1948, post-Holocaust. We are not here because we reacquired the land in 1967 (though we did, fair and square) after the Arab world vowed to send us into the Mediterranean. We are not here because we are stronger (though we are), or smarter (ditto), or more numerous (definitely not).

We are here for one reason and one reason alone: because God, the Creator of every nanometer of earth gave us this land as our home.

The world would love to bury this fact. This is why Abraham 3,691 years ago, and David 2,883 years ago, made sure the world knew that we were purchasing the land, with witnesses and documents. They declared: "Listen here, world, the Creator of the Universe gave us this land and we are fulfilling this promise with these transactions."

The transactions made it real, not some intangible dream, but a very tangible reality.

This is exactly how we preempt any evil from striking our brothers and sisters. By declaring, "This is ours. This isn't negotiable."

This, I promise you – no, not I promise you, but God promises us all – is the only way to bring peace into this world.

But if we ourselves do not believe this, and therefore do not proclaim ownership of the land, what's the world to think?

Our doubts will only result in more bloodshed and more pain. Stop treating a very real illness with a very false cure. Provide the correct cure and the illness will go away.

If we cannot, or will not, do it for ourselves, let us do it for those who have laid their lives to make God's promise real – people like Dalia and Almog.

May it be a peaceful – truly peaceful – Shabbat all across the Holy Land and all across the world. And may it usher in the perpetual peaceful Shabbat, *yom shekul Shabbat*,¹⁶ for our entire family – the family of Israel – and for all the world.

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹⁶ Tamid 7:4.