

# O H R N E T

SHABBAT PARSHAT CHAYEI SARA · 27 CHESHVAN 5763 · NOV. 2, 2002 · VOL. 10 NO. 5

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

### SUPERHERO

*"And I will have you swear..." (24:3)*

In a more modest world, mild-mannered Clark Kent would discreetly slip into a phone booth, tear off his shirt and reveal his true identity, Superman.

If truth be known, we can all be Superman.

Within us exist tremendous untapped powers. There are several well-documented cases of mothers lifting motorcars to save the lives of their children, or running at superwoman speeds to rescue their offspring from wild animals.

Ostensibly, these were ordinary folk, suddenly possessed of superhuman strength. G-d has put inside us enormous powers but most of the time we do not, or cannot, access them. Why?

In this week's Torah portion, Avraham makes his servant Eliezer swear not to find a wife for Yitzchak from the Cananites *"rather, to my land and to my kindred shall you go and take a wife for my son..."*

If Avraham doubted Eliezer's loyalty, why send him in the

first place? And if Eliezer's loyalty was beyond question, what was the need for an oath?

Avraham realized that it might not be easy to find a wife for Yitzchak. He made Eliezer swear so that if the going got tough, Eliezer would reach down into hidden reservoirs of persistence and continue the search.

Nothing substitutes for the will to succeed. Our mindset is very often our greatest enemy. Lack of self-esteem and/or self-confidence limits our ability to take wing and fulfill our potential.

A Jew is supposed to say to himself every day "When will my actions reach the actions of my fathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?" When we compare ourselves to these giants we are reminding ourselves of the spiritual legacy locked inside us, which would, if we would only let it, send us looking for the nearest telephone booth to reveal our superman costume to the world.

Sources:

• Based on the *Shem MiShmuel*

## PARSHA OVERVIEW

Sarah, Mother of the Jewish People, passes on at age 127. After mourning and eulogizing her, Avraham seeks to bury her in the Cave of Machpela. As this is the burial place of Adam and Chava, Avraham pays its owner, Ephron the Hittite, an exorbitant sum. Avraham sends his faithful servant Eliezer to find a suitable wife for his son, Yitzchak, making him swear to choose a wife only from among Avraham's family. Eliezer travels to Aram Naharaim and prays for a sign. Providentially, Rivka appears. Eliezer asks for water. Not only does she give him water, but she draws water for all 10 of his thirsty camels. (Some 140 gal-

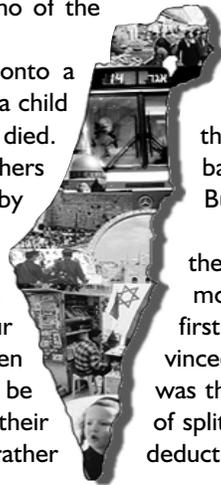
lons!) This extreme kindness marks her as the right wife for Yitzchak and a suitable Mother of the Jewish People. Negotiations with Rivka's father and her brother Lavan result in her leaving with Eliezer. Yitzchak brings Rivka into his mother Sarah's tent, marries her and loves her. He is then consoled for the loss of his mother. Avraham remarries Hagar who is renamed Ketura to indicate her improved ways. Six children are born to them. After giving them gifts, Avraham sends them to the East. Avraham passes away at the age of 175 and is buried next to Sarah in the Cave of Machpela.

## SHLOMO – THE FIRST USE OF WISDOM

One of the best known stories of Jewish history recorded in the sacred writings of the Prophets concerns the first application by King Shlomo of the extraordinary wisdom granted to him by Heaven.

Two women came before the king holding onto a baby. They told him that each had given birth to a child in the same home but that one of the babies had died. Each of them claimed that the surviving child was hers and called upon the king to award the disputed baby to her.

The king summed up their claims by declaring that “This one says the living child is mine and the dead one is yours while the other one says it is your son who is dead and mine that is alive.” He then made the dramatic move of ordering the baby to be cut in half so that each of the claimants could have their share. One mother protested that she would rather



relinquish her claim than see the child die while the other insisted that he be cut in half so that neither of them would have the disputed child.

The famous judgment rendered by the king to award the baby to the mother who opposed the splitting of the child because she was the true mother is commonly understood as being based on her altruistic reaction to Shlomo’s proposal. But how did Shlomo anticipate such a reaction?

The commentaries point out that in summing up the conflicting claims, Shlomo stressed that the first mother first mentioned the live child while the other first mentioned the dead one. He was therefore convinced that the one who stressed life rather than death was the true mother and only made the dramatic gesture of splitting the child to demonstrate the correctness of his deduction.

## ISRAEL Forever

### TO WHOM DOES HEBRON BELONG?

Hebron has been in the news a great deal lately. On Chol Hamoed Succot a rabbi visiting the Machpela Cave to pray at the tomb of the Patriarchs was murdered by a terrorist sniper. Only last week the IDF evacuated the city that it has occupied following terrorist incidents and took up positions around the city to defend its Jewish residents.

What is perhaps the most distressing news is that the Israeli Civil Administration produced a document blaming the Jewish community in Hebron for inciting trouble by attempting to repossess Jewish property in Hebron.

In this week’s Torah portion we read of the purchase by our patriarch Avraham of the Machpela Cave as a burial site for his wife Sarah. Our Talmudic sages state that, thanks to this purchase, this Hebron site is one of the three places in Eretz Yisrael whose Jewish ownership cannot be disputed even by those who deny our Divinely given title to it.

This same inviolable claim is made by leaders of the Hebron community in the detailed response to the afore-

mentioned accusation.

The original Jewish community that lived in Hebron for many generations owned substantial property in the city. All the lands of the “Jewish Ghetto” today known as the Avraham Avinu neighborhood, the majority of Tel Rumeida and many other homes, stores and agricultural lands were owned by Jews. The 1929 Arab massacre, in which 67 Jews were murdered, prompted the British to banish Jews from the city. But even after this exile, and another which ended the 1936 attempt to resettle the city, Hebron’s Jews held on to the purchase and leasing deeds of the properties to which they hoped to return. The Jordanian conquest of the city in 1948 transferred these properties to the “Custodian of the Properties of the Zionist Enemy”.

Avraham’s purchase of the Machpela Cave took place 3588 years ago. Jewish possession of property in the city of Hebron was revoked only 54 years ago. Neither of these events should be forgotten in the great debate as to whom Hebron belongs.

## THE HANGING OF THE WITCHES

**A**lthough the Torah laid down rules for the conviction of a sinner and the type of punishment he deserves, the Sanhedrin had emergency powers to punish offenders when it saw a need to provide a deterrent. The classic example of the exercise of this power was the action taken by the sage Shimon ben Shatach who hanged eighty witches in Ashkelon in one day.

These witches were indeed guilty of various forms of sorcery punishable by the death penalty of stoning. Rabbi Eliezer, whose opinion is that all those put to death by stoning were subsequently hanged (not by the neck but momentarily strapped to a pole in the ground) regardless of their gender, challenged the position of the other sages who limited such hanging to men only. The other sages based their ruling on the passage (*Devarim 21:22*) which stresses that he will be hanged, implying that she will not. Rabbi Eliezer cites the example of the Ashkelon hanging of witches. The response of these sages was that this was an emergency measure to curb the trend towards witchcraft amongst Jewish women at that time.

Their proof that this hanging was not regular judicial procedure is that a court may not try two capital cases in one day if they are not regarding the same sin, since it is too difficult to devote the proper attention to each case. Since the witches in Ashkelon were guilty of different sins of witchcraft (some of conjuring “*ov*” and others of “*yidoni*” – Rashi) the court of Shimon ben Shatach had no legal mandate to try and execute all of them the same day unless it resorted to emergency powers.

An interesting question regarding this *gemara* is raised by Rabbi Yacov Ettlinger in his “*Oruch L'ner*” commentary. Were these witches first stoned to death and then hanged in the post-mortem manner of others executed in this way, or were they put to death by hanging? If we posit like the latter then the simple reading of the *gemara* indicates we face another question. If the sages wished to prove that the hanging of witches was only an emergency measure why did they not simply point to the fact that hanging by the neck is not one of the forms of execution prescribed by the Torah? The author solves this problem by referring to the historical background of that Ashkelon incident (cited at length by Rashi on 44b). That incident shows that the magical powers of those witches made it impossible to execute them in any other way. Therefore, they needed to be put to death in the only way possible, as the *gemara* rules earlier on this very page.

• *Sanhedrin 45b*

## WHO WAS THE RESURRECTED MAN?

**A**n interesting mystery concerning the identity of a dead man who came to life is introduced to us by our *gemara* in an effort to find a basis for the statement in our *mishna* that there were two different graveyards for those executed for capital sins. Those whose sins were of a more serious nature were not buried together with the ones who died for sins of a lesser degree because just as it is improper to bury a sinner next to a righteous man, so too is it wrong to bury a more serious sinner next to a less serious one.

The source for this concept is the incident described in *Melachim II (13:20)* following the death and burial of the Prophet Elisha. A Moabite band was able to attack a funeral procession of Israelites. Fleeing in panic the pallbearers cast the corpse into the nearest burial cave, which happened to be that of Elisha. As soon as the discarded body of this man came into contact with the bones of Elisha “he came to life and stood on his feet.” Rabbi Acha bar Chanina’s explanation is that this man was a sinner in his lifetime and it was Divine intervention which made it possible for him to arise so that he would not be buried next to the righteous prophet. “He stood in his feet”, adds the sage, but never returned home, remaining alive just long enough to be buried in another grave.

A completely different version of the dead man’s identity is found in the *Midrash (Pirkei D'Rebbie Eliezer)*. There he is identified as a righteous man named Shalum ben Tikvah who was outstanding in his kindness. He would fill up a large container of water and place himself at the entrance to his city in order to offer a refreshing drink to people thirstily arriving from a long journey. The merit of his kindness caused Divine revelation to be bestowed upon his wife, the Prophetess Chulda (*Melachim II 22:14*). When Shalum passed away all of Israel participated in his funeral. Upon being attacked they quickly buried him in Elisha’s tomb. Upon contact with the prophet he was resurrected as a fulfillment of the blessing which Elisha had received from his master, the Prophet Eliyahu, that he would have twice his spiritual power (*Melachim II 2:9-10*). Eliyahu had performed the miracle of resurrection only once (*Melachim I 17:22*) so that Elisha was entitled to two such feats. In his lifetime, however, Elisha performed only one resurrection (*Melachim II 4:35*) so that it was necessary for him to perform this posthumous one as well. This Shalum who returned to life went home and even fathered a son, Chananel, who made the famous sale of his field in Anatot to the Prophet Yirmiyahu (32:6).

• *Sanhedrin 47a*

## PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Name the four couples buried in *Kiryat Arba*.
2. What did Sara hear that caused her death?
3. What title of honor did the *B'nei Chet* bestow upon Avraham?
4. Where was Avraham born?
5. How were Avraham's camels distinguished?
6. What is meant by "all the good of his master in his hand?"
7. What special character trait did Eliezer seek when choosing a wife for Yitzchak?
8. Why did Avraham's servant, Eliezer, run toward Rivka?
9. Why did Lavan run to greet Eliezer?
10. When Lavan told Eliezer that the house was cleared out, what did he remove?
11. Who did Eliezer want Yitzchak to marry?
12. Aside from Eliezer, to which other people did Rivka offer to give water?
13. Lavan answered Eliezer before his father, Betuel, had a chance. What does this indicate about Lavan's character?
14. What did Rivka mean when she said "I will go?"
15. What blessing did Rivka's family give her before she departed?
16. Who was *Ketura*?
17. What gift did Avraham give to Yitzchak?
18. How old was Avraham when he died?
19. For how many years did Yaakov attend the Yeshiva of *Ever*?
20. How many times is Eliezer's name mentioned in this week's Parsha?

## PARSHA Q&A!

### Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 23:2 - Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sara, Yitzchak and Rivka, Yaakov and Leah.
2. 23:2 - That Yitzchak was almost slaughtered.
3. 23:6 - Prince of G-d.
4. 24:7 - Ur Kasdim.
5. 24:10 - They were muzzled, so they wouldn't graze in the fields of others.
6. 24:10 - Eliezer carried a document in which Avraham gave all he owned to Yitzchak so that people would want their daughter to marry him.
7. 24:14 - He sought someone who excelled in performing acts of kindness.
8. 24:17 - He saw that the waters of the well rose when she approached.
9. 24:29 - Lavan coveted his money.
10. 24:31 - Idols.
11. 24:39 - His own daughter.
12. 24:44 - To the men who accompanied Eliezer.
13. 24:50 - That he was wicked.
14. 24:58 - I will go even if you don't want me to go.
15. 24:60 - That the blessings given to Avraham would continue through her children.
16. 25:1 - Hagar.
17. 25:5 - The power of blessing.
18. 25:7 - 175 years old.
19. 25:17 - 14 years.
20. None!

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## AGE OF THE WORLD

**From: Michael in Los Angeles, CA**

Dear Rabbi,

*It is hard for me to understand the fact that many relics such as dinosaur bones, cave art, and rock formations are thought to exist for millions of years. I asked this to a local Rabbi. He told me that dinosaur bones were planted by G-d to test our faith. I do not really understand this answer. How can you explain this apparent contradiction with the Jewish calendar?*

Dear Michael,

The resolution of the apparent contradiction between the “scientific” age of the universe and the Jewish date of 5763 years since Creation has two standard approaches:

The scientific estimate is true, and the text of Genesis can be reconciled: For example, saying that the six “days” are not really days, but rather six “time periods.”

The Jewish date is true, and the scientific estimate must be explained (away).

Several satisfactory explanations following the first approach can be found in the book *Challenge* and I recommend that you look there. Since you asked about the second approach, I will address it.

It’s definitely possible for G-d to create a world that looks older than it is. Adam was created as an adult. Observing him a few minutes after he was created, you would assume him to be at least twenty years old. The Garden of Eden had full-grown trees laden with fruit. According to the Torah text, these trees were no more than three days old.

Let’s take this idea a step further: A star 10 million light-years from the earth *could have* been created with its light already reaching the earth. The star would appear 10 million years old, even though it was just created.

Now you’re probably thinking, “But why would G-d do that? Why create bones, artifacts, partially decayed radium,

potassium-argon, uranium, red-shifted light from space, etc., all pointing to an age which is not true?”

Strictly speaking, this isn’t a problem. Not knowing why G-d did something doesn’t prove that He didn’t do it. But I’ll try to answer this anyway:

The purpose of this world is to hide G-d’s presence. This allows us to exercise free will. In fact, the Hebrew word for world is *olam* which means hiding. Evidence which “hides” the age of the universe could be part of G-d’s general “policy” of hiding.

Now you might say “According to this we can never rely on our observations. Doesn’t this approach negate all scientific findings?”

No. This approach merely questions evidence that contradicts other reliable evidence.

Let me give you an analogy: Suppose George is accused of murder. We find his fingerprints at the scene of the crime, the murder weapon on his premises, and he has a motive. The defense argues that George was framed. Will anyone take that seriously? But suppose that reliable witnesses testify that they saw George 100 miles from the scene at the time of the murder. Suddenly it becomes appropriate to take the “frame-up” defense seriously.

Here too, scientific observations have to be understood in light of the other available evidence - i.e., the Torah. The Jewish People were eyewitness at Sinai who observed the giving of the Torah (hence the term “observant Jews?”). For us the Torah’s account of events is first-hand testimony.

Therefore, the idea that scientific observations might be misleading should be taken seriously.

Speaking of archeological finds that ought not be taken too seriously, did you hear this one?

Caveman 1: Ugh!

Caveman 2: Ugh! Ugh!

Caveman 1: Stop changing the subject!

Sources:

• *Challenge, Carmell and Domb, 1978, Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists, pp. 124-41, 142-49, 164-75.*

**The Weekly Daf** by RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH  
**at Jewish Bookstores Everywhere!**

Published by Targum Press / Distributed by Feldheim

