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Abraham said: I am an Alien Among You, Sell Me Some Property So I Can Bury My Dead 23: 3-18

Abraham said: I am an alien among you, sell me some property so I can bury my dead DIG: What was significant about Abraham burying Sarah in Canaan, rather than taking her back to their homeland? Why might this property be an important part of God's plan for Avraham (see 25:7-11)? What relationship do you see between the *purchased land* and the *Promised Land* (see 22:15-18)? Why was Abraham willing to bury his wife in Canaan but does not allow his son to find a wife there (23:3)?

REFLECT: How do you react when the promises of God seem to slip through your fingers? Do you still live as if they are a reality? Can the sons of Het, who live and work where you live, tell there is something different about you? Do they call you a mighty prince/princess, or something else? Are you blameless in your dealings with others? What kind of foresight can you provide for your family and future generations?

As important as it is to see how one of our spiritual **forefathers** expressed **his** grief (**to see link click Ft - Sarah Died and Abraham Went to Weep Over Her**), the main purpose for its insertion into the text is to provide a document for **Abraham's** descendants to use as a legal claim on, at least, part of the Land of Promise. From the promises made to **Abraham**, two of them are repeated. One is repeated seven times, and that is, that **he** is going to give **him a seed** from **Sarah**, a legal **seed** that will carry on, all the promises that **God** gave **him** (see **Eo - Your Wife Will Bear You a Son and You Will Call Him Isaac**). The second promise that is repeated more than twenty times in the book of **Genesis** alone is the promise of **the Land** (see **Eg - I am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans to Give You This Land**).

So, regarding **the Land**, **God** told **Abraham** to "Walk throughout **the Land**, and wherever **you** walk and it'll be **yours** (see **Dy - Go, Walk Through the Length and Breadth of the Land, for I am Giving it to You**). I'm going to give it to **you**. I'm going to give **you the**

Land of the Canaanites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Jebusites, and **the Hittites.**” Oh, that’s a big promise. But now **Sarah** was **dead** and **Abraham** doesn’t own one inch of **the Land** in which to **bury his wife. He’s** a foreigner, a tourist, in **the Land** that **God** gave **him** as an everlasting possession. And now **he’s** got to find a place to bury **his wife**? I want you to understand the dilemma that we face in the text and the dilemma that **Abraham** faced in reality. See, **God** promised. **He** promised to give **Abraham a seed**, and it took many years of waiting, crying, praying, repeating, saying, “**God**, you know **I’m** going to die as an old man and **I** still don’t have **a seed**. And **Abraham believed** (see [Ef - Abraham believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness](#)), but now **Sarah** is **dead** and no **land** is **his** legally. You have to have a lot of faith in **God**. You have to have a very close relationship with **God** to be able to sustain the stress from having promises, repeated promises, promises after promises, that **God** is going to give you **the Land**. Even the borders of **the Land** were given to **him**, from Dan to Beersheba, from the rivers in the north, from the Euphrates and the Tigris in the north to the river of Egypt and various borders are given to **Abraham** in the book of **Genesis**. But still, not one inch of **land** is in **his** possession. But **he** still has to **bury his wife**. This is what we find here in this parashah.

Therefore, **Abraham** purchased a piece of land from **Ephron** of **the sons of Het**. Most biblical scholars say that **the sons of Het** were Hittites, an ethnic group originating in the north, in modern day Turkey. How could **Abraham** inherit land that was owned by the Hittities and not the Canaanites? The answer lies in **Genesis 10:15** which indicates that **Het** was one of **the sons of Canaan** (see [Di - The Line of Ham](#)). **Hence, the Hitties were, in reality, a Canaanite group, although they mainly lived north of what is usually referred to as the land of Canaan and did not speak the language of the Canaanites.**

A brief look at **the Hittites** as a people group is that they invaded the heartland of Canaan sometime after 1400 BC. There were, however, sporadic **Hittite** settlements scattered throughout Canaan before that time. In fact, **Ezeki’el 16:3** informs us that **Jerusalem** was partially of **Hittite** origin when it says: **Your father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittie (Ezeki’el 16:3)**. The Amorites were western Semites. That is, Canaanites who spoke the western branch of the Semitic language. The Canaanites were not Semites, but **they** spoke the a Semitic language similar to Hebrew. **Chapter 23**, therefore, affords us a good glimpse into ancient **Hittite** land transactions. We find one example of this in **verses 9** and **11**.

It is not surprising that the acquisition of land is one of the most significant aspects of the

covenant agreement. **Abraham** appears content enough to wait for **the land** to come to him in **the LORD's** timing, but meanwhile, **the dead** must be laid to rest.³⁷³ Here we have the negotiations and the purchase of **the cave of Machpelah**. Because **she** was not yet buried, **Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites**. As **an alien and a stranger**, **Avraham** presented **his** request in the most courteous manner. **ADONAI** had given **Abraham the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, to him and his descendants (17:8)**. So when **he** asked: **Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead (23:3-4)**, **he** knew that it would also be used for future generations of **his** family. This starts an interesting account of the Oriental method of bargaining.

The sons of Het replied to him, "Sir, listen to us, because you are God's mighty prince among us, go ahead and bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. Choose anyone that you want; none of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead" (23:5-6). This was the start of the bargaining process. They politely offered **the land** to **Abraham** for free, but the expectation was that **he** would refuse and offer payment.



Then Avraham, following strict middle-eastern social customs, rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the sons of Het (23:7). **Abraham's** goal was to be **blameless** in this transaction. **For ADONAI, God is a sun and shield; ADONAI bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is**

blameless (Psalm 84:11). God despises those who minimize the value of a thing during negotiation and say: **It's no good; it's no good**, and **then boast** of the bargain after the deal is done (**Proverbs 20:14**).

Abraham knew the sight **he** wanted, a **field** containing a suitable **cave** with **trees** around it, and within sight of **their** home in **Mamre**. It belonged to a prominent **descendant of Het** named **Ephron**. In accordance with the exaggerated formalities of purchasing and selling that have long been practiced in the East, **Avraham** first asked for someone to mediate between **him** and **Ephron**, to transmit **his** request to be allowed to purchase **the land**.³⁷⁴ **He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf. So he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which is Hebrew, meaning a double cave, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you."** **Abraham** did not go directly to **Ephron**, but **he** got some of **the sons of Het** to plead for **him**. No business of any importance can to this day be transacted in the East without middlemen.³⁷⁵ **Ephron the Hittite was sitting among the sons of Het**, indicating a position of authority. **And he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the sons of Het who had come as witnesses to the gate of his city**, where all transactions were legalized (**23:8-10**).

Abraham asked for only **the cave** as a tomb, but **Ephron** wanted **him** to purchase **the** adjoining **field** as well. **Ephron said to Avraham, "No, my lord. Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it."** **Abraham** didn't need **the field**, but under **their** laws, if **Ephron** only sold **him the cave**, **he** would still have to pay labor services to the king. But if **he** sold **the field and the cave**, **he** would be free from those services. Therefore, **Ephron** said: **I give both the cave and the field to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead (23:11)**. Here then, we have what appears to be a free offer of the burial site, but it was not to be taken seriously. That was the way things were done in ancient Middle East negotiations. **Abraham** understood this was just a polite way of starting the negotiations. Then we have **Abraham's** counter offer.

Again, following the custom, **Abraham bowed down on his knees until his head touched the ground before the people of the land (23:12)**. Then the offer itself is given. **And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the witnesses: Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there (23:13)**.

Ephron answered Avraham, and cleverly gave **his** asking price: **Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver** (which would be about ten pounds of

silver). Then **he** flippantly adds: **But what is that between me and you?** This implies that this would be a reasonable asking price. **Bury your dead (23:14-15)**. But in fact, this was a highly inflated price because the average cost then was four **shekels of silver** per acre. At this price **Abraham** would be paying *forty shekels of silver* per acre. A laborer, who would earn ten **shekels** per year for his work, would not expect to make that amount in his lifetime! But once again, this was all part of the negotiations. The first offer was supposed to be a deliberately high price, and then you begin negotiating downward. So at first **he** offers **the land** for free, then **he** offers it at a deliberately high price. The negotiations were then supposed to begin in earnest.

However, **Abraham** was not in the mood or position to bargain. **He** had some good reasons to purchase **the land**, and very little time for quibbling about the price. Therefore, **he** immediately **agreed to Ephron's terms** (no doubt surprising **Ephron** and all the **sons of Het**) and **weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittite witnesses: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the standard of value current among the merchants** at that time (23:16). Moreover, if **he** had merely received **the land** as a **gift**, **his** ownership could be subject to question in future generations. Accordingly, **he** entered into a valid and legal land transaction involving money and witnesses. **Abraham** had the foresight to make sure that this **land** was forever legally the property of **him** and **his descendants**, the Jewish people of today.

There are two other significant land purchases attested to by the Scriptures: **The tomb of Joseph**, acquired in **Shechem** (see the commentary on **Joshua Cu - Three Graves**), and **David's site for the future Temple** (see the commentary on **the Life of David El - David Builds an Altar**). **These** three acquisitions were all purchased without bargaining and paid for with unquestioningly legal tender. **They** are unchangeable **Jewish** possessions of **the Land of Promise!**

So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre - both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field (characteristic of **Hitti** land transactions, which were very careful to specify **them**) - **was deeded to Avraham as his property in the presence of all the sons of Het witnesses who had come to the gate of the city (23:17-18)**. All the details of the oral contract are given and this is still customary in an Oriental bargain.

Therefore, I cannot resist, at this point, to make an appropriate application to the seemingly never-ending conflict in the land of Isra'el. There are those who have claimed ownership to all three of the places mentioned above which were rightfully purchased for the Jewish



people; **the cave of Machpelah** in **Hebron**, **Joseph's tomb** in **Shechem**, and **the Temple Mount** in **Jerusalem**. The Bible provides ample legal evidence about the Jewish claim for these locations and their surroundings; but there are those who wish to deny Isra'el of its rightful ownership and occupation of these locations.

It seems that a major reason **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** had this detailed information about the purchase of these locations recorded in the TaNaKh is to provide the world with a witness and testimony that these places, as well as the rest of **the Holy Land**, are the national inheritance of the Jewish people. Much appreciation must be given to **Abraham** who, although **he** was in great distress and grief over the loss of **his** dear **wife Sarah**, nonetheless, had the foresight to purchase **the land** in **Hebron** for **his people** as a lasting inheritance.