

Toronto Torah

Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Chayei Sarah

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for the yahrtzeit of Shimon Berglas ז"ל שמעון אריה בן חיים ז"ל

Was Buying the Cave of Machpelah a Test? Rabbi Adam Friedmann

Early commentators debate whether purchasing the Cave of Machpelah was one of Avraham Avinu's ten tests. Rashi and Rambam (commentary to Pirkei Avot 5:6) assume that the last test was the Akeidah, while Rabbenu Yonah (ad loc.) includes the sale as a test. Both positions lead to questions about the message of the story. If this was not one of Avraham's tests, why is it mentioned in the Torah? And if it was a test, what exactly was the challenge?

1: Not a Test, but a Sign of Success

Ramban (commentary to Bereishit 23:19) answers the first question. The Torah tells us about Cave of Machpelah as part of its concluding notes on Avraham's life. The vignette shows us the great kindnesses that G-d did for Avraham. He came to the land of Canaan completely unknown, and became a highly respected and influential figure. The Hittites call him "a prince of G-d" and offer him their best burial plots. This shows that G-d's blessing of making Avraham's name great came to pass in his lifetime.

2: Emotional Pain

Considering the other option, that the sale was a test, we might think that the challenge had to do with mourning. Avraham had just lost his wife, and found himself needing to bargain with a huckster, Ephron, before being able to bury her. However, as Rabbi Yonatan Grossman points out, the text does not support this reading. The overwhelming emphasis is on the sale and Avraham's interactions with the Hittites and Ephron, not on his grief.

3: A Test of Authenticity

If Avraham's test wasn't about grief, then what was it about? The Talmud (Bava Batra 16a) explains the story as a test of Avraham's faith: The Satan tells G-d that there is no one in the world like Avraham. Even though G-d promised to give him the entire land of Canaan, when Sarah died Avraham couldn't find anywhere to bury her. Nevertheless, he did not question G-d's ways. But this raises an obvious question: didn't the Hittites offer him their best burial plots, and for free? If so, what does the Talmud mean?

The answer may lie in a reading which opposes the triumphant picture painted by Ramban. Avraham initially asks the Hittites to grant him a burial plot in his position as a *ger toshav*; someone who dwells in the land but is ultimately a stranger. The response, as mentioned above, is that Avraham is anything but a stranger. He is a prince of G-d, an important person. The offer to bury Sarah in the choicest plot was also an offer to accept the mantle of prominence in Hittite society. Avraham could have become an influential figure in that society. He declines this offer and insists on maintaining his position as a stranger who would need to buy a burial spot outright.

Why not accept the offer of the Hittites? Wouldn't this have been at least a partial fulfillment of G-d's promise to give him the land? Evidently not. Accepting this position would have been a success for Avraham personally, but only a caricature of his greater goal. G-d promised Avraham that the land would be ruled

by his descendants and spiritual heirs. This is what Avraham sought. Not the kingdom of Avraham nudging Hittite society in a positive direction, but the Kingdom of G-d populated by people serving G-d. This is also what the talmudic passage above means. G-d promised Avraham a dominion over the land which would embody his spiritual vision. When Sarah died, this was nowhere to be seen, and Avraham refused to accept an alternative.

Avraham Avinu was a visionary who dedicated his life making his visions real. His last test was to face the fact that those goals would not be realized in his lifetime. He passed up the opportunity to live out an inauthentic version of his dreams and trusted G-d to carry his efforts through. Each person is created with a unique soul and a unique perspective on life. This is his or her great vision to fulfill. Avraham teaches us that once we discover our goals, we can't fall prey to the temptation of a tangible but inauthentic compromise. Even if it means that we never see our dreams realized in our lifetimes, we trust that G-d appreciates our efforts and will carry them to fruition.

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Summary

As our chapter begins, Eliyahu knows that he is about to ascend to the heavens in a whirlwind. He tells Elisha to remain behind in Gilgal while he heads to Beit-El, but Elisha stays with Eliyahu. Upon arrival, the prophets from Beit-El ask Elisha if he knows that G-d will be taking Eliyahu away today, and Elisha says he knows, and they should be quiet. The story repeats itself as they continue to Yericho: Eliyahu attempts to dismiss Elisha, the local prophets tell Elisha the same things, and Elisha repeats his earlier response. They then continue to the Jordan River. (1-6)

Eliyahu and Elisha separate from the other prophets, crossing the Jordan after Eliyahu miraculously splits the river with his cloak. (7-8)

Eliyahu asks Elisha if he has any last request, and Elisha asks if he can have twice the prophecy of Eliyahu. Eliyahu answers that this will happen “only if you see me being taken.” Fiery chariots then separate them, drawing Eliyahu heavenward while Elisha calls out after him, “My Father, My Father.” Elisha is left to grieve and rend his clothes. (9-12)

Elisha lifts Eliyahu’s cloak off the ground. He then strikes the water and

says, “Where is G-d, the G-d of Eliyahu”, before striking the Jordan again. It splits, and Elisha crosses the river. The other prophets see this and acknowledge Elisha as Eliyahu’s successor. (13-15)

The other prophets continue to search for Eliyahu for three days, despite Elisha informing them of Eliyahu’s ascent. (16-18)

Upon returning to Yericho, Elisha hears from local people that the water is foul and people are dying. Elisha instructs them to place salt in a new dish. He throws it into the water, and says that G-d has healed the waters of Yericho. (19-22)

Elisha returns to Beit-El and “*ne’arim ketanim*,” a term which usually refers to youths, leave the city and mock him and call him bald. Elisha curses them, and 42 children are killed by two bears from the forest. (23-25)

Insight

How could Elisha cause the death of children just for making fun of him? The Talmud (Sotah 46b) offers multiple reasons, including:

- 1) *Na’ar* can mean “poured out”, as they were empty of mitzvot, and *Ket-*

- anim* means they were of little faith;
- 2) They were young adults, and acted childishly;
- 3) They were adults from a city named *ne’arim ketanim*;
- 4) Elisha saw prophetically that they and their descendants would not perform mitzvot.

[Rabbi Alex Israel](#) also notes that Elisha “turned back” to curse them, indicating that these youths came from Yericho, the city he had just saved, and now they were cursing him!

While Rabbi Israel highlights the rabbinic discomfort with Elisha’s actions, he points out that the text of Melachim doesn’t give any indication of disapproval, and that the text indicates the punishment was measure-for-measure. The Talmud also says that the arrival of the bears to defend Elisha was miraculous, further solidifying the fact that it was an act done by G-d, not one performed by Elisha.

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It Happened in Israel: “Like Dreamers”

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Both Talmuds record a story about Choni HaMe’agel, the Circle-maker, that focus on the meaning of the verse in Tehillim, “When G-d restored the captivity of Zion, we were as dreamers.” (126:1)

In the Talmud Bavli (Ta’anit 23a), Choni wonders, “Does anyone really ever sleep for seventy years in a dream?” One day, Choni sees an elderly man planting a carob tree and asks him how long it will be until the tree bears fruit. Upon hearing that it will be seventy years, he challenges the man, who will surely not see its produce. The man explains that his parents planted the trees from which he benefits, and he is doing the same for his children. Choni then sits down to eat and falls into a sleep for seventy years, hidden behind rocks. Upon waking, he sees a man harvesting the carobs and is informed that this is the grandson of the person who planted the tree. Choni realizes that he had been asleep for seventy years. He sees that his donkey has produced young. Choni goes to his home to find his son, but is informed that his son has passed away, but his grandson is alive. When he introduces himself, his grandson does not believe him. Choni goes to the Beit Midrash, where he hears the scholars say that the Torah that day was as clear as when it was taught by Choni. He takes this opportunity to introduce himself, but again is not believed. He becomes depressed and prays for death, and G-d allows him to die. Rava comments that “This is the meaning of the popular expression ‘Either friends or death.’”

In the Talmud Yerushalmi (Ta’anit 3:9), Choni does not wonder about the verse from Tehillim. Rather, the verse frames the story. Choni enters a cave and falls asleep, sleeping

through the destruction of the First Temple and awakening after the Second Temple has been built. When he wakes, he asks people what has happened. They are shocked that he does not know, and they ask him who he is. He answers that he is Choni. They say that they heard that when he would enter the Temple, it would light up. He enters, and it indeed fills with light. Choni then says about himself, “When Hashem restored the captivity of Zion, we were as dreamers.”

Insight

There are many differences between these stories, several of which point to differences between how the Talmuds record narratives. The most prominent is the Land of Israel in the story. In the Talmud Bavli, the narrative happened in Israel, but that is not the purpose of the story. The climax, as is often the case, takes place in the Beit Midrash, and the story is framed as solution to a problem in biblical interpretation. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, the story is about experiencing the destruction and rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash and the Land of Israel, and how one person managed to “sleep through it.” Israel is thus part of the meaning of the story.

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Biography

Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet

Rabbi Adam Frieberg

Born in 1235 in Barcelona, Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet (Rashba) was one of the primary students of both Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) and Rabbeinu Yonah. In his younger years, Rashba was a merchant, but he ultimately left business for the rabbinate. As Rabbi of the main synagogue in Barcelona, Rashba led Spanish Jewry for more than 50 years. Rashba was well versed in Roman law, Spanish common law, and economics; this enabled him to lead the Jewish communities of the Spanish provinces and to serve as their representative to the greater Spanish community. As a prominent leader of the Jewish people, Rashba successfully defended the community in theological debates with Christians (Shut HaRashba 4:187).

Rashba wrote prolifically; more than 3000 of his teshuvot are still extant. He received requests for halachic guidance from all over the Jewish world. This is likely due in part to the geographic centrality of Barcelona, relative to major Jewish centres of the time - Portugal, France, Germany, Turkey, North Africa, Italy, and Israel. Also, Barcelona was itself a prominent Jewish community.

Rashba also wrote halachic tracts; two of his most famous are *Torat haBayit* and *Avodat HaKodesh*. *Torat haBayit* has been preserved in two versions, one long and the other short, both of which are usually printed together.

The turn of the Jewish millennium in 5000 (1240) created much messianic fervor in the Jewish community. Rashba ensured the unity of the Jewish community by combating false messiahs, most prominently Nissim ben Avraham and Avraham Abulafia when they appeared in the latter half of the 13th century (ibid. 1:548).

Rashba vigorously defended Rambam against his detractors, but he disagreed with Rambam's approach to general philosophy and the philosophy of Judaism. Indeed, Rashba, as part of the Beit Din in Barcelona, forbade those under thirty from learning secular philosophy and the sciences.

Rashba passed away at the age of 75, in 1310. Among Rashba's works are his novellae on the Talmud, *Torat HaBayit*, *Avodat HaKodesh* and *Sha'ar HaMayim*. His most renowned students were Rabbi Aharon haLevi (Ra'ah), Rabbi Yom Tov al -Asvilli (Ritva) and Rabbeinu Bechayye.

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Torah and Translation

How to Lead a Community

Rabbi Shlomo ibn Aderet, Shu"t Rashba 5:238

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

דע כי לשון רכה תשבור גרם ולעולם כל מישר ומישר ופנה דרך לפני העם להסיר המכשלה את העם צריך לעלות מן הקלה אל החמורה. ואין נוטלין כל החבלה ביחד...

וכבר הראו לנו מועצות ודעת במה שהזכיר בפ"ק דע"ז (דף טז) גבי של בית רבי שהיה מקריב לבית קיסר שור פיסס ביום אידם חיסר ד' רבוון. שלא יהיו מקריבין אותו יום אלא למחר. חיסר ד' רבוון שלא מקריבין אותו כל עיקר. ואמרו ר' למעקר מילתא בעי ועקרי אותה פורתא פורתא.

הנה זאת שמענה ואתה דע לך עוד כי אי אפשר לנהוג בכל האנשים במדה אחת. וזכור נא ענין דוד אדונינו מלכינו אשר נהג להעלים עינו מיואב ושמעיה ואף על פי שהיו בני מות... לכל זמן מזומן והעלמת עין מן העובר לעתים מצוה והכל לפי צורך השעה. והחכם מעלים עיין לעתים בקלות.

ואני רואה שצריך שיתחזק ענין התקנות בתחילה ולא יכנס במחלוקת. וכבר ידעת ענין מלכנו הראשון שאול כי היה כמחריש והעלמת עין בדבר זה עד אשר יחזקו זרועות העומדים על הפקודים...

והנך רואה כי גלתה סנהדרין ממקומה כדאיתא (בסנהדרין דף מא) כדי שלא יצטרכו לרבות בדיני נפשות מפני שראו דרבו הרצחנים. כ"ש אנו שאין בנו כח מדין תורה לדין בדיני נפשות ואף לא בדיני קנסות אלא לצורך השעה. ולא לעבור על דברי תורה אלא לעשות סייג לתורה כמוזכר בסנהדרין (דף מו) וביבמות (דף צ).

זהו עצתי שתפתה בלשון רכה פעם ושתיים. והרבה רעים על הרעים שמאל דוחה וימין מקרבת אולי יזכו וישבו מדרכם הרעה ורשעים עוד אינם.

ואם לא ישמעו ויעברו בשלח יעבורו תלוש ומרוט טול מקל והך על קדקדם אלף ופרוטרוט.

Know that a soft tongue breaks bones. Always, [try] each different path, and clear the way before the nation. Removing obstacles from before the nation requires progressing from the lenient to the strict. And do not attempt [to resolve] the entire package together...

They have already shown us counsel and wisdom when they mentioned (Avodah Zarah 16a) that the house of Rebbe would bring the house of the Caesar a fat ox on the day of their festival, and they paid 40,000 so that they shouldn't sacrifice it that day, but the next day, and they paid 40,000 so that they shouldn't sacrifice it at all. They said that Rebbe wanted to eliminate the practice altogether, but he uprooted it bit by bit.

Hear this and know further that one cannot treat all people the same way. And please remember how David, our master and king, ignored what Yoav and Shimi did, even though they were liable for death... For everything has an appointed time, and ignoring the sinner may be a mitzvah at times, all according to the needs of the moment. The sage ignores easily, at times.

And I see that one must strengthen enactments at the outset, and not enter into strife. And you already know about our first king, Saul, that he was silent and ignored the matter [of people's rejection of his reign] until the arms of those who stood upon his orders were strengthened...

And you see that the Sanhedrin was exiled from its place, as seen in Sanhedrin 41, so that they would not need to handle many capital cases, for they saw that the murderers had increased. Certainly for us, who lack the biblical authority to handle capital cases, or even fines other than for the need of the moment. This is not to trespass Torah, but to protect it, as seen in Sanhedrin 46 and Yevamot 90...

This is my advice, to persuade with a soft tongue once or twice, and to bring a great number of friends upon the wicked ones, have the left push away and the right draw near, perhaps they will merit and repent of their bad ways, and the wicked will be no longer.

And if they will not listen, they will pass under the sword, plucked and torn; take a stick and strike them on their head a thousand times and then some.

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Monday-Thursday

10:00 AM - Noon: Adult Seder Boker with Rabbi Moshe Yeres on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/sederboker> (men)

Monday/Wednesday: Talmud Succah, Orot haTeshuvah of Rav Kook

Tuesday/Thursday: Parshah, Tanach: Sefer Melachim

Shabbat October 30

After 8:00 AM shacharit R' Yehuda Mann, Halachah from the Parshah, Clanton Park

After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT: Simcha Suite (men)

After minchah Idan Rakovsky, Weekly Class, Shaarei Tefillah

Sunday October 31

9:00 AM R' Zev Spitz & R' Yehuda Mann, Semichat Chaver Program, Clanton Park (men)

9:15 AM Idan Rakovsky, Postmodernist Jewish Thought, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

10 AM R' Aaron Greenberg, Talmud Eruvin, Yeshivat Or Chaim or ZOOM: <http://bit.ly/iliczoom> 613613 (univ)

Monday November 1

8:00 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, S. Y. Agnon: *HaNidach* (The Outcast), Part 2, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/agnon>

8:30 PM R' Moshe Yeres, Talmud Shabbat (Chap. 15), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/talmud>

Tuesday November 2

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, King Solomon's Arc (Melachim I 2), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>

7:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 7-8), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (men)

Wednesday November 3

6:15 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Talmud: Eruvin, Shaarei Shomayim and ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/eruvim>

12:30 PM The Ethical Challenge (with CPD credit for accountants), Week 1
Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, Managing Minors: Overseeing the Financial Affairs of Children
On ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/bmlunch>, Register (free) at <http://torontotorah.com/business>

7:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, Introduction to Talmud, Week 4 of 5, Shaarei Tefillah

8:00 PM R' J Anstandig, Laws of Winter Shabbat #2, Shaarei Shomayim & ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/wintershabbat>

8:15 PM R' Chaim Metzger, Artscroll Through the Ages, BAYT and ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/translated>

Thursday November 4

8:30 AM R' Chaim Metzger, Trei Asar, Yeshivat Or Chaim or ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/trei> (university)

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 21-22), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (women)

8:00 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Beitzah, email ymanntorontotorah.com for location (advanced, men)

8:00 PM R' Jared Anstandig, Gemara Bava Batra, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/torontowbm> (university women)

Friday November 5

8:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Parshah, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

10:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, R' Mordechai Torczyner, R' Yehuda Mann, Bava Batra Perek 2 *advanced*
In-person at Yeshivat Or Chaim, on Zoom at <http://tiny.cc/frishiur>

Coming Up!

SHABBAT NOVEMBER 6-7 - SHABBATON AT SHAAREI SHOMAYIM!

Theme: When Does Judaism Change?

Legal Ethics: November 8: Wills and the Jewish Client

Register: <https://torontotorah.com/cpd>, Session on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/mtethics>

Wednesday mornings November 10-24 - "The House that David Built"

Register: <https://torontotorah.com/wednesday>, Sessions on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>