

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny

## **(Portion of Chayei Sarah)**

*One of the great satisfactions of life as an educator is watching a student's face when 'the penny drops'; when a difficulty or question they have struggled with suddenly is resolved. Equally inspiring is raising a question they have noticed especially when it should be obvious.*

*I have a little game I play with potential students when trying to explain what Orayta students are looking for in our classes on Machshava (Jewish philosophy).*

*I tell them I will ask them a question that they cannot get wrong, and that they will absolutely be able to answer in under three seconds.*

*There are only three possible answers to this question : yes, no or maybe.*

*Then I ask them if they believe in G-d. And inevitably most of them will say yes, some will say 'maybe' and the occasional lone wolf will say no. And it does not matter which response they choose (nor will I recall which potential student responded with which answer; that's not the point); what interests me is that they will all respond almost instantly one way or another.*

*Which leads to my follow-up question: "So, what is G-d?"*

*And that's when I get that look; like a deer caught in the headlights. On the one hand they are right: how can we possibly understand what or who G-d (Hashem) is? On the other hand, how can you know if you do or don't believe in something when you have no idea what it is?*

*It never fails; every high school senior I have ever met has considered their position regarding the existence of G-d, but almost none of them have ever explored what that really means. They spend a fair amount of time debating whether you can prove G-d's existence without really considering whether Hashem is relevant in their lives, and how we might develop a relationship with Hashem.*

*And the promise of exploring that question (without giving up traditional Jewish learning) always fascinates them. Well, almost all of them.*

*Hal (not his real name), already a matriculated student at Orayta, didn't seem at all interested in the question and was completely non-plussed regarding the conundrum I shared.*

*In fact, as the weeks of study progressed it became very clear he was not interested in much of what we had to share, and I started to wonder why he had decided to attend Orayta.*

*So I decided to ask him.*

*'It does not seem that you are at all interested in responses to these theological questions' I asked him one day; 'nor are you excited at the prospect of serious Talmud (Gemara ) study', to which he readily responded: "I guess you're right; I'm really not looking for answers to these questions".*

*'So why are you here?' I asked him, to which he responded:*

*"Honestly, I got into my dream school, but my parents really did not want me to attend that University as there is very little Jewish life there. And they said they would only pay tuition for that College if I spent a year in yeshiva... "*

*And therein lay the rub: you can't give a person what he or she does not want to receive.*

*The greatest chef in the world can cook the most incredible meal on the planet; if you just polished off three full hamburgers and are not at all hungry, he or she can't give it to you. Before you can give to someone they have to want what you have to give.*

A great case in point is the lengthy negotiations (*Bereishit* chap. 23) leading to the sale by Ephron the Hittite of a burial cave and its field to Avraham.

At first it seems Ephron offers the field to Avraham for free, but after Avraham refuses the offer wanting to actually purchase and thus own the field, Ephron says well, in that case, I'll sell it to you for 400 shekels of silver, which the commentaries tell us is an astronomical sum.

Why does Ephron first offer the property for free and then turn around and ask for such an abnormal sum a moment later? And why does Avraham agree? Why not make a counteroffer?

What if Avraham has figured out a critical truth in his quest to acquire the *Machpela* burial cave? What if Avraham has figured out that Ephron does not really want to sell?

Think about it: Who is Ephron the Hittite? Who has even heard of him? What claim to fame does he have other than the fact that he sold this burial cave to the great Avraham? Avraham is a leader of stature who mingles with Kings and does battle with great armies. He dialogues with the Pharaoh of Egypt and the King of the Philistines (Abimelech) and with only three hundred fighters, conquers the greatest army the world has ever known in the battle of the five Kings.

So when Ephron, a hither-to unknown fellow is suddenly thrust into the limelight, negotiating on an international level, perhaps he realizes this is his great moment. Who knows? It could lead to a book-deal, a movie, fame and fortune; so why would he want it to end so quickly? Perhaps Ephron simply wants to enjoy the negotiation. And after all, what's the rush? Sara is dead and her body isn't going anywhere right?

But to Avraham, the thought that his beloved Sarah might be denied the burial she so deserves is almost too much to bear. In the world of Avraham, a body is a vessel that served as a medium for a special soul who impacted the world. And in our tradition, until the body is buried, the soul cannot rest.

Indeed, if Avraham accepts the gift of burial, he will be Ephron's indebted client forever. There will be no bill of sale, and Avraham will be relying on Ephron's largesse which could change at any moment. And if Ephron, after the great burial decides a week later to move the body, then Avraham will have to negotiate all over again. So Avraham is not interested in a gift; he wants a contract; he wants to own the burial cave and end this discussion, forever. So he refuses the gift and requests a payment and a change of ownership. At this point, Ephron smells a deal and requests an insanely exorbitant amount, sure that Avraham will return with a counter offer and create a dialogue that can last for weeks and even months, as Ephron's fame spreads far and wide: the man holding the great Avraham 'captive'.

Which is why Avraham pulls the rug out from under Ephron and simply agrees to the exorbitant amount; something Ephron had not expected. Now, however, Ephron cannot backtrack and has no choice but to accede the deed of sale, transferring the first piece of property for Jewish ownership in the land of Israel.

There is a powerful lesson here we would do well to consider:

If you want to give something to someone, be sure they want what you have to offer.

On a national level, we have been offering peace to Arab politicians, most notably the PLO and the Palestinian Authority for a hundred years. But if they don't really want peace it won't matter how many different times, and in how many different ways, we offer it.

To be sure, there are many Arabs who genuinely want peace and want only to live and work in peace and even see the value of working together with Jews and Israelis towards a common goal. But alas, their leadership does not seem to share this desire. And why would they? A true peace agreement would stop all the European payments that get diverted into private bank accounts, and if we actually arrived at a peaceful conclusion to this conflict they would have to run a government and be held accountable for equitable results. So if they don't want it, it matters little how hard we try to offer it...

And on a personal level, if we desire to give something to those we care about, we can't give it to them unless they want it, and most often that is not something we can control. Whether it be a meaningful Jewish experience or a bouquet of flowers, we would do well to pay attention to what others **want** of us, rather than remaining focused on what it is we want to give.

Wishing you all a Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman