

Parshat Chayei Sarah: Stranger, Resident, and the Meaning of Belonging Maharat Ruth Friedman *Class of 2013*

In this week's parsha, Avraham, who has spent much of the time we have known him wandering, wishes to establish roots in Hevron. The death of Sarah creates a need for him to pay honor to her, and so after his initial mourning, Avraham approaches the children of Chet to humbly request a grave in which to bury her.

Avraham introduces his request by qualifying his status vis a vis the inhabitants of the land:

I am a ger (stranger) and a toshav (resident) among you. (בראשית כג:ד)
(Bereishit 23:4)

Avraham's choice of language is striking, and prompts a series of questions. Why does he refer to himself as both a stranger and a resident, seemingly mutually exclusive identities? Why does he feel the need to categorize himself as part of his request? What is he trying to convey with these two words?

Rashi refers to the midrash in Breishit Rabbah 58:6 to answer this question.

If you wish [to sell the land to me,] I will be like a ger [and purchase it]. But if not, I will be like a toshav and take it legally, for God has said to me "To your offspring I will give this land." ומדרש אגדה אם תרצו הריני גר, ואם לאו אהיה תושב ואטלנה מן הדין שאמר לי הקב"ה (לעיל יב ז) לזרעך אתן אתי הארץ הזאת:

The midrash understands ger and toshav to be mutually exclusive terms, and therefore imagines Avraham's words as a challenge to the sons of Chet. If you wish to sell me the land, he says, then I will act like a ger, and pay for the land. But if you don't wish to sell me the land, then I will act as a toshav, and take it from you without payment, for God has already promised the land to me. According to the midrash, one was either a stranger, without burial land rights, or a toshav, a resident, with burial land rights.

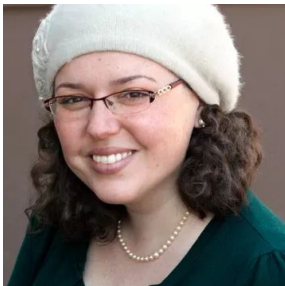
The Rashbam presents a much different interpretation. He writes:

"I am a ger (stranger) and a toshav (resident) among you" - I came from a foreign land to live here, and I have settled among you. Therefore, I do not have a burial plot. Allow me to purchase land here, and may the residents of the city desire to give me the land so I can bury the dead of my family. For I can only have a burial plot if the whole city desires it, as we see when Avraham pays Ephron and it is established for him as a plot, and the text says "[It was] to Abraham as a possession before the eyes of the sons of Heth" (23:18). גר ותושב אנכי [עמכם] - מארץ נכרייה באתי לגור כאן ונתיישבתי עמכם, לכן אין לי מקום קברי אבות הנה: תנו לי אחוזת קבר - הניחו לי לקנות קרקע כאן ותתנו אתם יושבי העיר להניח לי לקבור בה מתי משפחתי, כי אחוזת קבר אין יכול להיות אלא ברצון כל בני העיר. וכן מוכיח לפנינו כשנתן אברהם הכסף לעפרון ויקם [וגו'] לאברהם למקנה ואחרי כן קבר אברהם [וגו'] וקם לו לאחוזת קבר מאת כל בני חת:

Unlike Rashi, the Rashbam understands Avraham's words to imply that there are multiple layers of belonging. Avraham arrived to Hevron as a ger, a stranger from a foreign land. By settling in Hevron he then became a toshav, a resident among the people. However, he still was not considered a full member of the surrounding society, with the right to bury his family in a local plot. For that right, to make an eternal mark upon the landscape of that society, simply settling there was not sufficient. Rather, all members of the city needed to accept him to bestow upon him the full rights of membership and to confer an ultimate sense of belonging.

Many of the commentaries view the fact that Avraham had to be granted permission from the whole community to be an act of degradation to him. However, when considered from the perspective of the residents of the city, we see a different narrative emerge - one in which the members of a community must all be engaged in the act of welcoming the strangers in our midst. Avraham secured certain rights in Chet simply by settling in their midst. But, with Sarah's death, he sought a more intimate connection with the land, and indirectly, with the nation of Chet. To form this bond, Avraham needed to connect with the entire people of Chet, and the people of Chet offered him such an embrace.

Much of the discourse that has emerged from the events of the recent weeks has centered around questions of belonging. The encounter between Avraham and the people of Chet serves as a beautiful reminder to us that we must always remember the vulnerability of those in our midst who feel that they do not belong, and ensure that we welcome them with a loving embrace.



Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman is a member of the inaugural class of Maharat. She serves as Maharat at Ohev Sholom - The National Synagogue in Washington DC. Maharat Ruth is deeply committed to working to ensure that Jewish communal structures provide sensitivity and support to individuals and couples struggling with fertility challenges, and she is honored to serve on The Red Stone Advisory Committee. She is a proud member of both the Chicago and Washington Boards of Rabbis, and she sits on the Executive Committee of the board of the International Rabbinic Fellowship, of which she is also a member. Maharat Ruth is also a founding member of the Beltway VAAD.