

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Chayei Sarah

How do We Know to Whom the Biblical City of Chevron Belong?

The Elements of the Four Holy Cities Flow Through Bat Ayin

I'm very blessed to live in Bat Ayin, situated between the two holiest cities in the world: Yerushalayim and Chevron! The two additional holy cities Tiberias and Tzfat are also dear to my heart and soul. Although they are further away, I try to visit them every year, swim in the Kineret, and pray at the tombs of Tzaddikim buried in these cities. The term "four holy cities of Israel" was coined in the 16th century when these cities connected for charitable purposes under the leadership of Rabbi Moshe Alshich, together with Rabbi Yosef Caro, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, and Rabbi David ibn Zimra (Radbaz). I have not found the source for how these four cities correspond to the four elements, Jerusalem – Fire, Chevron – Earth, Tzefat – Air, and Tiberias – Water. In my experience, often the most self-evident doesn't have or require a source, everyone senses that these cities are holy through their particular elements. Thus, we here in Bat Ayin live in the vortex point between holy fire and the holy earth, and here you can feel the red-brown earth element flowing from Chevron to merge with the red fire of Jerusalem. Bat Ayin, is, furthermore called the Tzefat of Yerushalayim, due to the air of the devoted Chassidim who live here and their intense prayer. Our numerous wellsprings also connect us with Tiberias' holiness through water. Needless to say, in our experience, the zenith of the land of Israel is gathered here in Bat Ayin. This year, on our annual school trip to the Machpelah Cave, we were fortunate to find the Yitzchak Hall open. It is known that inside this Hall – which is only open to Jews 10 days a year – is the opening to the Garden of Eden through which all our prayers ascend. As I stepped into this enchanted hall, I felt transported beyond the dimensions of time and space. As I bent down and felt the cool air from the opening to the Garden of Eden, my prayers flowed like never before, as if my soul was wrapped in prayer. What an incredible, powerful, experience!

Sarah Ensures Ownership of the Machpelah Cave for Her Descendants

Sarah, our mother, was very well connected with the holiness of the land. Therefore, she made sure to pass away specifically in Chevron so she could be buried within the holiest earth in the world. The *Eishet Chayil* that we sing Friday night upon returning home from the synagogue was originally Avraham's eulogy for Sarah. Later King Solomon recaptured it and included it at the end of his Mishlei (Proverbs). This is what is written, "A woman of valor is the crown of her husband" (Mishlei 12:4). This is Avraham who would lament over Sarah as it stated, "She envisioned a field and took it" (Mishlei 31:16) – She envisioned and took the field of Machpelah and there she was buried as it states, "Afterward Avraham buried Sarah" (*Bereishit* 23:19); (*Midrash Tanchuma, Chayei Sarah*, Chapter 4). Sarah, through her *gevurah*, decided during her lifetime the location of her burial place in the holy cave where Adam and Chava were buried. We can learn from her to devote ourselves to establishing the holy places of Israel under Jewish autonomy. Avraham wouldn't have had the idea to request the Machpelah if Sarah had not established her place nearby throughout the days of her last years. In Sarah's merit, Avraham was able to redeem the Machpelah for her, for the rest of the matriarchs and patriarchs, and for all their descendants until this day. We need to renew to merit the Cave of Machpelah through the power of Sarah. Let us keep visiting this holy cave and keep praying the Hall of Yitzchak will be redeemed from the captivity of the Ishmaelites and be returned to the descendant of Yitzchak, son of Sarah our Matriarch!

How can the nations defraud Israel by Saying that our Holy Places are Stolen Property?

Parashat Chayei Sarah opens with Sarah's passing and Avraham's purchase of not only the Machpelah

cave but also its surrounding land as it states:

ספר בראשית פרק כג פסוק יז וַיִּקַּם שָׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּמַכְפֵּלָה אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי מַמְרֵה הַשְּׂדֵה וְהַמְעָרָה אֲשֶׁר בּוֹ וְכָל הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בַּשְּׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל גְּבֻלוֹ סָבִיב־יָחַ) לְאַבְרָהָם לְמַקְנָהּ לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי חֵת בְּכָל בְּאֵי שַׁעַר עִירוֹ:

“And so, the field of Efron which was in Machpelah, facing Mamre, was established (as Avraham's possession). [This included] the field and the cave that was in it, and all the trees that were in the field, which were within its entire border around. [It was] to Avraham as a possession before the eyes of the sons of Chet, in the presence of all who had come within the gate of his city” (*Bereishit* 23:17-18).

The description of Avraham's purchase spans most of chapter 23 in *Bereishit* (Verses 9-20), including numerous repetitions. “The field” is mentioned 6 times, “give” is mentioned 4 times, “Machpelah” is mentioned 3 times, “Silver” 3 times, “before the eyes of the sons” 2 times, and “before the ears” 2 times. Moreover, both in verse 2 and in verse 19 it mentions “The same is Chevron in the land of Canaan.” Emphasizing that Chevron is part of the Land of Canaan and not Philistine land. These redundancies clearly indicate Avraham's purchase of the *Machpelah* cave in the eyes and ears of those present, so no misunderstanding could ever occur about the *Machpelah* belonging to Avraham. Yet, Chevron and its Machpelah cave has been and still is one of the most disputed places in the world. It is as if the Torah preempted that the Ishmaelites and other nations would try to dispute Jewish sovereignty over this holy city. Thus, the Torah clarified in black on white how Avraham purchased this whole area for his wife for posterity for all of their descendants. The Midrash furthermore nails this point:

...Rabbi Yudan bar Simon said: This is one of the three places that the nations of the world cannot defraud Israel and say, “This is stolen property in your hands.” They are the *Machpelah* cave, the *Beit Hamikdash*, and the tomb of Yosef [in Shechem]. The Machpelah cave, as it states: “Avraham listened to Efron, and Avraham weighed out the silver for Efron” (*Bereishit* 23:16). The Temple, as it states: “David gave to Ornan for the place 600 Shekel of gold by weight” (I *Divrei Hayamim* 21:25). The tomb of Yosef, as it states: “He bought the part of the field where he had pitched his tent, at the hand of the sons of Chamor, Shechem's father for a hundred pieces of silver” (*Bereishit* 33:19); (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 79:7). It is interesting to note that these are the three most disputed places in Israel and perhaps in the entire world.

The Eternal Connection Between the People of Israel and Our Promised Land

When the Promised Land is redeemed, by its rightful owner – the people of Israel, it becomes elevated as Rashi explains that although the simple meaning of *Bereishit* 23:17 is that the field and the cave that was within it, and all the trees...became secured to Avraham as a possession, etc., the literal meaning of וַיִּקַּם שָׂדֵה עֶפְרוֹן is that “the field of Efron rose” – וַיִּקַּם/vayakam. It experienced an elevation, for it left being the possession of a simple person [and went] into the possession of a king (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 48:8); (Rashi, *Bereishit* 23:17). We experience the application of this principle concerning Gaza. When this area was under Jewish autonomy it was the thriving land of Gush Katif with Israel's most developed agriculture. Yet as soon as Israel left the lands to the Ishmaelites, all the flourishing greenhouses and fields were destroyed along with our synagogues and graveyards. The entire land turned into breeding grounds for terrorism with tunnels for lethal arsenals of deadly weapons, may Hashem save us. The holiness of the land of Israel must be activated by her people. Only when the people of Israel live on its land and connect with its holiness, does the land bear its holy fruit. The word Chevron is from the root כ-ב-ח – ‘connect’ from which also the word ‘friend’ derives. Chevron is the connecting point between this world and the Garden of Eden, as the *Zohar* explains:

Rabbi Kisma said The *Machpelah* Cave is close to the opening of the Garden of Eden. When Chava died,

Adam buried her there. There he sensed the scents of the Garden of Eden. He wanted to dig more, but a heavenly voice emerged and proclaimed: "Enough!" At that moment he stopped and did not dig anymore, and there he was buried. Who took care of his body? Shet, his son, who was created in his likeness and image... [Since then] No one knew the cave until Avraham came and entered it, saw it, and smelled the perfumed scent of the Garden of Eden. He heard the voice of the ministering angels saying: "The first man was buried there; Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'acov were prepared for this place." He saw the lit candle and went out. Immediately his desire was for this place...Before Avraham came, many others desired to be buried there, but the ministering angels would guard the place. (*Zohar Chadash, Midrash Ruth, Article When Hashem expelled Adam from the Garden*). So, you see that the exclusive right to the holy Machpelah cave has already been established since Avraham's time.

What is the Connection Between Chevron and Yerushalayim?

Whereas the Temple in Jerusalem is high upon a hill, revealed and open to all, *Ma'arat HaMachpelah* is a cave that embodies the inner dimension, hidden from all eyes. The *Beit HaMikdash* extends outward to the heavens – a masculine quality, while the Cave of *Machpelah* extends inward, to the depths of the earth – the feminine mother earth. Jerusalem bursts out, while Chevron is directed toward the roots. Chevron is the preparation for Yerushalayim just like our Patriarchs are the preparation for King David who conquered Yerushalayim. Moreover, King David himself was first a king in Chevron for seven years before he was crowned king over all of Israel in Yerushalayim. The root letters of the word *יִרְאָה* /*yirah* – 'awe' are included in the name *יְרוּשָׁלַיִם* /*Yerushalayim*, the city of awe. It is a place of intense *גְּבוּרָה* /*gevurah* – 'might,' the trait of Yitzchak. The near sacrifice of Yitzchak occurred in Jerusalem at the site of *Beit HaMikdash*. In contrast, the humble cave of Machpelah is a place that inspires *אַהֲבָה* – 'love of G-d and *חֶסֶד* /*chesed* – 'loving kindness' the trait that characterized Avraham. He even discovered the Cave of Machpelah while being engaged in the hospitality of slaughtering calves to serve angels disguised as guests. The *Zohar* asks, how did Avraham enter the cave? He would run after the calf as it states "Avraham ran to the herd..." (*Bereishit* 18:7). The calf fled to this cave. Avraham entered after it into the cave and saw what he saw. When he would pray daily, he would go out to this field, which gave rise to celestial scents. Since he saw a light emanating from the cave, he made it his place of prayer. In this place, G-d would speak with him. Therefore, he desired the cave and yearned for it perpetually (*Zohar*, Part 1 127b). The merit by which Avraham earned discovery of *Ma'arat HaMachpelah* is likely due to his desire and willingness to fulfill the positive precept of *hachnasat orchim* (hosting guests), despite the exceedingly hot weather and the pain he experienced on the third day after his *Brit Milah*. This reflects Avraham's primary trait of 'Chesed' – total, unrelenting loving-kindness. All may view that which is revealed but the revelation of the hidden is dependent on G-d's *Chesed* – His willingness to allow entrance into 'the arena of the hidden.' In other words, Avraham's discovery of *Ma'arat HaMachpelah* is an example of how *Chesed* begets *Chesed*. Jerusalem and Chevron blend and unify. Torah – the rules, the boundaries – the Tablets of the Ten Commandments are found in Jerusalem. The *Chesed*, the full loving-kindness without restriction, the trait of Avraham is in Chevron. The lights of Chevron and the lights of Jerusalem merge to create a unity of spirituality that imbues the Jewish people, the revealed and the hidden, this is the secret of *Ma'arat HaMachpelah*, a unity which cannot be, and never will be, 'disengaged.'