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The Details of Avraham's Purchase of Me'arat HaMachpelah

After all the back-and-forth negotiations between Avraham and Ephron, Ephron finally requests four hundred shekels and sells Me'arat HaMachpelah to Avraham. There is a remarkable Midrash about this entire episode cited by Rav Shimon Schwab[1]:

כַּמָּה דְיוֹת מִשְׁתַּפְּכוֹת וְכַמָּה קוּלְמוֹסִין מִשְׁתַּבְּרִין כְּדֵי לִכְתֹּב בְּנֵי חֵת בְּנֵי חֵת.

How much ink has been spilled, and how many pens have been broken, in order to write 'Bnei Chet, Bnei Chet'!"


Rabbi Shimon Schwab zt"l

The Torah goes out of its way to repeat Bnei Chet again and again throughout this story. The Midrash explains that the term Bnei Chet appears no less than ten times - corresponding to the Ten Commandments. This is what we might call a **Midrash Pliah.** What connection does the purchase of Me'arat HaMachpelah have with the Aseret HaDibrot?

The Midrash itself gives the answer: **לְלַמֶּדְךָ שֶׁכָּל הַמְבָרֵר מְקוֹחוֹ שֶׁל צַדִּיק כְּאִלּוּ קִיֵּם עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת**. To teach you that whoever clarifies the purchase of a righteous person is as though he has fulfilled the Ten Commandments. But what does that mean? What does it mean that by clarifying the details of Avraham's purchase, we are somehow fulfilling the Aseret HaDibrot?

The Aseret HaDibrot Are One Unit

Rav Schwab explains that the key is to look at the beginning and the end of the Aseret HaDibrot. They begin with: **אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ** - I am Hashem, your God. They end with **לֹא תַחְמֹד... וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ** - You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your fellow. The first is fundamentally **bein adam laMakom** -our relationship with Hashem. The last is fundamentally **bein adam lachavero** -our relationship with another person. Hazal teach us that these are not two separate systems but rather one unit. The two *luchot* contain five commandments on one side and five on the other, representing the two dimensions of our relationship: **bein adam laMakom** and **bein adam lachavero**. Together they form one Torah.

You cannot separate the first from the last. You cannot say: "I am very religious when it comes to my relationship with Hashem, but business is business." You cannot say: "I am careful about Shabbat, but I can pressure someone in a business transaction." The Torah does not recognize

1. Rav Shimon Schwab, *Ma'ayan Beit HaSho'eva*

that distinction. The Aseret HaDibrot are a package.

THE CONNECTION TO LO TACHMOD

Now we can understand the remarkable relevance of Avraham's purchase. The tenth commandment is: **לֹא תַחְמֹד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ... וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ.** You shall not covet your fellow's house... nor anything that belongs to your fellow. How does one violate *Lo Tachmod*? The Rambam[2] explains that it is possible to violate *Lo Tachmod* even when the object is ultimately purchased legally. If a person desperately wants his friend's property, repeatedly pressures him, pleads with him, offers him more and more money, and continues until the owner finally agrees to sell, the buyer has violated *Lo Tachmod*. In other words, the fact that I paid for something does not necessarily make the transaction morally legitimate. I can own something legally and still have obtained it in a way the Torah forbids.

That raises a fascinating question about Avraham. As we read the story, couldn't someone have misunderstood what happened? Perhaps Ephron did not really want to sell Me'arat HaMachpelah. Perhaps Avraham kept asking. "Come on, Ephron. I'll give you whatever you want." "Please, I need this field." "I'll pay you generously." Could it be that Avraham Avinu was guilty of *Lo Tachmod*? If Avraham had violated *Lo Tachmod*, the problem would be far greater than one isolated prohibition. If the Aseret HaDibrot are one unit, then undermining the tenth commandment undermines the entire structure.

This, says Rav Schwab, is why the Torah spends so much time telling us exactly what happened. Why are the **Bnei Chet** mentioned again and again? Why does the Torah describe the negotiations in such extraordinary detail? Because the Torah wants to make one thing absolutely clear: Avraham did not violate Lo Tachmod. Ephron wanted to sell. The Bnei Chet were there. The negotiations were public. The price was ultimately stated explicitly: **אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת** שֶׁקֶל כֶּסֶף And Avraham paid the full amount. Ephron's elaborate negotiations were his own strategy. He initially presented himself as though he were willing to give the field away, but ultimately maneuvered the discussion until he received an enormous sum. Avraham, however, did not pressure Ephron into selling something he did not want to sell.

That is why the Torah spends so much time on the transaction. The Torah is clarifying the purchase. Now we understand the Midrash: **כָּל הַמְבָרֵר מִקְחוֹ שֶׁל צַדִּיק כְּאִלּוּ קִיֵּם עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרוֹת.** Whoever clarifies the purchase of the righteous is as though he fulfilled the Ten Commandments. Why? Because by demonstrating that Avraham did not violate *Lo Tachmod*, the Torah establishes the integrity of the entire Aseret HaDibrot.

THE DEEPER MESSAGE: RELIGION DOES NOT END IN SHUL

There is a powerful message here for all of us. Sometimes we divide Judaism into categories.

There is **religious life**: Tefillah, Shabbat, Tefillin, Kashrut and learning Torah. Then there is **real life**: Business, negotiations, money, relationships and competition. The Torah tells us that this division does not exist. The Aseret HaDibrot begin with: **אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ** - "I am Hashem, your God, and they end with: - **וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר לְרֵעֶךָ**-"Anything that belongs to your fellow." The Torah is telling

2. Rambam, Hilchot Gezeilah Va'Avedah 1:9

us: If Hashem is truly your God, then that has consequences for how you treat your fellow human being. One's Judaism does not end when they leave shul. In fact, perhaps the real test begins when one leaves shul. It is easy to feel holy while standing before Hashem. The harder question is what happens when one is standing across a negotiating table from another person.

Avraham Avinu teaches us that business can be avodat Hashem. A transaction can be a religious act. Integrity is not something separate from Torah. Perhaps this is the deeper message of the ten appearances of *Bnei Chet*. The Torah could have told the story much more briefly, but it deliberately slows down. It tells us who was there, what was said, how the negotiations proceeded, what was offered and what was ultimately paid. Why? Because Hashem wants us to understand something fundamental: The Torah cares about the details of how we treat another person. Not only whether we believe in Hashem, but whether our belief in Hashem changes the way we behave.

The Aseret HaDibrot begin with God and end with our neighbor. That is not accidental. The Torah is teaching us that the two are inseparable. The real test of our relationship with Hashem is often not what happens when we are standing in front of Him. It is what happens when He places another person in front of us. That is the greatness of Avraham Avinu. He did not merely believe in Hashem. He brought Hashem into every part of his life. When we understand the integrity of Avraham's purchase, we are not studying a story about real estate. We are studying what it means to live an entire life according to one Torah. ■

