



57

A SPECIAL PLACE

THE GRAVES OF TZADDIKIM (THE RIGHTEOUS) HAVE A SPECIAL PLACE IN Jewish thought and history. A Tzaddik, during his or her lifetime, helps the people of their generation to connect with G-d. They achieve this through the inspiration of personal example and teaching. In addition, they have an extra measure of the power of prayer, which they use for the benefit of others. When the Tzaddik passes away many aspects of his or her spiritual influence continue. In addition, the site of the Tzaddik's grave acquires a sacred quality.

The first and most prominent example of this in Jewish history is seen in this week's Sedra¹, which begins with an account of Abraham purchasing a certain Cave in the ancient city of Hebron, in which he could bury his beloved wife Sarah.

Every word in the Torah is significant, and there are many important teachings which are expressed with tantalising brevity - such as the vital laws of Shabbat. However, the purchase of the Cave in Hebron is described in close detail. Clearly it has special significance.

The Sages tell us that this Cave in fact already contained the graves of Adam and Eve. In our Sedra, Sarah was buried there. Later Abraham himself, then Isaac and Rebecca and finally Jacob and Leah² were also buried in the Cave in Hebron. It is known as the *Machpelah*, meaning 'double', because of the 'couples' (husband and wife) who are buried there, or because it is a double cave³.

Three and a half centuries after the events in our Sedra, the Jewish

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people were being led by Moses towards the Land of Israel. Twelve Spies were sent to investigate the Land. One of them, Caleb, the husband of Miriam, went alone to the Machpelah Cave in Hebron in order to pray there. The Sages tell us that he asked to G-d to help him withstand the pressure that ten of the other Spies would put on him to speak badly about the Land⁴. We thus see a person in Biblical times visiting the graves of Tzaddikim in order to strengthen his contact with G-d. This practice continues to our own time.

The city of Hebron achieved a different kind of prominence in the time of King David, who ruled there for seven years before he became King in Jerusalem. At the same time strong awareness of its status as a sacred site continued. In the Second Temple early each morning one of the Priests would announce “the eastern sky is bright as far as Hebron”⁵. The Sages explain that the name Hebron was mentioned simply in order to allude to the merit of the Patriarchs, rather as we now recite their names daily in the Amidah prayer. Indeed the kabbalists tell us that all Jewish prayer is somehow channelled through the Machpelah Cave, as well as the Temple, to help it rise to G-d. It is said that at the Machpelah Cave is the entrance to the Garden of Eden⁶.

The word Hebron comes from a root meaning ‘join together’. It is said that Hebron signifies the joining together of the Jewish people with the Divine, through prayer; since it is the site of the graves of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of the entire Jewish people, it also signifies the unity of the Jewish people among themselves⁷.

Jews have lived in Hebron almost continuously for the past three thousand years, and for most of its history it was a community of scholars. Chabad chassidim were prominent there in the 19th century, and a Chabad Yeshivah was established there in 1900. In 1929 the Arabs massacred a large number of the Jewish men, women and children of the city, attempting to get rid of the Jewish presence. Nonetheless, today some five hundred Jews live in Hebron itself, and a further six thousand Jews live in the Kiryat Arba suburb.

The special Jewish relationship with Hebron begins with the events described in this week’s Sedra, and extends till the present. Long may it continue in the future!

1. Genesis 23:1-25:18. 2. Rachel was buried separately near Bethlehem (see Gen.35:19). 3. See Rashi to Gen.23:9, and Erubin 53a. 4. See Rashi to Numbers 13:22. 5. Mishnah Yoma 3:1. 6. See Rabbi Dov Ber, ‘On Visiting Graves of Tzaddikim’, near the end. 7. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.25, p.98.

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SEDRA CHAYEI SARAH

KINDNESS

'How did you do on your Sedra test?' Debra asked Danielle as they strolled out of the school gates at the end of school. 'Oh, I think I did well', replied Danielle. 'There was one question though - "What is the central theme of the Torah?" - that I could not quite understand. I mean, what exactly does that have to do with the story of Isaac marrying Rebecca?'

'It was a tricky question', agreed Debra, 'I had to think about it for a while'. 'So,' said Danielle, 'did you work out the answer?'

'Yes. It has to do with the story that our teacher told us about the sage Hillel, when a man asked him to teach him the entire Torah whilst he stood on one foot. Hillel replied to him "What you do not like done to you, do not do to anyone else. That is the whole Torah, the rest is explanation"

'Ok,' said Danielle, 'I remember that story. But what does it have to do with what we were learning in the Sedra?'

'Ah,' said Debra, smiling to herself; she was remembering a picture she had once drawn of this scene. 'You remember when Eliezer - Abraham's servant - arrived at the well, near where Rebecca lived, he said, "the girl that will pour water for me and also for my camels is the one that will marry Isaac", and in the end it was Rebecca that offered him and his camels water from the well -'

'I think I get it!' Danielle interrupted, and she proceeded to explain, 'Like our teacher said - Eliezer knew that kindness is a central theme in the Torah. So the girl that was kind and would offer him water from the well, and also for his camels, was definitely the right girl for Isaac. And that is how that question - "What is the central theme of the Torah?" - connects with our story of Isaac marrying Rebecca'.

'Exactly!' exclaimed Debra, 'you're right!'

'Thank you,' said Danielle, 'and by the way, talking of kindness, and it's being a central theme in the Torah, I want to thank you for studying with me for this test; you really helped me!'

No problem', replied Debra, realising at the same time that they had reached her house. 'Hey, Danielle, do you want to come to my house for supper? You can use the phone to call your mother if you like'.

'Thank you', said Danielle, following Debra as she opened the gate to her front garden. 'I'm just sorry I don't also have some camels for you to feed'

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