

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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## Beginning The Journey

Chayei Sarah - 26 October 2013 / 22 Chesvan 5774

A while back, a British newspaper, *The Times*, interviewed a prominent member of the Jewish community – let's call him Lord X – on his 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The interviewer said, “Most people, when they reach their 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday, start thinking about slowing down. You seem to be speeding up. Why is that?”

Lord X's reply was this: “When you get to 92, you start seeing the door begin to close, and I have so much to do before the door closes that the older I get, the harder I have to work.”

Something like that is the impression we get of Abraham in this week's parsha. Sarah, his constant companion throughout their journeys, has died. He is 137 years old. We see him mourn Sarah's death, and then he moves into action.

He engages in an elaborate negotiation to buy a plot of land in which to bury her. As the narrative makes clear, this is not a simple task. He confesses to the local people, Hittites, that he is “an immigrant and a resident among you,” meaning that he knows he has no right to buy land. It will take a special concession on their part for him to do so. The Hittites politely but firmly try to discourage him. He has no need to buy a burial plot. “No one among us will deny you his burial site to bury your dead.” He can bury Sarah in someone else's graveyard. Equally politely but no less insistently, Abraham makes it clear that he is determined to buy land. In the event, he pays a highly inflated price (400 silver shekels) to do so.

The purchase of the cave of Machpelah is evidently a highly significant event, because it is recorded in great detail and highly

**“Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah and his search for a wife for Isaac are evidently highly significant events. But why?”**

legal terminology, not just here, but three times subsequently in Genesis,<sup>1</sup> each time with the same formality. Here for instance is Jacob on his deathbed, speaking to his sons:

“Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre in Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite. There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. The field and the cave in it were bought from the Hittites.” (Gen. 49: 29-32)

Something significant is being hinted at here, otherwise why mention, each time, exactly where the field is and who Abraham bought it from?

Immediately after the story of land purchase, we read, “Abraham was old, well advanced in years, and God had blessed Abraham with everything.” Again this sounds like the end of a life, not a preface to a new course of action, and again our expectation is confounded. Abraham launches into a new initiative, this time to find a suitable wife for his son Isaac, who by now is at least 37 years old. Abraham leaves nothing to chance. He does not speak to Isaac himself but to his most trusted servant, whom he instructs to go “to my native land, to my birthplace,” and find the appropriate woman. He wants Isaac to have a wife who will share his faith and way of life. Abraham does not specify that she should come from his own family, but this seems to be an assumption hovering in the background.

As with the purchase of the field, so here, the course of events is described in more detail than almost anywhere else in the Torah. Every conversational exchange is recorded. The contrast with the story of the binding of Isaac could not be greater. There, almost everything – Abraham's thoughts, Isaac's feelings – is left unsaid. Here, everything is said. Again, the literary style calls our attention to the significance of what is happening, without telling us precisely what it is.

The explanation is simple and unexpected. Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God had promised them two things: children and a land. The promise of the land (“Rise, walk in the land throughout its length and breadth, for I will give it to you”) is repeated no less than seven times. The promise of children occurs four times. Abraham’s descendants will be “a great nation,” as many as “the dust of the earth,” and “the stars in the sky”; he will be the father not of one nation but of many.

**“Throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah, God had promised two things: children and a land. Despite this when Sarah dies, neither promise has been fulfilled.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 23: 17, 25: 9, 49: 30, 50: 13.

Despite this, when Sarah dies, Abraham has not a single inch of the land that he can call his own, and has only one child who will continue the covenant, Isaac, currently unmarried. Neither promise has been fulfilled. Hence the extraordinary detail of the two main stories in Chayei Sarah: the purchase of land and the finding of a wife for Isaac. There is a moral here, and the Torah slows down the speed of the narrative, so that we will not miss the point.

*God promises, but we have to act.* God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, “Jewish grandchildren.”

**“God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married.”**

*Despite all the promises, God does not and will not do it alone.* By the very act of self-limitation (*tzimtzum*) through which He creates the space for human freedom, He gives us responsibility, and only by exercising it do we reach our full stature as human beings. God saved Noah from the flood, but Noah had to make the ark. He gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel, but they had to fight the battles. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed. What changes the world, what fulfils our destiny, is *not what God does for us but what we do for God.*

That is what leaders understand, and it is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take responsibility for creating the conditions through which God’s purposes can be fulfilled. They are not passive but active – even in old age, like Abraham in this week’s parsha. Indeed in the next chapter, to our surprise, we read that after Sarah’s death, Abraham takes another wife and has eight more children. Whatever else this tells us, and there are many interpretations (the most likely is that it explains how Abraham became “the father of many nations”), it certainly conveys the point that Abraham stayed young the way Moses stayed young, “His eye undimmed and his natural energy unabated.” Though action takes energy, it gives us energy. The contrast between Noah in old age and Abraham in old age could not be greater.

Perhaps though the most important point is that large promises – a land, countless children – become real through small beginnings. Leaders begin with an envisioned future, but they also know that there is a long journey between here and there and we can only reach it one act at a time, one day at a time. There is no miraculous shortcut, and if there were, it would not help. It would make achievement like Jonah’s gourd, that grew overnight, then died overnight. Abraham acquired only a single field, and had just one son who would continue the covenant. Yet he did not complain, and he died serene and satisfied. Because

he had begun. Because he had left future generations something on which to build. All great change is the work of more than one generation, and none of us will live to see the full fruit of our endeavours.

Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Sacks". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

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**RABBI  
SACKS**

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