

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

The Living Dead or the Dead Living?

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

This week's Torah reading opens with the death of Sarah. Abraham wanted to bury his beloved wife in the cave where Adam and Eve were buried. He proceeded to negotiate the purchase of the Cave of Machpela from the Hittites:

"Sell me property for a burial place with you so that I can bury my dead," ... "... Take our best burial site to bury your dead. No one among us will deny you his burial site to bury your dead." ... "If you really want to help me bury my dead ..." (Genesis, 23:4-8)

Did you notice a pattern in the phraseology of the discussion? In all, burying one's dead is mentioned seven times. The Vilna Gaon points out that in a regular discussion such as this, the actual phrase might appear three or four times. He also points out that while six of the times, it refers to burying the dead, the seventh time, at the conclusion of the negotiations, Abraham is told, *"your dead you should bury."* (Ibid, 15)

Why, asks the Vilna Gaon, does the Torah use such a wordy description of the purpose of Abraham's purchase? Another question -- Why, in the last time the phrase is used, does the terminology switch order? Six times the Torah mentions burying the dead, and the seventh time it mentions the dead being buried.

The Vilna Gaon suggests a homiletic interpretation of the text: Abraham purchased the Cave of Machpela as a family plot. Eventually, three couples would be buried there: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah. Additionally, the Midrash tells us that Esau's head is buried there. At Jacob's funeral, Esau disrupted the burial, insisting that the remaining grave belonged to him. In the ensuing altercation, Esau was killed, and his severed head rolled unceremoniously into the cave.

Hence, seven people from the family of Abraham ended up buried in the Cave of Machpela.

The Vilna Gaon suggests that the seven expressions of burying the dead are a prophetic reference to the seven people who would eventually come to rest in the cave. The first six expressions refer to our righteous patriarchs and their wives. The final statement, with the order reversed, predicts the burial of our not-so-great uncle Esau.

Back to our second question: Why does the Torah use the phrase *"*burying the dead"* when talking about the righteous, and then change the order to *"the dead being buried"* in reference to the wicked?

To answer this question, the Vilna Gaon quotes the Talmudic saying, (Brachos, 18) "the righteous in death are considered alive." The positive influences of good people allow their memories to continue long after their bodies have been laid to rest. This is why, in reference to the righteous, the Torah says, *"bury your dead."* In a spiritual sense, the burial precedes the death because the soul and remembrance live on.

Conversely, "the wicked in their lifetimes are considered as dead." Esau, who devoted himself to the empty pursuits of hedonism, idolatry, and murder, lived a life of no redeeming value. For all intents and purposes, he was dead long before his cruel and selfish heart stopped beating. Therefore, the Torah says, *"your dead you shall bury."* For the wicked, the spiritual death takes place prior to the actual burial.

Every day is an opportunity to build a legacy. We can create or we can destroy. We can be vibrant and productive or we can simply take up space.

What would we do if we knew that today was the last day of our lives? Would we pray or would we play? Would we think or would we drink?

Shimmy Biegeleisen was the vice-president of Fiduciary Trust International at the World Trade Center. On September 11, he told his wife he loved her, told his friend to take care of her, recited a Psalm, and met his Creator. Hundreds of firefighters, policemen, and just plain civilians spent their final moments saving others.

On the last day of his life, Timothy McVeigh ate mint chocolate-chip ice cream.

Hug your kids. Give your neighbor back his hedge trimmers. Give to charity. Pray. Live to 120 in good health, making every day special.

Each day is a pen with which to write our autobiography. Let's make sure it's a book worth reading.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz