

A Hittite

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Avraham decides he wants to acquire the Cave of Mahpela as a family burial location. It belongs to Efron the Hittite. The Hittite empire was based in central Turkey. Which illustrates that Avraham and his family were not the only migrants then. Relations with the Hittites seems to have been good. Yet the convoluted formal negotiations strike us as strange. Instead of approaching Efron directly he goes through the "people."

We now know that only the wealthy had burial caves, or special ossuaries where the bones were gathered and stored, sometimes in pottery containers. To qualify to buy a cave for burial Avraham had first to qualify as having the required status. This is why first he approaches the people and they respond positively that he does count as a nasi, a prince and he is allowed to buy a burial plot. He bows down to them in appreciation. Then asks them to negotiate with Efron. Finally, Efron, who it seems had been sitting there all the time, gets up and dramatically offers the field and the cave for free. Avraham bows in gratitude. But then Efron continues "Look it is only a field worth four hundred shekels. What's that between friends?" Avraham weighs out the full amount and the field and cave and the trees all pass to Avraham.

What went on here? Didn't Efron offer the field for free? Was Avraham politely declining because he did not want to be beholden? Or was it that he understood the formal procedures, the cultural nuances and realized that the norms of hospitality required offering something feely. But in reality, if one wanted to keep it, if it were a genuine sale he would have to do the obvious thing.

Why dos the Torah bother to go into such detail over this minor incident? I suggest the Torah is so concerned about good human relations, about getting on with others, even of different cultures. That why it encourages to listen to language, to try to determine intent and the subtle messages beyond the surface of human discourse. To understand the person, the culture and the context, as much as the words.