



PARSHAS CHAYEI SARAH 5778

The parsha starts with the death of Soroh Imeinu. She was buried in Chevron and then Avrohom settled in Be'er Shevah.

The concept of burying people who die goes back to the first death in human history. The Earth opened up to receive Hevel. There is a mitzvas asei to bury the dead and there is an issur to leave a body unburied. Avrohom set aside an entire plot of land to bury Soroh. He did not inter Soroh Imeinu in any communal cemetery. Avrohom was separate and conducted himself in a superior way. He represented Hashem to the world and this commanded the respect of the people he interacted with.

In last week's parsha, Avrohom tells Avimelech that from the time he and his wife started traveling around among the pagan nations he realized that their lives were perpetually in danger. He was perceived as a foreigner and an outsider, and was treated with suspicion and discrimination. He was preaching absolute morality and middos tovos and people didn't appreciate it. He wasn't part of their club and his life was in danger. It's not always easy to be separate. It comes with inconveniences and sacrifices.

But Avrohom didn't just preach superior morals and conduct. He lived it in his life.

In the end, Avrohom becomes successful and prosperous, and people realized that it was because he lived on that superior level that Hashem showered him with the blessings of success. Now people wanted to associate with Avrohom despite his separateness. The Benei Cheis called him a Nosi Elokim and wanted him to bury his wife in their cemetery. But Avrohom refused and insisted on maintaining his separateness even in this. He needed to buy a separate burial space and was willing to spend as much as it took.

Why is one's burial place so important in Jewish thought? It is because it reflects a fundamental difference between the Jew's capacity for spirituality and a non-Jew's capacity.

Only Jews can offer a korbon shalomim to Hashem while goyim can only offer a korbon oloh. Why?

Klal Yisroel serve Hashem uniquely by using the physical world in all of its aspects for spiritual purposes. The Ramban in his essay "Toras Hashem Temimoh" asks why the Torah is based on mitzvos ma'asiyos. Why don't we just have tefillah and limud which are spiritual activities? He answers that there are three dimensions to creation. There is the totally physical dimension, the totally spiritual dimension, and the delicate blending of both physical and spiritual dimensions within the human being. To serve Hashem only with spiritual activities and deny the physical dimension altogether like angels is not possible. People are not angels. Our unique challenge is to serve Hashem with our body and neshomo together. The body is the tool used by the neshomo, and when it is used by the neshomo to serve Hashem, then the body itself becomes elevated and spiritualized. A

Jewish body is kodosh and because of that it has to be treated with kedushoh. It is forbidden to mutilate the human body. It is not my own to abuse and destroy. I have a right to use my body in the way that Hashem intended me to use it. When I don't, I corrupt it and it gets defiled by my aveiros. This is the essence of Tefillah Zakoh on Erev Yom Kippur. Our job on this earth is to elevate and to sanctify our body.

This is a fundamental concept in our view of human beings. After an animal dies, there is nothing special that needs to be done with the carcass. You can let it rot, or feed it to your pets, etc. But there is no need to bury it. The animal's body is not kodosh, but a Jewish body is and needs burial. The kinoh which describes Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom concludes with the statement that Rebbe Akiva is fortunate because his body was purified and elevated. That is the greatest praise for a human being.

One who views himself as just a physical entity with no spiritual dimension is depriving himself of this potential to bring kedushoh to his body. This is the essential problem with the theory of evolution—it reduces the human body into an animal body with no potential for elevation. We use our body to serve Hashem and view physical enjoyment as a means to an end and not an end in itself. This is our main conflict with the non-Jewish worldview. A non-Jew cannot bring a korbon shalomim. A shalomim involves the human being eating the meat of the korbon offered to Hashem as part of the avodas hakorbon. A non-Jew can bring a korbon oloh because he can serve Hashem by denying the physical and negating the physical and only serving Hashem in spiritual activities. Once he begins getting involved in this world, he gets confused and clouded.

The laws of tznius underlie a fundamental value of the Torah—assessing another human being as a neshomo and not by their physical appearance. What do I want people to notice about me? The way I present myself to other people reflects the image I have about myself and my own source of worth. Does it come from my physical beauty or from my spiritual dimension? Of all the discussions about abortion, the main argument in favor rests on one deep misconception—that a woman has rights over her body. We don't own our bodies. We can only use it in ways that Hashem wants us to use it and that is how we sanctify it.

There is a din kevuroh because when Rebbe Chanania ben Tradyon was burning together with a Sefer Torah he remarked that the parchment is burning but the letters are flying to shomayim. When a person sees a sefer Torah burning he tears kriyoh. When a Sefer Torah becomes posul and cannot be read form—even if all the letters are wiped off completely—it is still buried, because even the parchment achieves a level of kedushoh as the carrier of the letters of the Torah. So too, the body receives kedushoh because it was the carrier of the neshomo and its vehicle of expression in the world. It is the tool for serving Hashem.

This is why Soroh Imeinu must be buried separately in a mokom kedosh. Her kedushas haguf demands nothing less. This is the concept of a Jewish Beis Ha'kvoros. This is why the halacha does not allow a tzaddik to be buried among evil people. It is an affront to the higher kedushoh to be buried among those with lower kedushoh.

The idea of tznius represents this. It was one of the clashes between the culture of the Greeks and Torah. The Greeks glorified the human body—they displayed it in their athletic games and represented it in their art without clothes. They thought the craziest thing in the world is bris miloh, because to them the body is a natural object of beauty and nothing more. There is no spiritual dimension to it. But we believe that the physical body can serve as a sign of a bris between human beings and Hashem. It is the carrier of that bond and it is kodosh. Something that is kodosh is covered. One should not get distracted with externals but to focus on the essence.

Living a life of kedushoh is explained by the Ramban and Rambam. The issur of lo sosuru and the mitzvah of Kedoshim Tihiyu is about making physical pleasure the be-all-and-end-all of life—that I indulge in pleasures for their own sake and not as a means for anything higher.

Soroh Imeinu lived a life of kedushoh which made her body holy. Her body had to be buried in a place that respected and reflected that kedushoh.

Chazal tell us that when Avrohom Ovinu was told to go to the Akeidah he wasn't told which mountain. He was going to be "shown" which mountain. How was he shown? The Midrash says that when scanning the landscape, Avrohom notices a cloud hovering over a mountain. He turned to Yitzchok and asked him what he sees. He responded that he too saw a cloud hovering over a mountain. Avrohom then turned to Eliezer and Yishmoel and asked them what they saw. They responded that they just see a landscape of hills and valleys. They can't see that cloud. They are dominated by their physicality like a donkey. So they must stay with the donkey and not travel further to Har Hamoriah. You aren't going to appreciate what's going to happen on that mountain.

When Yitzchok brought Rivka into his mother's tent for the first time, the cloud that used to hover over this tent returned. This cloud represents the kedushoh manifesting itself in the physical world. Soroh Imeinu's tent was filled with kedushoh and Rivkah Imeinu brought it back again. This is the life of a Jew.

A hundred years ago there was an anti-religious newspaper published in Yiddish called "The Forward" which ran all kinds of vicious and malicious articles defaming frum Jews and yiddishkeit. Nowadays no-one speaks Yiddish in non-religious circles, so the paper had adapted over the years into a standard, secular, left-wing Jewish newspaper. From time to time, they reprinted old Yiddish articles from a century ago and one of them was about the city of Brisk and Rav Chaim. They called him a wild fanatic who is backward and out-of-touch with the times. But these people in New York couldn't understand how all their relatives living in Europe who knew Rav Chaim first-hand were awe-struck and described him as a superior human being. They couldn't fathom how someone so backward and culturally primitive could be so superior? But this was the reality. Whether you agreed with Rav Chaim's approach to things or you disagreed, all acknowledged that the Torah made him a superior human being.

This was Avrohom Ovinu. Despite all his crazy ideas about absolute right and wrong and how avodo zoro is false, they still appreciated that he lived his life on a superior level. His

life reflected the superior wisdom and way of life of the Torah. In the end, they respected him and looked up to him. They wanted him to join them in their society and he refused. He is different. His body is not just an animal body, his body was designed to contain kedushoh. They can't understand that because he is the Nosi Elokim, he can't bury his wife in their cemetery.

When Avrohom looked for a wife for Yitzchok he overlooked Eliezer's daughter. Even though he was Avrohom's dedicated servant and mastered all Avrohom's Torah, Avrohom turned him down. I am boruch and you are arur. A wife must be found in Beis Besuel—a house of reshaim and avodo zoro! This is better yichus? The answer is that an eved is beholden psychologically to another human being. He serves Hashem only through the channel of his human master. He was obligated to another human being and couldn't rise above those aspirations. He served the G-d of Avrohom Ovinu. Hashem is not his own personal G-d.

Throughout the narrative, Eliezer doesn't have a name. He is simply the servant of Avrohom—completely subservient to his master. In two places, Eliezer becomes an ish. Why? In those places, he picked himself up and does something selfless—when he decides to choose Rivka to become Yitzchok's wife and gives up his ambitions for his own daughter to marry Yitzchok.

To have the capacity to connect to something way beyond ourselves and our human limitations and connect directly to the infinite power of Hashem is the definition of being boruch. Avrohom saw that potential in Beis Besuel and that was actualized in Rivka Imeinu. But Eliezer remains an arur—confined to human limitations.

We live in hard times. It is a struggle and a challenge to rise above the culture of the street and live as bnei Torah. But Jews have lived superior lives for thousands of years. We are not just non-Jews who like to keep some strange rituals. We have different values and different goals with a totally different outlook on life and what a human being is. Internalizing that is what becoming a ben Torah means. The Torah has to live within you.

Sometimes we get distracted. People like Lot become too rich and they lose focus on what's important and lose balance. Other people become famous and this throws them off-balance. Being a ben Torah is focusing on one thing: we are a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh—a superior people regardless of how we end up making our parnassah. We function differently, we are different human beings. This is why Soroh Imeinu needed a separate beis hak'voros. We are different and we have to remain that way.