

Fulfilling a Divine Promise

by David Segal • November 14th, 2006

This week's Torah portion, *Chayei Sarah*, begins with Sarah's death. After mourning her, Abraham seeks a burial site for his beloved wife. Since he is a relative newcomer in the land, he approaches the resident authority among the Hittite settlers to buy a plot of land from them for a gravesite. In their deference to Abraham's piety, they refuse to accept payment for a burial site, and they graciously invite him to use any of their gravesites. Abraham chooses the cave at Machpelah but insists that Ephron, its owner, accept money from him in exchange. After a brief argument, Ephron acquiesces and lets Abraham pay him a nominal fee for the property.

This episode has troubled rabbis and readers for centuries, for it seems to undermine God's promise that Abraham would inherit all the Land of Canaan. God said to him several chapters earlier, in *Parashat Lech L'cha*, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever... Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you ♦? (Gen. 13:14-17). On the one hand, God vows to hand over the land to Abraham; on the other hand, Abraham acquires this piece of it by economic means. Rabbinic interpretations of this apparent contradiction range from a demonstration of Abraham's humility, to the first establishment of contractual Jewish ownership of land in *Eretz Yisrael*.

I interpret this episode as a lesson about social justice. The divine promise of a better world and the prophetic vision of a just society are God-given ideals; however, it is up to us to strive toward them. They are not simply gifts of divine intervention – they require human activation.

We can see this same dynamic between God's promise and human action in another verse similarly riddled with contradiction. In the space of only seven verses, Deuteronomy both assures us that "there shall be no needy among you ♦? and also warns us that "there will never cease to be needy ones in your land ♦? (Deut. 15:4, 15:11). The former is an inspiring promise of God's favor: there will be no poverty because "your God will bless you in the land that ... God is giving you ♦? (Deut. 15:4). The latter is a reality check and a call to action: we will always have poverty in our midst, "which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land ♦? (Deut. 15:11). We keep alive the dream of a world without poverty even as we shoulder the burden of alleviating this intractable social ill.

The gap between ideal vision and present reality demands our involvement. God may provide the promise, but we, like Abraham, bear the responsibility of fulfilling it in our world. May our prayers and reflection this Shabbat strengthen our resolve to do God's work with our human hands.

About the author:

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