



## DIVREI MENACHEM

BY MENACHEM PERSOFF

Special Projects Consultant, OU Israel Center  
mpersoff@ou.org

# In Praise of Sarah Imeinu – And the Hittites!

**P**arshat Chayei Sarah describes the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah, and the adjacent field, from the Hittites who lived around Hevron. Notably, Avraham negotiated the sale of the ancestral property with Ephron, the city's rich and distinguished head.

We are accustomed to reading this epic story noting the ignominy that Avraham suffered, having to call himself an alien and a resident. Moreover, our revered ancestor experienced the wily negotiating strategies of Ephron, who squeezed out of Avraham an extravagant price for Sarah's burial plot (and the field).

If Ephron was such a charlatan and a cheat, why would the Midrash Rabbah, in the words of R. Elazar, ask, "How many

pens were broken in writing the names of the Hittites, which occurs no less than *ten* times?" After all, the Torah is very frugal with words – every letter, our rabbis tell us, is pregnant with meaning. What did the Hittites do that earned them such an accolade?

Clearly, we need to distinguish between the Hittite onlookers of the sale and Ephron himself. The narrative records how the Children of Chet referred to Avraham as a prince of God, how the crowd very much favored Avraham purchasing the lot, and how they agreed to intercede with Ephron on Avraham's behalf. They explained to him the financial aspects of the purchase (following local custom). They promoted Avraham's interests and acted as witnesses.

The Midrash, amazingly, adds that the Hittites' action "forms a parallel with the Ten Commandments" and teaches that promoting a righteous man's business interests is like fulfilling all of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps an analogy with the life of Sarah will help us to understand the intent of the Midrash.

Rabbi M. Miller suggests that the expression in *Eshet Chayil*, which indicates that the virtuous wife "planned the purchase of a field and bought it," refers to Sarah. Sarah, obviously, did not physically buy her

**Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM**

**050-595-5161**

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own mausoleum and burial plot. However, the way she lived her life, as a helpmate to Avraham and elevating her mundane duties to a spiritual level, matched Avraham's business deal with the Hittite.

Following the Zohar, *Ma'arat Hamachpelah* is the entrance to Gan Eden, where Heaven and Earth meet. That would seem like a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, in essence, that, too, is what the *Aseret Hadibrot* teaches us: They, too, consist of laws that form a bridge between the material ("Earth") and the spiritual ("Heaven"). The Mitzvot forbidding us to covet property, for example, force us to transcend our nature and raise our desires to another realm. They bring us closer to Hashem, reminding us that *He* is the Source of everything we have.

So Sara is buried in a double cave that symbolizes two worlds and the "double" life she lived, consisting of the synthesis of the mundane and the holy – a central value of our belief and way of life. The Hittites deserved their praise because, in the rabbi's words, they directed a commonplace act of a purchase of land to a higher end. May we be worthy of such "mundane" actions even as we attend to our daily routines and activities. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

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