Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Chayei Sarah)

Eternity; a powerful word; what does it mean? Does anything really last forever?

Many years ago, in the wee hours of pre-dawn darkness on an empty Jerusalem road, I discovered just how fleeting life can be. At 4am, after a very late night studying and reconnecting with my students after a prolonged trip overseas, I was finally headed home for what I thought would be a peaceful Shabbat and a chance to reconnect with my wife and kids, I must have fallen asleep at the wheel. I was rudely re-awakened when my tiny Peugeot 104 wrapped itself around an electric pole.

Had I not been wearing a seatbelt, I probably would not be here, but I quickly realized I was in serious trouble. The impact was so powerful that my wife would later describe the steering wheel as completely bent by the force of my body crashing into it. When my belongings in the car were eventually returned the steel pen in my shirt pocket had been completely bent in half.

While I did not know this at the time, I had broken almost all my ribs, and my spleen had been ruptured. Bleeding internally, the body does an incredible thing: it rushes blood from the extremities to the vital internal organs. Unaware of this, all I knew was that in all the pain I was experiencing I could not move my arms or legs; so I was convinced I had been paralyzed. To make matters worse, I had bitten down and cut open my tongue (which would later require almost forty stitches) and was bleeding profusely; who would have thought the tongue has so much blood?

Think about it: What do they always do in the movies when they want you to know one of the characters, say, in a gun battle, is going to die? They have blood running out of his mouth, right? The characters see the blood and gets it: he is dying. So, I was absolutely sure I was dying. The irony was not lost on me: after all of my experiences in Lebanon and in the army, it was a careless driving accident that was going to be the end of me.

It is impossible to describe the intense wave of sadness that washed over me: who would walk our eldest daughter Maayan, then aged five, down to her wedding chuppah? Would Yonatan, then aged two, even remember me at his Bar Mitzvah? Who would come to the door and tell my wife the news; how would she manage? What little had I even accomplished in my life? At age thirty-one, had I left the world much different than when I found it?

Eventually, someone found me, the ambulance came and after two days in the ICU (Along with my father-in-law's intervention which saved my life) Hashem decided to give me a second chance to get it right….

What in the end, really matters in this world?

This week's portion, *Chayei Sarah*, finds Avraham contemplating this challenging question as he prepares to bury his beloved wife, Sarah. Strangely, the Torah seems to devote an inordinate amount of time to Avraham's attempts to bury his wife. Up until this point in the Torah, people simply die. As

an example (Genesis (*Bereishit*) 9:29) when Noach dies it simply says he was 950 years old and he dies. So why is so much time devoted here to Sarah's burial?

The commentaries note that there is a fascinating turn of phrase Avraham uses in his negotiations with the Hittites to secure a burial site:

"*Ger ve'Toshav anochi imachem*…"

Literally: "*I am a stranger and an inhabitant amongst you*…" (ibid.23:4)

Why does Avraham describe himself in such paradoxical terms? Is he a stranger, or is he a resident?

Rav Shlomo Riskin notes that we find this exact phrase in the portion of Behar when the Torah tells us that in the Jubilee (fiftieth or *Yovel)* year, the land must return to its original owners:

"*And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, for you are strangers and settlers with me*…" "Ki *Gerim ve' ve'Toshavim atem imadi*…" (Leviticus (*Vayikra*) 25:23)

The Torah is challenging us here to consider what really lasts in this world: what do we really ***own***?

There is a powerful *Midrash* (rabbinic legend) based on a case in the Talmud.

The first chapter of tractate *Baba Metzia* deals with cases dealing with conflicts of ownership. *Shnayim Ochzin* deals with two individuals both claiming a garment with only possession as proof of ownership, and the Talmud delineates a variety of cases with a similar theme.

The Midrash elaborates on one of these cases:

"*Zeh omer shel avotai, ve'zeh omer shel avotai*..."

Two individuals are arguing over the ownership of a parcel of land. Each claims to have inherited the property, but neither can prove ownership; they have no witnesses, no contract, and not even a provable status of possession. So, they decide to go to the local rabbi (judge?) to try and resolve their dispute

The Rabbi (Rebbe?), after hearing both sides finally responds: "I have heard both of your arguments neither of which is stronger than the other, so let's ask the land! Whereupon he bends over cupping his hand to his ear as it were, trying to 'hear' what the land has to say.

One imagines at this point the two litigants are probably looking at each other wondering whether they have come to the wrong rabbi who must be certifiable...

But the rabbi straightens up, looks at the litigants and declares: 'the land says it's not yours, and it's not yours; you're it's! "Ki me'afar atah ve'el afar tashuv "

"…for you are from the dust and you will return to the dust…" (Bereishit (Genesis) 3: 19)

In other words, we don't really own anything in this world; if anything, the world owns us.

A close reading of the verses in our portion indicate that the Hittites don't really take Avraham's desire for a burial plot seriously. After all, who is Avraham? An old man with one son who is not even married and a crazy system of belief no-one in the world has bought into. They offer to give him the land for free, perhaps recognizing that eventually they can just use the land for their own purposes anyway once Avraham, already an old man, is gone.

But much like the Torah is reminding us in the Jubilee year that property and ownership is not what lasts, just like this world does not last, Avraham is making a point here: we are only temporary dwellers on this earth and in this world; we are merely strangers and travelers passing through. Eternity is about the things we accomplish that can never be undone; the kindnesses we do, and the meaningful life messages we leave behind for our children and those we loved to carry on. In short, all that Sarah came to represent. In that way, we are inhabitants; we make an impression that lasts eternal. Hence, we bury our dead in the ground, because earth is that item that cannot be destroyed. (Indeed, in Jewish law if a person safeguards an item he is guarding by burying it in the earth he will not be liable for its destruction …)

Indeed, one of the great challenges in life, as we struggle with the distractions of the physical all around us is to remember what really matters: money, power, and all the 'things' we accumulate are not what bring us happiness what really lasts is the good that we do, and the people that we touch. We would do well to remember that we are only travelers on this journey, and that most important is not to lose sight of what our destination really is.

Lastly, it is interesting to note that the burial plot Avraham acquires is actually the first time a Jew actually owns a portion of the land of Israel. Many Jews living in the diaspora, particularly in the West, have become convinced over the last seventy-eight years since that Jews have finally been accepted; we are inhabitants with equal rights and entitlements. We would do well, however, particularly given the current climate of rising anti-Semitism, to ask ourselves are we really *Toshavim*: full-fledged citizens accepted as equals? Or are today's 'Hittites' reminding us that we are really *Gerim*, strangers? Perhaps there really is only one place a Jew can truly be at home?

And perhaps what makes Israel such a powerful and meaningful place for Jews is that it is the same home where, four thousand years ago, the first Jew made a statement challenging us all to consider what really matters in this world….

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman