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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

One scene in this week's sedra has left a mark on Jewish law. Abraham has sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. He finds Rebecca, and brings her back with him. The first glimpse she has of her future husband is significant. Isaac has 'gone out into the field towards evening to meditate.' It is a fitting image.

Isaac is the quiet figure among the heroes of Tanach. Jacob and Moses meet their future wives at a well, where they perform acts of courage and kindness. In the case of Isaac, it is Rebecca who does the act of kindness at the well — and Isaac himself is not even there. Instead it is his father's servant who has been sent to find her.

Isaac is withdrawn, inward, introspective. In their marriage it is more often Rebecca who is the active partner. Meditating in a field — that is Isaac's characteristic gesture. He is a man of complex psychology. How could he not be? Bound and almost killed as a child, one can only guess at the mark that moment left on his soul. The result (since the Torah usually gives us only oblique hints about people's inner feelings) is that he is curiously opaque. We know less about him than almost any other personality in Bereishit.

The Talmud, more concerned with halachah than psychology, draws its own inference from the verse. Isaac's 'meditation' was a prayer. 'Towards evening' means afternoon. If Isaac's behaviour had normative implications, it meant that he instituted Minchah, the afternoon prayer. What is the connection between the patriarchs and prayer?

The Talmud records a famous disagreement among the Sages as to the origin of the three daily prayers. Were they a substitute for the sacrifices that once took place in the Temple? Or did their origins go further back into Israel's past?

It has been stated: Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina said, 'The prayers were instituted by the patriarchs.' Rabbi Joshua son of Levi said: 'The prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices.'

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina, and it has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua son of Levi.

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina: Abraham instituted the morning prayer, as it says, "And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood", and "standing" means prayer, as it says, "Then Pinchas stood up and prayed."

Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field towards evening," and "meditation" means prayer, as it says, "A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his meditation before the Lord."

Jacob instituted the evening prayer, as it says, "And he encountered [vayifga] a place, and pegia means prayer, as it says, "Therefore do not pray for this people nor lift up prayer or cry for them, nor make intercession [tifga] to Me."

It has been taught in accordance with Rabbi Joshua son of Levi: Why did they say that the morning prayer could be said until midday? Because the regular morning sacrifice could be brought until midday. Rabbi Judah, however, says that it may be said up to the fourth hour because the regular morning sacrifice may be brought until the fourth hour.

And why did they say that the afternoon prayer can be said until the evening? Because the regular afternoon offering could be brought until the evening. Rabbi Judah however says that it can be said only up to the middle of the afternoon, because the afternoon offering could only be brought up to the middle of the afternoon.

And why did they say that for the evening prayer there is no limit? Because the limbs and fat that were not consumed on the altar by the evening could be brought during the whole of the night.

More is at stake in this disagreement than halachah and history. At issue is the very nature of prayer itself.

There were two distinct spiritual traditions in biblical Judaism. On the one hand were the patriarchs and prophets. They were, if one can put it this way, ordinary people with extraordinary gifts — the gift above all of being able to speak and listen to the voice of God. The patriarchs were shepherds. So too was Moses. They wore no robes of office. They lived far from the cities of their time. Alone — away from the noise of urban civilisation — they heard and heeded God's word. They prayed as the situation demanded. No two prayers were the same. They spoke from the depths of their being to the One who is the depth of all Being. That is patriarchal and prophetic prayer.

There was another type of religious personality:

the priest. He did have special robes of office. He was a "holy man", set apart from others (this is the root meaning of kadosh, 'holy', in Judaism). For him, avodah, Divine 'service', primarily meant the offering of a sacrifice. Everything about the sacrifices was subject to detailed prescriptive rules. The temidim or regular sacrifices had their own time (morning and afternoon), their own place (the Sanctuary, later the Temple), and their own precisely defined ritual, never varying, always the same.

Spontaneity, essential to the prophet, is disastrous for the priest. Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, seized by the mood of the moment, made their own offering at the inauguration of the Sanctuary, and died as a result. If the prophet represents the "now" of the religious life, the priest represents eternity. They speak to different aspects of the soul, and different needs of society. Without spontaneity, the spirit withers; without structure, it lapses into chaos. Without prophets, the faith of Israel would have grown old; without priests, it would never have been able to become the code of a nation.

The question at issue between Rabbi Jose son of Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Joshua son of Levi was therefore: to which of these traditions did prayer belong? To the patriarchs or the priests? To supplication or sacrifice? To the personal dialogue of the soul or the collective worship of the nation?

One of the most remarkable and little noted facts about Judaism is that to this day we maintain both practices — because we say each Amidah (standing prayer) twice: once privately and silently as individuals, and then a second time publicly and collectively as a community (the "Reader's Repetition"). The silent prayer belongs to the world of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Rachel and Hannah — it is private, personal and can include (within certain halachic parameters) individualised requests. The Reader's Repetition follows the logic of the sacrifices (which is why there is no repetition in the case of Maariv, the evening service, because there was no nighttime sacrifice in the Temple). We thus preserve both the patriarchal and priestly traditions.

Equally significant is the different character of the prayers — due to the different personalities and histories of the patriarchs.

My predecessor, the late Lord Jacobovits of blessed memory, used to point out that the position of the sun at the various stages of the day mirrored that of the patriarchs themselves. In the morning, the sun is in the east — and Abraham began his life in the east, in Ur of the Chaldees, namely Mesopotamia. In the early afternoon, the sun is overhead in the middle of the sky — reminding us of Isaac who spent his entire life within the land of Canaan, later to become Israel. In the evening the sun is in the west, as was Jacob who ended his life in the west, in exile in Egypt.

The characteristic mood of the different times of the day is also reflected in the lives of the three fathers. Abraham is morning: the dawn of a new faith. It was he who broke his father's idols, recognising the inner contradictions of polytheism and paganism. His religious career began with a journey away from home, from his birthplace, and his father's house, to a new and unknown destination. Abraham represents beginning — a new chapter in the religious history of humankind.

Isaac is afternoon. There is nothing spectacular about the afternoon; there is no qualitative change from dark to light or day to night. Instead there is a slow transition, an almost imperceptible shift. Isaac is the bridge between day and night, and between the lives of Abraham and Jacob, both fraught with drama. His own life is relatively uneventful and passive. He is not the prime mover of events. Yet without a bridge we cannot cross from one domain to another. If Abraham is the iconoclast, Isaac represents the quiet courage of continuity, without which the entire project of the covenant would die.

Jacob is night. He sees his great vision of the ladder and angels at night. He struggles with an unknown adversary at night. He ends his days in exile, at the beginning of the long, dark night of slavery. Jacob's great strength is that he does not let go. He is born holding his brother's heel. He refuses to let go of the stranger wrestling with him. If Abraham is originality and Isaac continuity, then Jacob represents tenacity.

The verbs associated with each are also different. Abraham 'rises early in the morning' and 'stands'. When it comes to prayer, he is the initiator. Acknowledging that he is "but dust and ashes," he nonetheless utters the most audacious prayer of all time: "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" That is prayer as amidah.

Jacob, by contrast, 'encounters'. It is not he who seeks God on his flight from home but God who seeks him. The phrase the Torah uses just before Jacob has his vision of the angelic ladder is vayifga ba-makom, which in rabbinic Hebrew could be read to mean, 'He bumped into God.' There are spiritual experiences we have when we are least expecting them — when we are alone, afraid, thinking of something else altogether. That was Jacob's vision of prayer. Not everything in the life of the spirit is under our control. The great transformative experiences — love, a sudden sense of beauty, an upsurge of happiness — happen unpredictably and leave us, in Wordsworth's famous phrase, 'surprised by joy'. The glory of Jacob's epiphany is that it happened at night, in the midst of fear and flight. That is prayer as pegiah.

There is a third kind of prayer. Isaac is 'meditating' in the field — but the word sichah in modern Hebrew means not only meditation but also, and primarily, conversation. When the Talmud says, in the context of Isaac, ein sichah ela tefillah, we could

translate this phrase as "conversation is a form of prayer" — and in a profound sense it is so. Prayer is a conversation (between heaven and earth). But conversation is also a prayer — for in true conversation, I open myself up to the reality of another person. I enter his or her world. I begin to see things from a perspective not my own. In the touch of two selves, both are changed.

A genuine human conversation is therefore a preparation for, and a microcosmic version of, the act of prayer. For in prayer I attend to the presence of God, listening as well as speaking, opening myself up to a reality other and infinitely vaster than my own, and I become a different person as a result. Prayer is not monologue but dialogue. Before every Amidah we say, "O God open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise." In a real sense, therefore, in prayer we do not simply speak; we are also spoken to and through. God — and the traditions of Jewish faith — speak through us. The very words we use are not our own but those of thousands of years of our people's history as they encountered God and articulated their response. Prayer is like an electrical connection. While it lasts, we become a channel through which the energy of the universe (creation) and Jewish history (redemption) flows, and which we make our own. That is prayer as sichah.

Thus there are three modes of spirituality and we experience each in the course of a single day. There is the human quest (Abraham, morning prayer), the Divine encounter (Jacob, evening prayer), and the dialogue (Isaac, afternoon). That is how three events in the life of the patriarchs – Abraham's early rise, Isaac's meditation in a field, and Jacob's vision at night — became not just events in the past but permanent possibilities for us who follow in their footsteps, guided by their precedent, lifted by their example, enlarged by their spirit, summoned to their heights. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of Sarah's life. And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba; that is Hebron, in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her." (Genesis 23:1–2) Abraham may have been the first patriarch, the founder of Israel, the monotheist who brought a new vision of God to the world, but if Sarah had not been Sarah, Abraham could not have been Abraham. This realization of Abraham about his wife is the implicit message of the portion of Chayei Sarah, and it is what paves the way for the last significant act in Abraham's life: making Eliezer take an oath to find a wife for Isaac.

The first hint that something unusual has taken place after Sarah's death is the way the Torah charts Abraham's reaction. Ordinarily when it comes to mourning the dead, which response should come first, the eulogy or the tears? One would think that the immediate response to the shocking finality of the death of a loved one is grief and pain, a feeling of such overwhelming emotion that it can only be expressed in tears. And only afterwards, when the mood has settled and a measure of inner quiet and acceptance has returned, can the person who has been weeping offer some kind of eulogy, words that assess the uniqueness of the deceased and his/her special qualities.

However, in the portion of Chayei Sarah the exact opposite takes place. When Sarah dies in Hebron, we read how Abraham comes to "…eulogize Sarah and to weep for her" (Gen. 23:2). First a eulogy, and only then tears!

Why the reversal? Let's consider Abraham and Sarah while both were still alive. Without doubt theirs was an 'ideal marriage', although not necessarily ideal in what we usually think of as the 'perfect marriage', where the couple looks lovingly into each other's eyes. Rather theirs was a marriage rooted in ideals: the teaching of the existence of one God of justice and compassion, and expressing that belief by extending loving-kindness to all strangers. Both husband and wife were heroic personalities with awesome visions. As the Midrash writes, Abraham and Sarah shared responsibility in taming the Wild East: Abraham converted the men from idolatry to monotheism, and Sarah converted the women. But in the end, despite whatever greatness Abraham may have achieved, Sarah was recognized by God as being the greater personality. After all, when Sarah suggests that Ishmael must be sent away because he is a bad influence on Isaac, and Abraham vacillates, God decides: 'Everything which Sarah tells you, listen to her voice' (Gen. 21:12). This is what leads our Sages to say that Sarah was on a higher prophetic level than was Abraham [Rashi, ad loc].

Over the course of the years, however, familiarity does demand its price. Even the most perceptive of men can take their better half for granted. She can be the most beautiful woman in the city, but he is so involved in their joint mission that he doesn't notice. She may well be a prophetess, but his ongoing relationship with God causes him to see prophecy as an everyday occurrence. It doesn't necessarily mean that Abraham wasn't close to Sarah; on the contrary, he was so close to her that she had virtually become his alter-ego, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone. We see this clearly expressed in the incident shortly after Abraham enters the stage of world history at the age of seventy-five. A famine forces him to head down to Egypt to seek food, but the ramifications of the journey immediately strike him. "Now I realize that you are a beautiful woman [yefat toar]" (Gen. 24:11), Abraham says to Sarah. Danger has awakened him, for the Egyptians will surely

lust after her and kill the husband of such a beautiful woman. But only at that point does he take notice of her beauty. Until then, he had accepted it as a matter of course, just as he accepted the openness of their home, the dedication of her activities, the cleverness of her approach.

Intellectually, Abraham certainly understood exactly where Sarah stood in his life, the person whose idyllic home (Sarah's tent) provided the holy atmosphere for their joint spiritual work. But it is understandable that he might lose sight of Sarah's unique stature and distinctive achievements, that he might come to take her for granted.

Hence, when he first heard of her death, he was undoubtedly upset. But it was only after he began to assess the multiple commitments and accomplishments of her life in the preparation of the eulogy that he really began to cry. It was the realization of how indispensable she really was that gave rise to bitter tears of grief which could never be consoled; Abraham, following the eulogy, clearly understood that his life and mission could never be the same again.

Thus, these tears of Abraham never come to an end. True, Abraham marries again and even has children, but the Torah does not elaborate. The sixty-two years of his spiritual journey come to a complete end with the death of Sarah. It's as if her death is also the death of Abraham's religious creativity, although he outlives Sarah by thirty-eight years in which he remains strong and virile; we are told by the Bible that he remarries and even has more children (Gen. 25:1–6), but Abraham's achievements for his new faith recorded in the Torah are only achieved in the lifetime of his wife. When she dies, the major part of him dies as well. And if the Torah now turns its spotlight away from Abraham, it only confirms that without his wife, Abraham's life is no longer worthy of being mentioned. Indeed, God no longer enters into recorded dialogue with Abraham after Sarah's passing.

In fact, the last act of Abraham that the Torah records emerges directly from Sarah's death. Once Sarah is buried in the field which Abraham buys, we read that Abraham turns to Eliezer and charges his servant to return to Haran and seek a wife for Isaac. Why now? Wasn't Abraham interested in grandchildren earlier?

But this last request of Abraham emerges directly from the tears after the eulogy. Now that he has a deeper understanding of the significance of Sarah in his own life, he realizes that Isaac must marry a woman who will be able to reach the stature of Sarah. No small task, but anything less will thwart the effort to create a third generation that will carry the message of the One God to the world.

Not only does Abraham give this charge to Eliezer, but we read that Eliezer departs on his journey "…having all goodly things of his master's in his hand" (Gen. 4:10). Rashi explains that these 'goodly things' is a blank check which might be needed to convince a reluctant family of the wealth of their prospective son-in-law, Isaac.

But the verse can also be read literally. "Having all goodly things of his master's in his hand" means that everything Abraham accomplished, everything he was, all that he had become because of his wife Sarah – was now placed into the hand of Eliezer with the request that he find a similar wife for Isaac. The whole future of the Jewish people depends on the woman Isaac will marry.

The succession from Sarah to Rebecca is emphasized by the Torah itself. "And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebecca, and she became his wife; and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted for his mother" (Gen. 24:67). Rashi explains that when Sarah was alive three miracles distinguished her tent: the light from the Sabbath candles (shalom bayit, household tranquility) lasted from week to week; there was blessing in her dough, (generous hospitality with more than enough for all); and the clouds of the Divine Presence rested upon her tent (purity in personal life). All this ceased upon her death. But when Rebecca married Isaac, all three miracles resumed.

Thus, we see how the Torah effectively closes the pages of Abraham's spiritual life with a flashback to Sarah. The text focuses on her tent. Abraham's tears were not the result of a spontaneous burst of emotion; they grew in proportion to his understanding of the greatness of his wife, without whom the people of Israel would have never emerged. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBereshit.* *© 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

Death is not only tragic for those intimately affected it also always poses problems of succession and reorganization of the family, company or institution. Avraham and Sarah, the founders of the Jewish nation pass from the scene in this week's parsha. They are succeeded by Yitzchak and Rivka and in fact the majority of the parsha concerns itself with how Yitzchak marries Rivka and they establish their new home together.

In personality, temperament and action Yitzchak and Rivka differ markedly from Avraham and Sarah. Whereas Avraham and Sarah devoted themselves to reaching as many outsiders as they could and were actively engaged in spreading the idea of monotheism in the surrounding society, Yitzchak and Rivka seem to take a more conservative approach. They attempted to consolidate what they accomplished and to build a family nation rather than to try to attract more strangers to their cause.

As we will see in next week's parsha the struggle

of Yitzchak and Rivka is an internal family struggle as how to raise Eisav and Yaakov and guarantee the continuity of the ideas and beliefs of Avraham and Sarah through their biological offspring. Eventually it is only through Yaakov that Avraham and Sarah continue and become the blessing that the Lord promised that they would be. The world struggle that engaged Avraham and Sarah becomes a struggle within Avraham and Sarah's family itself.

It becomes abundantly clear that the main struggle of the Jewish people will be to consolidate itself and thus influence the general world by osmosis, so to speak. The time of Avraham and Sarah has passed and new times require different responses to the challenges of being a blessing to all of humankind. There are those in the Jewish world who are committed to "fixing the world" at the expense of Jewish traditional life and Torah law. Yet the simple truth is that for the Jewish people to be effective in influencing the general society for good there must be a strong and committed Jewish people. King Solomon in Shir Hashirim warns us that "I have watched the vineyards of others but I have neglected guarding my own vineyard."

The attempted destruction and deligitimization of the Jewish people or the State of Israel, God forbid, in order to further fuzzy, do-good, universal humanistic ideas is a self-destructive viewpoint of the purpose of Judaism. Without Jews there is no Judaism and without Judaism there is no true moral conscience left in the world. It seems evident to me that the primary imperative of Jews today is to strengthen and support Jewish family life, Jewish Torah education and the state of Israel.

We are in the generations of Yitzchak and Rivka and therefore we have to husband our resources and build ourselves first. We have as yet not made good the population losses of the holocaust seventy years ago! If there will be a strong and numerous Jewish people then, the age of Avraham and Sarah will reemerge. The tasks of consolidation of Jewish life as represented by the lives of Yitzchak and Rivka should be the hallmark of our generation as well. *© 2009 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Hashem, the G-d of Heaven, Who took me from my father's home and the land of my birth... will send His angel before you to take a wife for my son from there." (Beraishis 24:7) Avraham sent his trusted servant Eliezer to find a wife for Yitzchak. Eliezer asked whether, if the girl didn't want to come back, he should bring Yitzchak to go get her. Avraham told him no, Yitzchak could not leave, but Hashem would assist Eliezer in bringing the girl back.

In this verse, Hashem is referred to as the G-d of Heaven, but previously, when Avraham made Eliezer swear, he did it by using the name, "The G-d of Heaven and the G-d of earth." Why did he use that at the beginning, and switch to this one, now?

Regarding the original oath, the Ibn Ezra explains why Hashem is referred to as both the G-d of Heaven and of the earth. It's because a zivug, one's destined marriage partner, is decreed in Heaven, to be carried out on earth. When it comes to a match, Hashem's mastery of both spheres is recognized.

Here, however, Rashi explains that when Avraham was told by Hashem to leave Charan, Hashem's name was not well known in the world. Therefore, he told Eliezer, "Now Hashem is known as master of Heaven and earth, because I have made His name familiar in the mouths of people, but at the time He took me from my father's home, His name had not spread through the land." That's a beautiful insight, but what does it have to do with getting a wife for Yitzchak?

Perhaps Avraham was telling Eliezer that he had a strong merit in the land of Canaan. It was here that he had taught and spread knowledge of Hashem to people. It was here that he succeeded in making an impact on the people around him. The G-d of Heaven, who sent Avraham from his land to this one, would ensure that Yitzchak didn't have to leave.

Rather, He would send another special soul out of the spiritual wasteland, to connect with the holy soul of Yitzchak in Canaan. It was this merit which assured Avraham that Yitzchak would not need to be taken to the girl.

What is even more striking about this conversation and explanation is that Avraham was speaking matter-of-factly. He knew that he was responsible for spreading Hashem's name in the world, and giving Him a foothold amongst the people living at that time. He knew full-well how much he had accomplished, yet it didn't go to his head. He didn't believe Hashem "owed" him anything for this.

Avraham understood it is a privilege and honor to be able to serve Hashem, and that's what he taught his followers. He looked at his achievements as having fulfilled part of his life's mission, but not completing it. He didn't see them as outstanding or going beyond, but rather what he was put on this earth to do. No wonder Hashem mourns the fact that we don't have too many people like the Avos anymore – but we can change that, one by one.

R' Isser Zalman Meltzer z"l, the great Rosh Yeshiva and sage, was on his way to deliver a lecture in Yeshiva when he was stopped by a beggar asking for alms. R' Isser Zalman gave him a generous amount but the fellow complained that it wasn't enough.

The rabbi gave him more, but the man still had the audacity to ask for more. Once again, R' Isser Zalman gave him another coin. The student walking with

R' Isser Zalman was aghast at how the beggar treated the great man, and stunned at the sage's response.

"Why are you shocked?" asked R' Isser Zalman. "Do you think I'm better than him because I've learned a lot of Torah and I give shiurim? The circumstances of life have led me to be a Rosh Yeshiva and him to be a beggar. I do not feel superior to him so I felt obligated to grant his request, regardless of how he made it." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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Onen

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When a person loses a close relative (for whom he is required to mourn) and the relative has not yet been buried, the mourner is called an *onen.* An *onen* is exempt from performing positive commandments (*mitzvot aseh*) such as praying, putting on *tefillin*, and reciting *Keriat Shema*. However, he may not transgress any negative commandments (*mitzvot lo ta'aseh*).

Acharonim disagree as to his status when it comes to commandments that have both a positive and a negative component. For example, is an *onen* exempt from destroying his *chametz* before Pesach? On the one hand, this is a mitzva which requires taking positive action. On the other hand, destroying the *chametz* is also done to make sure that one will not transgress the negative prohibition of owning *chametz* (commonly referred to as *bal yera'eh u-bal yimatzei*).

An additional question pertains to an *onen* as well. May an *onen* choose to be stringent and fulfill the positive commandments from which he is exempt?

The answers to these questions depend upon the reason an *onen* is exempt from performing these. If the exemption is meant to give honor to the deceased and show that nothing else is important to the mourner at this point, then even if he wishes to perform these *mitzvot* he would not be permitted to do so. However, if the reason for the exemption is to enable the mourner to take care of the burial, then if he is able to arrange for someone else to take care of it (such as the local *chevra kadisha*), he would be permitted to perform these *mitzvot*. Alternatively, if the exemption is based on the principle that one who is already involved in performing one mitzva is exempt from performing another one (*ha-osek be-mitzva patur min ha-mitzva*), then if the mourner feels able to perform both *mitzvot*, he would be allowed to do so.

In Parshat Chayei Sarah*,* Avraham was an *onen* before Sarah was buried. Yet not only did he acquire a grave for her, he also purchased the field where the cave was situated, thus fulfilling the mitzva of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (Settling the Land of Israel). Perhaps we may conclude that just as Avraham involved himself in additional *mitzvot* even while he was an *onen*, so too any *onen* who wishes may choose to perform the positive commandments from which he is exempt. *© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI MENI EVEN-ISRAEL

The Steinsaltz Center

Parashat Chayei Sarah opens with loss. Sarah dies, and Abraham's first task is painfully ordinary: finding a place to bury her. God has promised him the entire Land of Canaan, yet he does not own even a grave. The father of a future nation must ask permission, as a resident alien, to bury his wife.

The Torah describes the negotiation in unusual detail. Abraham bows, speaks carefully, and declines a generous public offer. He then pays Ephron's full price for the Cave of Machpelah before witnesses at the city gate. The field, the cave, and its trees are all specified, and the property is "established for Abraham as a possession" (Genesis 23:17-18).

Why so much attention to a real-estate transaction? Because this is the first moment God's promise becomes a legally acquired human possession. Abraham's earlier acts created a spiritual relationship with the land. At Machpelah, that relationship takes permanent physical form.

His conduct reflects the three expressions of the soul: thought, speech, and action.

Thought: He carries God's promise as an inner conviction before circumstances confirm it.

Speech: He turns that conviction into public clarity, refusing vagueness or a gift that might later be disputed.

Action: He pays the silver, because divine assurance does not erase human responsibility.

Significantly, Abraham's first possession is not a palace or a fortress but a burial place. The Jewish bond with the land begins not with conquest, but with love, memory, and responsibility across generations.

The lesson is that inheritance must be made real. We must understand what has been entrusted to us, speak about it honestly, and take practical steps to preserve it. Abraham could not prevent Sarah's death, but in the midst of loss he created permanence. He built the human vessel through which a heavenly promise could endure.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Slave or Servant

After Sarah passed away and was buried in the Double Cave of the Patriarchs, Avraham realized that it was time to find a wife for his son, Yitzchak. Avraham called his servant, Eliezer, and gave him the responsibility to go back to the land of Avraham's family to find a woman from that family to marry his son. The Torah is very clear on the instructions that he gave to Eliezer: "Now Avraham was old, well on in years, and Hashem blessed Avraham with everything. And Avraham said to his slave, the elder of his household,

who controlled all that was his, 'Place now your hand under my thigh. And I will have you swear by Hashem, the Elokim of the heavens and the Elokim of the earth, that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell. Rather, to my land and to my kindred shall you go and take a wife for my son, for Yitzchak.' The slave said to him, 'Perhaps the woman shall not wish to follow me to this land; shall I take your son back to the land from which you departed?' Avraham said to him, 'Beware lest you return my son to there. Hashem, Elokim of the heavens, Who took me from the house of my father, and from the land of my birth; and Who spoke for me, and Who swore to me saying, "To your offspring will I give this land," He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman will not wish to follow you, you shall be absolved of this oath of mine; only, do not return my son to there."

One question that the Rabbis ask, is why Avraham sent a shaliach, a messenger, instead of doing such an important task himself. The first line, a statement that we have seen before, is repeated here to give us an answer. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Avraham was concerned about traveling such a long journey by himself, and he trusted that his loyal servant, in his place, would be able to accomplish this task. After all, Eliezer was the mosheil beito, the one in charge of every aspect of his house. Yet, we see that Avraham was very specific with his servant about his instructions concerning this task. One could ask why Avraham felt that he needed his servant to swear to him by placing his hand next to the major mitzvah that united the two of them, namely, circumcision. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains, as an eved, slave or servant, "He (Eliezer) was subservient to him (Avraham), was legally bound faithfully and exactly to carry out the wishes of his master." As a zakan beito, the elder of his house, "Just as Avraham had become an elder, mature, by following the guidance of Hashem faithfully in His service, so had Eliezer matured by his life in the house of Avraham, and become completely absorbed in that life, and therefore was the mosheil, the one in charge, in the full meaning of the word; he appointed everybody and everything in the household to the position and task that it was to fulfill in accordance with the will of Avraham and in his spirit." Part of the problem that concerned Avraham was the way in which Eliezer would act. If he acted as an eved, a slave, he was totally subservient and did not need any oath to keep him on the proper path. If, instead, he saw himself as a mosheil, one in charge, he would have a certain amount of flexibility in how he would perform that task, while Avraham did not want flexibility.

Avraham had Eliezer swear by the Elokim of the heavens and the Elokim of the earth. Here, the term Elokim is crucial to our understanding of this oath. Had Avraham used the four-letter term for Hashem, he would have referred to a Supreme Being that was merciful. This would have given Eliezer the flexibility to find "any wife" for Yitzchak, not necessarily from Avraham's family. The use of Elokim, which implies exact justice, would have limited that flexibility. In fact, Eliezer asked for clarity: "Perhaps the woman shall not wish to follow me to this land." Eliezer was testing Avraham's instructions, and even his use of Elokim, in case the girl that he sought would not agree to this wedding. Avraham made clear to him that his instructions were to be carried out within the parameters stated for accomplishing that task.

There is further proof that Avraham expected that Eliezer would listen to him and faithfully follow his instructions. Throughout this entire story, Eliezer's name is not mentioned even once. He is consistently called ha'eved, the slave or servant, not Eliezer. Since Avraham had many slaves, it would appear to be almost impossible for one to know which slave is the slave of our story. This would be true except for the fact that Eliezer was described in Lech Lecha as the leader of his household and here he is called "the slave." Eliezer was described as having a status which was elevated, yet here he is never described as one with an elevated status. It appears that was purposefully done to clarify for Eliezer the limitations of his independence when finding a wife for Yitzchak.

It is important to note that Eliezer had a hidden agenda. The Midrash explains that Eliezer had a daughter whom he wished to become Yitzchak's wife. Eliezer had become a tzaddik, a righteous man, in Avraham's household, and he taught his own daughter to love Hashem and respect His laws. But, even with all these positive aspects of both his and his daughter's life, he and she were both avadim Canaanim, Canaanite slaves. As such, they were to be slaves, forever passed down as inheritance. Eliezer understood, however, that if his daughter were to become Yitzchak's wife, she would need to be freed, and her future children would also break from the cycle of slavery. Avraham understood Eliezer's desires, so the question must be why Avraham sent Eliezer on this task.

Perhaps Avraham used that knowledge to shape his instructions. Avraham specified, "And I will have you swear by Hashem, the Elokim of the heavens and the Elokim of the earth, that you not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell." But Eliezer countered with, " Perhaps the woman shall not wish to follow me to this land." Only later, when Eliezer said the word, "Vayomar, and he said," with the musical shalshelet indicating ambivalence, did Eliezer ask Hashem for help completing his task according to Avraham's wishes and not his own. It appears that Avraham knew that Eliezer had already learned that one places Hashem's wishes before his own, and Eliezer would understand that Avraham's wishes were the same as Hashem's. The only one who did not know that Eliezer would succeed

was Eliezer. This was a test for Eliezer so that he would know what he was capable of.

We are all tested throughout our lives. Each test teaches us something about ourselves that we were unsure of. May we learn from our tests that we, too, are capable. *© 2026 Rabbi D. Levin*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

Avraham listened to Ephron, and Avraham weighed out to Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the sons of Chais, 400 shekels of silver, accepted by the merchant. Mundane, right? You can just see the scene, a large gathering of everyday people going about their everyday business, buying, selling, standing around talking, dealing with their children, while some "prince" of a man is "over there" bargaining with the king for the right to bury his wife in some not-yet-famous cave. It was nothing out of the ordinary for them, but for Avraham, it was beneath his dignity.

However, this is what the GR"A has to say about it: They are the 400 worlds that tzaddikim will inherit in the future world from that Chivarta, as it says in Idra Rabba, 128b: 400,000 worlds of the "white" of the skull of Arich Anpin emanate down, and from the light of those "white" the righteous will inherit 400 worlds in the future time. We find a hint to this in what the Torah writes, "400 shekels of silver, accepted by the merchant." (Biur HaGR"A, Sifra D'Tzniusa, Ch. 1, p. 19c)

If you learn Kabbalah and recognize all these terms, enjoy. If you don't, then where do I begin if not at the beginning?

The original light of God, called Ohr Ain Sof (Light Without End), is too spiritually intense for anything but it to exist. So, God reduces its intensity to allow Creation to exist and man to have free will. The system He created to do this is called the Sefiros and Partzufim, of which there are very many with all kinds of names performing all kinds of functions just to implement the will of God. This is the main discussion in the halls of Kabbalah.

Not coincidentally, the sefiros are structured like a human body. Not physically, but spiritually. So, the first three, Keser, Chochmah, and Binah, function like our three sections of brain. But Keser, being the highest, also plays the role of the skull, sefiros-speaking. Because, though we relate to our body parts in physical terms, they are really defined more in terms of their function.

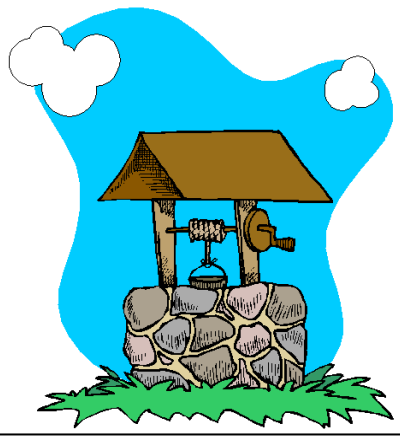
Every body part is represented in the sefiros on some level, but generally-speaking, Chesed is the entire right arm from shoulder to fingertips. Gevurah is the entire left arm, and Tifferes corresponds to the torso, the body from the waist until the neck. Internal organs are also represented, but instead of bodily fluids flowing through them, it is all Divine light. All of it is just to maintain Creation and allow history to flow, always according to the will of God.

Then comes Netzach as the entire right leg, Hod as the entire left leg, and Yesod as the reproductive organ, the main source through which Divine light flows from inside the system to the world in which we live. Malchus, generally, is considered to be the "earth" on which the entire structure stands. One of my latest books, "Heaven to Earth," goes into all of this in more detail.

If you look at the top of your head you will notice that your scalp is white (unless you are bald and get suntanned up there). On a human being, it's just hidden skin under the hair, but in the sefiros, it's a very high level of light, one that we only get now after extreme filtering, but which will be more direct in the World to Come. Right now, we get more pleasure from a good burger or salad or something really entertaining, but, believe it or not, that's only a fraction of the pleasure one can get from direct Divine light. In this world, if you ask a person, "Great steak or God?" a lot of people might have to think about that for a bit.

But not in the World to Come. Not even as early as the Messianic Era when we finally get to see what God's light is like without a lot of the filtering. Then, no one will have any doubts about which pleasure is greater. We'll still enjoy a good steak, but not nearly as much as experiencing higher levels of Divine light. In this world, some of the luckier, more spiritual people get to taste a little of that light from time to time, and they already choose spiritual pleasure over physical pleasure.

That's actually not the point right now. The point we're trying to make is how something so mundane as a business transaction can have such phenomenal spiritual consequences. The physical world is completely intertwined with the spiritual one, and when something moves down here, it moves something up there, and vice-versa. But it happens in such a hidden way that we just don't sense it, and we only get excited about what appeals to our senses in the here and now.



Obviously, at least "400" questions still exist, maybe even "400,000." The GR"A explains all of this in his commentary, and the Sha'arei Chochmah, a commentary on his commentary, fills in what the GR"A leaves out. If you do the work, you can understand it too. But the main point for now is illustrating how something so seemingly simple and plain in the Torah can allude to the deepest of kabbalistic secrets. You'd be amazed, actually -- awed. *© 2026 Rabbi A. Shafran*