

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

### IF SARAH IMEINU HAD DIED IN PITTSBURGH

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

*Rabbi Barry Kornblau posted the following this week, which expressed my thoughts and feelings as well: "At this time of our need and grief, our American Jewish community is currently experiencing an outpouring of love and support from others outside our community. In addition to thanking those who offer such assistance now, we Jews must also recommit, now, to our principled tradition of extending hands and hearts of love to other communities who, in their present and future times of grief and need, will appreciate our support."*

*This devar Torah is in large measure an expression of the same idea.*

You can learn a lot about your neighbors when it comes time to bury your dead, and also about your own place in society. But some of what you learn may be wrong. What did Avraham learn when it came time to bury Sarah? How much of what he learned was correct?

When Avraham rises from his grief, he turns to the Hittites and says:

גר ותושב אנכי עמכם  
תנו לי אחזת קבר עמכם  
ואקברה את מתי מלפני

*I am a ger and toshav among you  
Give me a graveholding among you  
and I will bury my dead from before me.*

The meaning of the phrase *ger and toshav* is unclear. To begin with, it may be a compound – "I am fully a *ger* and fully a *toshav*" – or else a hendiadys – "I am some hybrid of *ger* and *toshav*". Neither *ger* nor *toshav* is clear, either, and both must be contrasted with *ezrach* and with *yoshev*. Let's assume that a *toshav* is more firmly entrenched than a *ger*, so we'll call a *toshav* a resident and a *ger* an alien.

Avraham uses words that seem bold in context. "Give me", rather than 'sell me'; "graveholding", rather than 'grave'; and "among you", rather than 'anywhere'. A straightforward way of reading this is to see Avraham as seeing to upgrade his status. Until now he has had, and sought, no permanent connection to this land and culture; creating a family plot in the local cemetery will make him a local, and perhaps a citizen.

This reading is strongly opposed by traditional commentators, for both global and local reasons. Globally, the notion of Avraham genuinely wanting integration with Hittites seems a violation of Jewish destiny, and a failure to understand the message of the Covenant Between the Pieces that the cultures of Canaan are on an irreversible downward moral and religious trajectory.

Note however that Rashbam on last week's parashah criticizes Avraham for making a pact with the Philistines, and even suggests that the Akeidah was a punishment for making it, because it showed a lack of faith in God's promise that his descendants would inherit the Land. Perhaps Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak proved his faith, but he never understood why he had been tested?

Locally, the negotiation ends, at Avraham's insistence, in the purchase of Ephron's cave as an entirely private burial ground. The burden of proof rests on anyone arguing that Avraham initially intended a different plot of land and/or a gift rather than a purchase.

But there seem to be real developments in the course of the negotiation. Avraham initially expresses interest only in the cave "which is at the edge of his field", but ends up paying for Ephron's entire field. Avraham's last words to Ephron replace the phrase "bury from before me" with "bury there". So there is room to argue that Avraham initially wanted integration, but somehow feels/is rejected, and changes his goal from to mere toleration.

We might blame this on Ephron. He is the one who introduces the field. He describes the cave as "in it" rather than "on its edge." Perhaps the community was sincere in telling Avraham that any one of them would freely give him a burial space, and perhaps the Cave was close enough to an existing cemetery to be considered an annex. But Ephron's introduction of the field made a gift obviously too extravagant.

Or we might blame this on the Hittites as a whole. They never agreed to give Avraham his own space, only to allow him to bury Sarah in any of their own graves. Their goal was to make

Avraham a permanent refugee, with no rights except by sufferance.

Alternatively, the Hittites demanded that Avraham bury Sarah in one of their graves, with no distinctiveness at all. James Loeffler recently posted a quote from Reinhold Niebuhr that sums this reading up:

*The liberal world has sought to dissolve the prejudice between Jews and Gentiles by preaching tolerance and good-will... [But there's] a curious, partly unconscious, cultural imperialism in theories of tolerance which look forward to a complete destruction of all racial distinctions... The majority group expects to devour the minority group by way of assimilation. This is a painless death, but it is death nevertheless.*

Avraham recoiled, and chose full separation with tenuous tolerance over assimilation.

Or Hachaim, perhaps uniquely among traditional commentators, argues that Avraham was making a rights-based argument that depended on his outsider status.

ויש לך לדעת כי כל תורתנו הקדושה היא שכליית,  
ובפרט בענייני ההנהגה הארצית,  
וכמו שאנו מתנהגים בגר היושב עמנו,  
כן יתחייב שכליות יושבי הארץ להנהיג ביניהם  
להחיות אדם שהוא גר ותושב עמהם  
ולתת לו מתנת חנם.

והיא טענת אברהם גר ותושב אנכי... תנו לי,  
ודקדק לומר גר ולא הספיק לומר תושב,

המכוון לומר שהגם שאני גר ואיני מכם, אעפ"כ הריני תושב.

*You must know that all of our holy Torah is in accord with reason, especially in matters of national administration, and (therefore) just as we practice toward the alien who resides among us, so too reason requires the citizens of the land to practice amongst themselves to sustain-the-life of a person who is an alien and resident among them and to give him free gifts.*

*This is (the purpose of) Avraham's statement "I am an alien and a resident . . . give me" –*

*his intent being "even though I am an alien and not one of you, nonetheless I am a resident".*

This suggests that Avraham was right to be disappointed by every aspect of the Hittite response – their demand for assimilation and Ephron's desire for money.

However, Or HaChaim's justification of Avraham's disappointment comes with a challenging corollary; that Jews, whether in their own country or as part of a composite polity, have an obligation to freely give the necessities of a dignified life – specifically including burial grounds – to noncitizens who maintain separate identities.

This was too much for some subsequent commentators. Here is the contemporary Rabbi M. Peretz in Otzar Haparshah:

והאדר"ת בספר סדר פרשיות הקשה  
שלגר תושב מותר ליתן מתנת הנם בדבר שהוא להחיותו  
אבל מקום קבורה ומתנה גדולה אין היוב  
ונראה

כשם שיש מצוה להחיותו  
כך יש מצוה ליתן לו מקום קבורה  
אלא שמקום חשוב, כמו מערת המכפלה – אין היוב ליתן במתנת  
חינם

וגם אברהם לא ביקש זאת  
אלא כוונתו כיון שגר תושב אנכי עמכם – אם כן יש לי הזכות לקבל  
מקום קבורה בחנם

ואם כן, אני שמוכן לשלם במחיר מלא – ראוי ליתן לי רשות לקנות  
אפילו מקום חשוב כמערת המכפלה  
לכן הקדים אברהם גר ותושב אנכי עמכם

*The Aderet in his book Seder HaParshiyot challenged that it is permitted to give a resident alien free gifts in matter that sustain-his-life,*

*but there is no obligation to give him a burial place or large gifts?!*

*But it seems*

*That just as there is a mitzvah to sustain his life,  
So too there is a mitzvah to give him a burial place*

*Just that significant places, such as the Double Cave, there is no obligation to give for free*

*And Avraham did not seek this*

*Rather his intent was that "since I am a resident alien among you, I have the right to receive a burial place for free*

*Therefore, since I am prepared to pay full price, it is appropriate to give me permission to buy even a significant plot of land such as the Double Cave That's why Avraham began by saying "I am a resident alien among you".*

Rabbi Peretz contends that there must be boundaries to our obligations toward people who are not part of our nation. It follows that there are boundaries on their obligations toward us. (But rights extend beyond obligations, so aliens have the right to purchase anything on the market so long as they pay full price, and we have the obligation to ensure that right.)

Not too many of our ancestors could have imagine a real-life situation in which we needed to make clear that the way Gentiles were treating us was *lifnim mishurat badin* (beyond the letter of the law; expressing greater closeness to Hashem than required by Halakhah), lest our obligations toward Gentiles become too onerous. Not all Americans see us as neighbors, plainly, and this week we know far too well that some murderous anti-Semites live in our neighborhood. But sometimes you learn a lot from your neighbors when it comes time to bury your dead. We have a lot to live up to.

*The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.*