

This week's reading, *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, beginning on p. 127 of the *Etz Hayim*, is dominated by 3 topics: the death and burial of Sarah, the arrangement of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, and the final days of Abraham. The *parashah* has many curiosities, more than we have time to discuss. Among these curiosities:

Gen. 23:2: "Sarah died in Kiriath-arba – now Hebron – in the land of Canaan; and Abraham proceeded to mourn for Sarah and to bewail her." Notice that the last word in the Hebrew, **וּלְבַכְתָּהּ** *V'livkotah*, is written with a small כּ.

A modern commentator, Rabbi Yissocher Frand (who prefers Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew) of the Ner Israel Yeshiva in Baltimore, writes:

"... the word Livkosa [to cry for her] has a small chaf. There was not a tremendous amount of crying because this was not the case of a tragic sudden unexpected death, which causes people to cry. The Torah wants to record for us that the crying was muted, because it was part of the natural life cycle ... for Sarah to die at this ripe old age of 127."¹

Let's compare the grief of Abraham for Sarah with the grief of the unnamed Shunammite woman who was the subject of last week's haftarah (pp. 124-126 in *Etz Hayim*, beginning at v. 8). Like Sarah, the Shunammite woman suffered through years of barrenness before the apparently miraculous birth of a son. When the son died, she did not merely accept the death; in her misery, she sought the prophet Elisha, who rushed to her home and miraculously revived the child. The death of a child is devastating; the death of an aged person is hard, but is more readily accepted as part of the natural course of life.

Two other curiosities appear as Abraham negotiates with Ephron the Hittite for purchase of the Cave of Machpela. Ephron speaks of giving the cave to Abraham, so why does Abraham insist on paying for it? Our commentators explain that Ephron was offering the use, not the ownership, of the cave. Further, the Midrash (*B'reishit Rabbah* 79:7) tells us:

Said Rabbi Yudan the son of Rabbi Simon: This is one of the three places regarding which the nations of the world cannot accuse Israel and say, "You have stolen them." The three places are: the Cave of Machpelah, the site of the Holy Temple, and the tomb of Joseph at Shechem. The Cave of Machpelah, as it is written, "Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver." The Temple: "So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of gold" (I Chronicles 21:25). And Joseph's tomb: "[Jacob] bought the parcel of land (at Shechem) for a hundred pieces of silver" (Genesis 33:19).

Also, notice the verse Gen. 23:16 (p. 129 in *Etz Hayim*) in which Ephron's name occurs twice, but with different spellings – the second occurrence is missing the ךּ that appears in other instances of Ephron. This is the "defective spelling" that occurs in a few places in the Torah, indicating diminished respect. It's one thing to start negotiations with a high price and settle at a lower price; it's less respectable to speak of making a gift and then negotiating a high price. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 87a) comments:

¹ <http://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5770-chayeisarah/>

Said Rabbi Elazar: The righteous promise little and perform much—Abraham promised his guests “a morsel of bread” (Genesis 18:5) and then “ran to the herd and fetched a calf tender and good, and he hurried to prepare it” (*ibid.*, v. 7).

On the other hand, the wicked promise much and do not perform even a little. Initially Ephron proclaimed, “A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you?” But in the end, “Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Heth—four hundred shekels of silver in negotiable currency.”

Also, we read that, just prior to the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, Isaac had been at Beer-lahai-roi (Gen. 24:62, p. 138 in *Etz Hayim*). This is the well where Hagar took refuge (*Etz Hayim*, p. 88, v. 13) when banished by Sarah. Then we read of the marriage of Abraham and Keturah in Chapter 25, beginning on p. 139 in the *Etz Hayim*. The text doesn't tell us much about Keturah. Midrash (*Bereshit Rabba* 61, 4) has Rabbi Judah stating "She is Hagar." Isaac, apparently, had gone to Beer-lahai-roi to seek a reconciliation between Abraham and Hagar.

However, other commentators disagree with Rabbi Judah. Ishmael was born to Hagar when Abraham was 86 (Gen. 17:24-25). Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 (Gen. 21:5) and married at 40 (Gen. 25:20), when Abraham was 140. Keturah bore 6 sons to Abraham (Gen. 25:2, p. 139). So if we assume this portion of the Torah is in chronological order, Rabbi Judah's assertion would seem impossible, as Keturah's sons would have appeared well over 50 years after Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

Even if we don't assume this section is in chronological order, major commentators give other reasons not to believe that Keturah is Hagar. E.g., Ibn Ezra notes that Gen. 25:6 (p. 139 in *Etz Hayim*) speaks of “Abraham's sons by concubines,” the plural suggesting that Keturah is not Hagar.

In an essay titled “Who Was Keturah,”² Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv considers G-d's promise to Abraham that "... all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you" (Gen. 12:3) and cites Rashbam's suggestion that *venivrekhu*, shall bless, should be understood as “shall graft onto” – R. Shaviv interprets “in other words the families of the earth will intermingle with your family.” He continues:

... we can now consider the possibility that Abraham's three wives - Sarah, Hagar and Ketura - represent his connection with the three families of the earth, for it was through the three sons of Noah-- Shem, Ham, and Japheth-- that humanity was again established after the flood.

And we indeed found the following words in the midrash anthology *Yalkut Shimoni* for Job (903): ‘Abraham married three women: Sarah, the daughter of Shem; Ketura, the daughter of Japheth; Hagar, the daughter of Ham’. And in fact he married them in the order in which the ‘fathers’ appear in the Bible (Gen. 6:9) - first the daughter of Shem, then the daughter of Ham, and finally the daughter of Japheth.

By marrying these three women, the blessing that G-d bestowed upon Abraham, that ‘all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you’, was fulfilled, and similarly when he produced offspring from these three women, the blessing that he would be ‘the father of a multitude of nations’ was also fulfilled.

² See <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/chaye/sha.html>