

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Hayei Sara

Negotiations and Acquisitions

A strange negotiation is reported in this week's parasha. Sarah has died and Avraham has a carefully planned agenda for the funeral arrangements. He approaches the local clan and asks to purchase a particular parcel of land owned by a man named Efron. Efron offers to give Avraham the plot of land as a gift, free of charge, yet Avraham insists on paying for it. Eventually, a price is set; the sum is apparently exorbitant, especially considering the opening "price" offered by the seller.

While some Jews take pride in their business savvy, their forefather Avraham's negotiation skills seem to have been sorely lacking: He overpays for something he could have procured for free. To make matters even worse, Avraham had been

Avraham's negotiation skills seem to have been sorely lacking: He overpays for something he could have procured for free.

promised this entire land as his inheritance. Why did he insist on paying for something that God Himself would eventually deliver to him on a silver platter?

Avraham had not "forgotten" that this land would eventually belong to him; in fact, God's promise was precisely the reason Avraham behaved so strangely in this negotiation. Part and parcel of God's promise that Avraham would inherit the Land of Israel was a "price" to be paid: "Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs and they will be enslaved and oppressed, for four hundred years." (Bereishit 15:13)

Avraham had not "forgotten" that this land would eventually belong to him; in fact, God's promise was precisely the reason Avraham behaved so strangely in this negotiation. Part and parcel of God's promise that Avraham would inherit the Land of Israel was a "price" to be paid: "Know with certainty that your descendants will be

The standard translation of this verse presents us with a much-debated problem: The Jews were not enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. However, if the verse is read while taking into account the cantillation symbols that serve as punctuation of the Hebrew text, a very different parsing emerges: "Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs for

four hundred years. (At times,) they will be enslaved and oppressed.” This nuanced reading of the text is not always conveyed correctly in translation, but the gist of the verse is that the four hundred years describes the duration of time in which they would be strangers or foreigners, devoid of sovereignty. The verse describes a period of time in which Avraham’s descendants would be a political minority in the land that would eventually belong to them, and not a period of four hundred years of oppression and enslavement.

Avraham had a very clear understanding of the promise God had made to him; in fact, he made reference to it in his negotiations with the locals: “I am a stranger (or foreigner) and a resident among you,” he said. “Allot for me a burial place among you so that I can bury my dead.” (Bereishit 23:4) Avraham understood his political situation, and acknowledged his current position as less-than-equal among the lords of the land. He echoed God’s use of the word *ger* to describe his status as an outsider among the locals, indicating that despite his absolute conviction that this land will eventually belong to his descendants, he and his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will continue to be “strangers” for four hundred years - first in Canaan, then in the house of Lavan, and finally in Egypt. The local Canaanite population will continue to control politics, commerce and the military until the full price for the Land of Israel is paid and God’s promise comes to fruition.

And so, Avraham insists on paying for the burial plot. He insists on burying Sarah specifically in that spot because he cherishes the land. He appreciates its significance and holiness, and he wants to be a part of it. He wants to make an acquisition, to establish a foothold, in this very unique place. Although he is quite aware of the price he and his descendants will have to pay to inherit the Land of Israel, he wants to own some small part of it in his own lifetime. He knows that he will continue to be a stranger in the eyes of the surrounding population, but he also knows that this acquisition is the down payment on the land. This is the beginning of ownership of the Land of Israel which will last forever. Avraham did not want it to be given to him as a gift, for if it were “given” (and not sold) to him, it would not really belong to him. Sarah’s burial was, figuratively and literally, the act that planted the roots of the Jewish People - and Avraham would not allow

This is the beginning of ownership of the Land of Israel which will last forever.

this act to be based on the on-again-off-again largesse of the local Canaanite population.

Efron must have thought that he had hoodwinked Avraham, taking from him four hundred silver shekels for a burial plot, but Avraham was sure that he had made a wonderful deal. For a mere four hundred coins of silver, he had made the first acquisition in the Land of Israel, placing a down payment on the land that would be inherited by his descendants four hundred years later.

For a more in-depth analysis see

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/10/essays-and-audio-parashat-chayei-sarah.html>