

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chayai Sarah
November 2023 / Cheshvan 5784

darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Chayai Sarah – The inspiring story of Sarah Nachshon

In this week's Parasha of Chayai Sarah we read of Avraham's acquisition of a burial plot for his wife Sarah in what is now called the city of Chevron. Avraham paid a king's ransom for this particular site, known as Maarat Hamachpela - the cave in which Adam and Chava were buried and in which all of the Avot and three of the Imahot would be buried.¹

About eight years ago, I was privileged to visit Maarat Hamachpela in Chevron with my daughter's class. There I heard first-hand the remarkable, true story of Sarah Nachshon, one of the brave “women of Bet Hadassah”.² I will repeat her story here in my own words.

The Bet Hadassah building was built in Chevron in 1893 with funds donated by Jewish communities from North Africa. It was a medical clinic run by the Hadassah women's organisation. It was the site of horrific rioting in the 1929 massacre of Jews by local Arabs.³ It was occupied by Jordan after 1948 and then recaptured by Israel in 1967. Even though there were legal documents attesting to Jewish ownership, the Israeli government was under intense political pressure to preserve the status quo, and therefore the building stayed empty. In 1979, 10 women and 40 children camped out in the building for approximately one year, refusing to leave until the government issued zoning permits to make their residency permanent. They were ultimately successful,⁴ but the battle for Chevron was not over yet. Sarah Nachshon, one of those brave women, had a personal tragedy. Her young baby, Avraham, passed away unexpectedly. Mrs Nachshon wanted to bury her son in the Jewish cemetery of Chevron, but the army would not allow her to do so. They explained to her that the government was under pressure to return the area to Arab control. Mrs Nachshon refused to accept that. She picked up her dead baby from her car and started walking towards the cemetery. The army eventually conceded and provided her with an escort. By the time she got to the cemetery, a small crowd had gathered to witness the event. Before she buried her baby, Mrs Nachshon wanted to give a message to the crowd, and she knew exactly what to say: “History has come full circle. 3000 years ago, Avraham claimed this land to bury Sarah. And now Sarah is reclaiming this land to bury Avraham!”

This remarkable story reminds me of a similar incident that probably took place around the same time:⁵

¹ We have pointed out before that those parts of Eretz Yisrael that were acquired for cash at exorbitant prices in historically documented transactions are ironically the parts where Jewish ownership is most heavily challenged – Hebron (acquired by Avraham), Shechem (acquired by Yaakov) and the Har Habayit in Yerushalayim (acquired by David HaMelech).

² Tear-jerker warning – every time I think of this story I start to cry. You can see a recording of Sarah Nachshon's personal testimony here: <https://hebronfund.org/bury-my-son-in-the-hebron-cemetery/?print=print>

³ Nothing much changes, does it?

⁴ The government only agreed to issue the zoning permits after six people were murdered in a surprise terrorist attack in front of the building.

⁵ I heard this story many years ago. I do not have a source and some of the details are a little hazy. But the message of the story is clear. This is a story that could only happen in Israel!

Israel had finally regained access to the tomb of Rachel, but the area was very dangerous. The army did not allow Jews to enter the tomb. A brave little old lady asked for a meeting with the senior army officer in charge of the site. She brought one of her friends along with her for moral support. The two old ladies turned up to the meeting and took their seats at a large table. On the other side of the table were about a dozen senior military officers. They asked the ladies to explain the nature of their meeting. "We would like to pray at the tomb of Rachel". "I'm sorry", replied the senior officer, "It's too dangerous and we can't guarantee your safety". "How can you keep us away from Mama Rachel? We need her more than ever! We need Mama Rachel!" After this heartfelt plea, the army finally conceded.

Avraham is known as the 'Ivri'.⁶ From there is derived the word 'Ivrit' or 'Hebrew'. Rashi explains,⁷ that Avraham is called 'Ivri' because he came from the other side (מֵעֵבֶר) of the Euphrates River. That is perhaps the simple meaning of the word, but there is another opinion in the Midrash. According to Rabbi Yehuda, it is meant to teach us that the whole world was on one side – worshipping idolatry, while Avraham was on the other side – in recognizing Hashem. Avraham stood opposite the whole world in his firm belief that Hashem is the Creator and that He wants us to behave in a certain way. That is why Avraham was the first of the Avot.

Avraham showed amazing courage in standing up for what he believed in, even though it was different from the majority. The brave women in the above stories continued Avraham's legacy. They were prepared to stand up against whatever challenge was thrown their way and to stand firm for what they knew was right.

All of us are equally charged with that same responsibility. To stand firm, against the whole world if necessary, to do what we know is the truth, to follow Hashem.

Thankfully, there are some people, including world leaders, who have managed to retain a semblance of moral clarity in these difficult days. But unfortunately, antisemitism has once again reared its ugly head around the world⁸. Israel is fighting a war that it does not want to fight, but it is a war that must be fought. A war of good versus evil. We must all stand firm and united on one side, the side of truth, the side of Hashem. We are Hashem's representatives in this world, and he has charged us with a mission – to be a light unto the nations. And He told us exactly how we need to behave to fulfil this challenge – the 613 mitzvot. In the very first chapter of the Shulchan Aruch⁹, the Rama exhorts us to be strong in our service of Hashem and not to be embarrassed in front of those that might mock us. It is up to us to stand firm and carry on Avraham's legacy.

Let's try something this week:

1. Stand firm and support the truth. Do not be swayed by the morally corrupt who hypocritically stand behind catchphrases like 'humanitarianism', 'revenge', 'proportionality' or 'cycle of violence'.
2. Remember that Hashem has charged us, His Jewish people, with a mission, and we are each responsible to carry on Avraham's legacy. That means keeping Hashem's Torah and His mitzvot despite the challenges thrown our way.
3. Exercise courage in every situation – to do what is right, not necessarily what is popular or easy.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

⁶ See Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit 14:13.

⁷ Based on the Midrash, Breishit Rabbah 42:8.

⁸ Of course, the ugly head of antisemitism is always reared, but some times are much worse than others.

⁹ Orach Chaim 1:1.