

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Chayei Sarah

A death strikes the family. Sara passes away and leaves behind a grieving husband. Here, for the first and only time, we are given a clear view into the private life of our father Avraham. Crying, he eulogizes Sara and busies himself with her burial.

The story of Avraham's purchase of a burial plot for his wife is recorded in great detail, despite the fact that it's quite uneventful. Clearly, the primary interest of the Torah here is not merely to document the event; rather, there must be some underlying message that the Torah is after. This is indeed the case.

We need to learn the nature of Jewish marriage, and, fortunately, the Torah is ready to teach. As always, Avraham and Sara teach by example. But, strangely enough, the Torah begins our marriage education with a view of the end of that great relationship.

The Torah takes marriage very seriously; adultery is a capital crime. We have a very real need to know who is married and who is not. But yet, nowhere does the Torah tell us how to create a marriage. Nowhere does the Torah describe the marriage ceremony. All we have to go on is the verse, "When a man 'takes' (kee'chah) a woman" (Devarim 24:1).

Of course, our tradition is very clear. When a man gives a woman something of value (the custom is to use a ring) for the expressed purpose of creating a marriage, and she accepts, they are married. There is no debate on this issue.

The Talmud shows how this tradition is derived from the Torah text itself. The source of this law turns out to be, surprisingly enough, the purchase of Sara's burial plot. The same word "kee'chah" that the Torah used to describe the marriage ceremony is also used to describe the purchase of Sara's plot. Avraham had some difficulty dealing with the shifty salesman, Ephron. Trying to put a quick end to the negotiations, Avraham says: "Here's the money, take it (kee'chah) from me" (Bereishit 23:13). Just as the word kee'chah here refers to the giving of money, so too the meaning of that same word kee'cha in the verse discussing marriage must also refer to the giving of money.

What is the meaning of this? Avraham's burial of his wife is the source for the institution of Jewish marriage? Isn't that kind of morbid? As always, thorny questions lead to the discovery of wonderful truths.



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Avraham spared no expense to give his wife an honorable burial. In fact, he was grossly overcharged. He knew it, but he didn't care. Overpaying was an expression of honor and respect to his wife, and that was far more valuable to Avraham than the money. For Avraham, this was just another opportunity to demonstrate his love. It is this act of extravagant giving that teaches us how to get married. A husband must be ready to give to his wife like our father Avraham gave to Sara. Extravagant giving makes a marriage.

But there is more. Whenever we give, no matter how altruistic we may consider ourselves to be, there is always a thought of receiving something back in return. That's the sad reality of the human condition. There is only one exception to this rule: When you give to the dead. The dead cannot repay you. Honoring the dead is the ultimate act of selflessness, for there can be no thought of receiving anything in return (Bereishit Rabba 96:5). This is the kind of giving that serves as our model for the institution of marriage. Husbands and wives must learn to give to each other as if their spouses are dead. That's true giving, free of any expectations or regrets. If we can just learn how to really give selflessly, we'll be guaranteed a happy marriage. It might sound unrealistic, but if we can give like that to the dead, why can't we give like that to the living?

Jewish marriage begins with an act of giving that is defined by the selfless giving of our father Avraham. The funny thing is that the Torah uses the word kee'chah to describe the marriage ceremony. Kee'chah means to take. How did "give" become "take"?

For the answer to this final question we must go back to the creation of man and woman. Primordial Man was originally created whole, but part of his internal reality was taken by G-d for use in the formation of Woman, and Man was left with an inner void (2:21-23). Through marriage, man is reunited with his missing piece and becomes whole again. But there is only one way to get married. The only hope for man is selfless giving. Only by giving can man successfully take back what G-d took away.

Shabbat Shalom!

