

D'VAR TORAH



Buying Land

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Parashah

Abraham received a promise of land and descendants. As this week's parashah opens, the promise has hardly been fulfilled. So Abraham begins a tradition of taking the promise into his own hands by buying land, a tradition that will be copied by both Jacob and Joseph.

The promise really has not worked out for Abraham. At the end of the Abraham cycle, the beginning of this week's parashah, Abraham has held up his end of the covenant and gotten very little in return from God, scarcely more than unfilled promises and terrifying trials.

Then his wife dies. Sarah had accompanied him from home to be a ger toshav, a resident alien, with him in a land that was not theirs. Together, they had been each other's home. We read of the way they prepared meals together, argued, laughed, and cared for their child. This parashah opens with Sarah's death and Abraham "came to mourn for her and to cry over her." Then he buys a burial plot from the locals, from the Bnei Heth.

The promise has not been fulfilled so Abraham begins to fulfill it. Abraham buys a burial plot hundreds of years before his descendants will be given the land. He stakes a claim to the land with Sarah's body. Our parashah ends with his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, burying him there. We read, in "the field that Abraham had bought from the Bnei Heth, there Abraham was buried and Sarah, his wife." He lays claim to the land of Israel with his body and the body of the woman who had been his home. His descendants will respect that choice and choose to be buried alongside Sarah and Abraham. The grave does function as a homebase for them, a piece of land that is theirs in the land of Canaan.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, also buys land in Canaan. Immediately after returning to the land after his time in Paddan-Aram and then with Esau, Jacob comes to the city of Shechem in Canaan and purchases the field on which he pitches his tent and builds an altar. He wastes no time in actualizing the promise of land and descendants which God had passed down to him. Jacob enters the land already surrounded by his many descendants. The only thing lacking is land, which he immediately buys. His descendants then murder all the inhabitants of the surrounding town from whom he had bought the land. It happens as revenge for his daughter, Dinah, who had wandered out of the land he had bought and consorted with the locals. After this incident, God tells Jacob to leave, to "get up and go up to Beth El and dwell there and build an altar there." Jacob does not get to stay in the parcel of land he had bought,

he does not get to leave behind roots the way Abraham did. Rather, he loses it nearly as soon as he buys it.

Joseph's land buying is even more egregious. He buys land from the Egyptians for Pharaoh as they sell themselves into slavery to avoid starving during the years of famine. While the land is Pharaoh's, not his, it is during this time that the Israelites settle in Egypt, in Goshen, where they will be until they get taken out during the Exodus.

Why is Abraham's buying of land so much more successful than that of Jacob or Joseph? Abraham buys land with complete honesty. He does not attempt to deceive the locals or take advantage of them. Abraham also buys land for the dead rather than for the living. He does not make claims on where his descendants need to be or what they need to do. Rather, he provides an option for them to join him when they "are gathered to their kin." In this way, Abraham partners with God in fulfilling the promise. He does not try to change God's decrees, but rather colors in the details within the lines that God had drawn.