



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

Parshas Chayei Sarah 5771 פרשת חיי שרה תשע"א

THE GREAT SYMPOSIUM

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

One of the distinguishing characteristics of this week's *parshah* is the apparent length and repetition of the storyline. Consider the portrayal of Eliezer's attempts to find a wife for Yitzchak. The Torah describes his mission in detail. When Eliezer later meets the bride's family, he recounts the ordeal with all of its particulars.

This phenomenon is noteworthy in light of the fact that every word and letter of the Torah is precisely weighed and calculated. Of course, this must be the case here as well. Chazal recognize this fact and address the issue of Eliezer's repeated narrative in Bereishis Rabbah (60:8).

But it is a different section that is the focus of our discussion. We find another instance of a seemingly elongated narrative – right at the beginning of the *parshah*. Here again, we are presented with a somewhat lengthy account, the importance of which is not readily apparent.

The *parshah* begins with the tragic news of Sarah Imeinu's death; Avraham arrives to eulogize her. The Torah then devotes a substantial amount of space to a matter that appears relatively trivial. The entire remainder of Chapter 23 concerns Avraham's dealings with the Hittites, as he arranges the purchasing of a burial plot.

This arrangement leaves us with numerous questions. Why was this event accorded such a lofty position in the Torah? At first glance, the back and forth between the two parties, while polite, does not seem particularly eventful. What could be the landmark significance of the details of this purchasing agreement?

Dedicated in loving memory of
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by her son, R' Sholom Chayim Schneider, Brooklyn, NY

In fact, the entire episode appears somewhat strange. The Torah repeatedly emphasizes that the conversation took place in a major public forum: "And he answered... in front of all who come to the city..."; "And Avraham bowed before the nation..."; "And he spoke in the ears of the nation..." (*Bereishis* 23:10,12,13). What was so special about these proceedings that necessitated the presence of a huge audience?

The Malbim explains that this episode was indeed monumental in scope. It touches on some of the most fundamental aspects of our existence. Avraham was attempting to impart to the people the essential truth of *hash'aras hanefesh* (immortality of the soul). He purposely chose a very public forum. In keeping with his overall life-mission, he sought to spread truth to the masses.

It seems that the Hittites were long overdue in receiving a lesson about proper treatment of the departed. Their lack of awareness of what happens after death led to some odd practices.

They engaged in burial for mere practical purposes: to preserve the dignity of the mourners and spare them the experience of witnessing their loved ones in an ungracious state. As soon as the burial and funeral service were completed, however, the Hittites turned their attention to the "waste" of good real estate. They would then exhume and dispose of the body and ready the area for future usage.

Avraham set out to correct their mistaken notions and practices. He staged a very public burial, not just to teach proper burial practices, but to enlighten the people of some crucial principles. The elaboration and details of this particular section reflect the

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importance and content of Avraham's lesson in *hashkafah* (Torah outlook).

Just how these ideals are reflected in the burial process can be seen by examining some of its key elements.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

For years now, the universal practice of burial entails the laying of a tombstone. This notion actually has its origins in the Torah, as evidenced by the monument erected by Ya'akov for his departed wife, Rachel (*ibid.* 35:20). It is quite edifying to consider the ideas upon which this practice is based. And a lot can be learned by studying the names used to refer to these stones.

For example, there is a unique term for a tombstone used in the context of a Mishnaic discourse. The issue under discussion involves the monies designated for the burial needs of a particular *niftar* (departed individual). The funds were more than sufficient, and upon completion of the burial, there was even some left over. How is the surplus to be used? The Mishnah states (*Shekalim* 2:5):

מוֹתֵר הַמֵּת -- בּוֹנִין לוֹ נֶפֶשׁ עַל קִבְרוֹ.

“The remaining burial funds should be used for the purpose of building a monument (*nefesh*) by the grave.”

The Mishnah's term for tombstone – *nefesh* – also means soul. The soul's makeup is multifaceted, but a certain portion remains connected to the burial place, to hover over the interred body. The tombstone is referred to as *nefesh* to reflect this phenomenon (*Ta'amei Haminhagim, Kuntres Acharon, p. 476*).

The Torah refers to this object by a different appellation – *matzeivah* (*Bereishis* 35:20). This refers to yet another aspect of *hash'aras hanefesh* – the eventual reunification of the body and soul – to take place in the era of *Techiyas Hameisim* (Resurrection of the Dead). The word *matzeivah* comes from the root *nitzav* (standing) and implies a sense of permanence. Not that death and burial

is permanent, G-d forbid. Rather, the *matzeivah* indicates the permanence of the body's existence. It conveys the message that the body interred here will exist for all time. Although it now lies still, this is only a temporary situation. At the appointed time, the soul will reenter the body, and together the two will stand once again (*Teshuvos Maharam Shik, Yoreh Deiah, 171*).

These truths, says the Malbim, are what Avraham meant to impart to the nations, through his very public display of burial. He was trying to show them that – contrary to their mistaken practices – the *niftar* must be buried in a permanent setting (hence all the emphasis on the finality of Avraham's purchase). Had it been just a matter of covering the body, one could understand the practice of later clearing out the area. Avraham taught that this is not the case at all. Rather, as a treasure is stored for eventual usage, the bodily remains are to be kept in dignity until that time that they shall rise again.

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