

**РАННИ ЕВРЕЙСКИ СТРАТЕГИИ ЗА ПРЕГОВОРИ:  
„ПОДХОДЪТ НА ПРЕГОВОРИТЕ НА ПАТРИАРХ АВРААМ ЗА  
ЗАКУПУВАНЕ НА МЯСТО ЗА ПОГРЕБЕНИЕ НА  
ПОКОЙНАТА МУ СЪПРУГА САРА“**

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**Резюме:** *С това събитие, случило се преди 3800 години, Патриарх Авраам дава отличен урок за изкуството на преговорите. Историята започва, когато любимата съпруга на Авраам Сара си отива на възраст 127 г. Той тръгва да намери подходящо място за погребение на любимата си съпруга в осиновения му дом Хеврон. В сложна церемония за договаряне Авраам договаря цената за двойна пещера, пещерата Махпела, в полето на Ефрон Хетейския, на цена от четиристотин сребърни сикли. Авраам преговаря, докато все още оплаква загубата на Сара и докато е силно повлиян от емоциите си. Въпреки това той успява да проведе ефективен модел на преговори.*

*Тази статия се основава на Книга Битие, глава 23, с нейните 20 стиха като първоизточник. Акцент се поставя на въпроса: „Кои са основните стратегии, концепции, ходове, разбирания и техники, използвани от Патриарх Авраам по време на преговорите му с Ефрон Хетей?“ За да се отговори на този въпрос, всеки стих в тази статия е анализиран и основните взаимодействия при преговорите са изолирани и обяснени.*

*Придобиването на пещерата Махпела от Патриарх Авраам е добре познато, разпознаваемо и приемано като основна история за всички монотеистични религии; Юдаизъм, християнство и ислям. Важността на този доклад се основава на частично изследване посредством т.нар. „метод на конкретните ситуации“, базиран на следните факти: Библията описва подробно преговорите, споменават се всички части на процеса, като предварителни преговори, межкултурни преговори, разбиране на капаните в преговорите и как да се осигури споразумение в бъдеще. Освен това, посредством анализ на това описание в Светата книга ставаме свидетели на уникални преговори на един човек, който не принадлежи към хората на хетите, който се е сблъсквал с много предизвикателства и препятствия, за да придобие пещерата като място за погребение на починалата му съпруга Сара.*

*Посредством този пример се доказва тезата, че преговорите по време на емоционална принуда са възможни, и че ключът към успеха се крие в познаването на културата на партньора/опонента.*

**Ключови думи:** *преговори, културни различия, стратегии за преговори, подходи за преговори.*

**EARLY JEWISH NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES:  
“THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM’S NEGOTIATION APPROACH TO  
THE PURCHASE OF A BURIAL SITE FOR HIS LATE WIFE SARAH”**

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**Abstract:** *With this occurrence that took place 3,800 years ago, Abraham the Patriarch teaches us an excellent lesson in the art of negotiations. The story begins when Abraham’s beloved wife Sarah passes away at the age of 127. He sets out to find an appropriate burial site for his beloved wife in his adopted home of Hebron. In an elaborate bargaining ceremony, Abraham negotiates the price for a double-cave, the Cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the Hittite, settling at last on a price of four hundred silver shekels. Abraham negotiates while he is still mourning the loss of Sarah, and while he is deeply influenced by his emotions. Even so, he manages to conduct an effective model of negotiations.*

*This article is based on a primary source, the Book of Genesis chapter 23, with its 20 verses. What are the main strategies, concepts, moves, understandings and techniques used by Abraham the Patriarch during his negotiations with Ephron the Hittite? To answer this question, each verse in this article is analyzed, and the main negotiation interactions were isolated and explained.*

*Abraham the Patriarch’s acquisition of the Machpelah cave is well-known, familiar and acceptable as a basic story for all monotheist religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The importance of this paper is based on the following facts: The Holy Bible describes the negotiations in detail, all parts of*

*the process are mentioned, such as pre-negotiations, inter-cultural negotiations, understanding the traps in negotiations and how to secure the agreement in the future. Additionally, we are witness to a unique negotiation of one person, who is not one of the Hittite people, who faced many challenging obstacles in order to purchase the cave as a burial site for his dead wife Sarah.*

*We learn from this case that negotiating during emotional duress is possible and that the key to success lies within the knowledge of the counterpart's culture.*

**Keywords:** *negotiations, cultural differences, negotiation strategies, negotiation approaches*

### **Introduction**

The Book of Genesis, Chapter 23, describes in detail, a unique negotiation session between the Jewish Patriarch Abraham, and Ephron the Hittite. The death of Sarah, Abraham's wife, left Abraham heartbroken, and in search for a ritualized way to inter his wife near his center of life, so he can continue mourning her. To facilitate such a plan, Abraham, despite his sadness and sorrow, takes upon himself the task of negotiating with the Hittite people the purchase of a suitable plot of land to serve as a burial plot for his wife.<sup>1</sup> [3]

The following case study describes and analyzes Abraham's negotiation strategy as he approaches the purchase of the burial site for his late wife. The goal of the analysis, and its conclusions, is to provide theoretical and practical insight regarding early Jewish negotiating philosophy and practice.

We can learn from this case study the successive order of the prescribed stages, the rituals, and the process of negotiations which led to Abraham's success.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis, 23:4: "And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke unto the children of Heath".

### **Biblical Narrative and Analysis**

Existing narrative in the Book of Genesis, which is part of the Torah, the Jewish Holy Book, provides a comprehensive insight into the story of Abraham's approach and practice to the task of acquiring the land he decided to use as the burial site for his late wife, Sarah.

Verses 1-20 of chapter 23 in the Book of Genesis present the story of Sarah's death and of Abraham's negotiations with the Hittites. These negotiations led to the subsequent acquisition of a burial plot for his late wife.

Each quoted verse is accompanied by a brief analytic narrative.

**Verse 1:** *"And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah".*

**Analysis, Verse 1:** This verse creates the chronological timeline of Sarah's life, which is a familiar biblical instrument, traditionally used in ancient times to calculate the age of the world and other aspects of human life on earth.<sup>2</sup>  
[2]

**Verse 2:** *"And Sarah died in Kiriath-Arba the same as Hebron in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her".*

**Analysis, Verse 2:** This verse places Abraham at the start of the mourning period (usually seven days and nights), and at the location where he, ultimately, wants to procure a burial plot.

**Verse 3:** *"And Abraham rose up from before his death, and spoke unto the children of Heath, saying".*

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<sup>2</sup> Frank N. Egerton III, (1966), the Longevity of the Patriarchs: A Topic in the History of Demography, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1966), pp. 575-584.

**Analysis, Verse 3:** Obviously, Abraham must procure a burial site as fast as possible. This can be explained by the custom of the Jews to bury their dead as quickly as possible.<sup>3</sup> [1]

**Verse 4:** *"I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a burying-place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight".*

**Analysis, Verse 4:** This move is a step forward in Abraham's negotiation process of building the support of the people of Heath before the negotiation with the landowner Ephron, the Heath. This approach used by Abraham of paying respect and speaking in an "asking manner", thereby creating the support for his acquisition, demonstrates Abraham's understanding of the Heath people.

**Verse 5:** *"And the children of Heath answered Abraham, saying unto him":*

**Analysis, Verse 5:** This verse is evidence to a verbal communication between Abraham and the children of Heath. It also indicates that the conversation was between a group and a single person, making the negotiations very fragile and risky.

**Verse 6:** *"Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us; in the choice of our sepulchers bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulcher, but that thou mayest bury thy dead".*

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<sup>3</sup> Book of Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse -23, "you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance".

**Analysis, Verse 6:** The Heaths treat Abraham with the respect accorded to a noble person (“a mighty prince”), and in a demonstration of magnanimity, offer him a burial plot amongst their own dead. This is a considerable honor, but an honor that Abraham must reject since he wants to bury his wife in a plot that will not be used for burial by any non-Jews.

At this point the negotiations move from the ritualistic part to the “difficult” part. The people of Heath answered very politely and respectfully to Abraham and agreed to the idea of allowing him to bury his wife on their land.

Abraham knows that if there will be no resistance for his acquisition from the people of Heath, Ephron the Landowner will find it harder to oppose the offered deal. Here we encounter a good knowledge of the culture and use of the correct procedures in pre-negotiation for the optimal success in the negotiation process.

**Verse 7:** *“Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Heath.”*

**Analysis, Verse 7:** Abraham, despite being accorded significant honor by the Heath, responds with equal respect by bowing to his interlocutors. With this deep bow, Abraham is establishing a reciprocating platform of respect and honor between himself and the Heath people.

**Verse 8:** “And he communed with them, saying, if it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar,

**Verse 9:** “That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth, he shall give it me for a possession of a burying place amongst you”.

**Analysis, Verses 8-9:** Following the confidence-building act of the bow, Abraham moves expeditiously towards his goal. He capitalizes on the goodwill demonstrated by the Heath and pushes forward: *“If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.”* At this point, the ritualistic aspects of the negotiations have concluded and the negotiation process has moved on to specifics; Abraham is very precise in his request, both about the site he wants and about the terms of the procurement. He wants a specific cave, and he wants to own it outright. This is, undoubtedly, a delicate moment in the negotiations, because Abraham is obviously not satisfied with the initial response of the Heath, but wants something else.

**Verse 10:** “And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heath: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heath, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying”.

**Verse 11:** “Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury the dead”.

**Analysis, Verses 10-11:** Ephron the Heath, who we are told has been sitting among his people throughout the exchange, obviously willing to have the negotiation managed on his behalf, now personally enters the negotiations. He says to Abraham: *“No, my lord,”* he said. *“Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.”* On the face of it, it seems that Ephron is being even more generous than required by Abraham; after all, he offers to give the burial cave to Abraham for free, rather than to be paid for it.

**Verse 12:** “And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land”.

**Verse 13:** “And he spoke unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, but if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there”.

**Analysis verses 12-13:** Abraham, who should be happy with Ephron’s offer, is obviously not satisfied. He reinforces the gesture of respect by bowing again; this detail is carefully emphasized in the text. Then, having established goodwill and respect, Abraham insists on his original negotiation plan. He says to Ephron: “... *'But if thou wilt, I pray thee, hear me: I will give the price of the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there'*”.

Abraham now tries to move the negotiation from a social norm to a market norm. He attempts to transform the discussion from an act of goodwill, a format that tends to leave questions of clear ownership vague, to an act of procurement in exchange for money, an act that makes the issue of ownership clear and final. Thus, Abraham plans to avoid regrets and claims on the land from Ephron the Heath in the future. Abraham wanted all the Heath people to witness the purchase and the negotiations, so the deal will be known and clear to all.

**Verse 14:** “And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him”.

**Verse 15:** “My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that between me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead”.

**Analysis, Verses 14-15:** Abraham’s strategy succeeds. Ephron, for reasons which are not clarified in the original text, decides to go along and sell the plot. The author, again, describes Ephron’s response in detail: “*Ephron answered*”

*Abraham, "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead."*

**Verse 16:** "And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heath, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant".

**Analysis, Verse 16:** Abraham must be delighted. The author tells us that Abraham avoided further haggling: "*Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Heath: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.*" Abraham understands that further haggling will insult Ephron, and he decides to conclude the negotiations with an obvious win-win move by immediately agreeing to Ephron's price.

**Verse 17:** "And the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the borders roundabout, were made sure".

**Analysis, Verse 17:** The Biblical text emphasizes that this property turned to Abraham's ownership by deed, and not only by the promise of God. The author shows us a clear definition of the acquisition by Abraham, the borders, the trees, the exact location, and what's on the ground and what is under. As it is written: "*So the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the border thereof roundabout, were made sure*".

**Verse 18:** "Unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heath, before all that went in at the gate of his city".

**Analysis, Verse 18:** The author tells us that the final deal after the negotiation process was conducted within the city gate, where one can find many people who heard the details of the deal and thus became witnesses to the result of the negotiations. Thus, Abraham assures future generations of the procurement of the Machpelah cave as a burial site for his wife Sarah.

**Verse 19:** "And after this, Abraham buried Sarah, his wife, in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre--the same is Hebron--in the land of Canaan".

**Analysis, Verse 19:** This verse indicates the active conclusion of the negotiation session and the resultant purchase, by indicating that the cave that was purchased was used for exactly what it was purchased for. Furthermore, the author tells the reader again the location of the Machpelah Cave, possibly in order to avoid misunderstandings or disagreement in the future (in the absence of organized, survivable archives with accurate mapping data).

**Verse 20:** "And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a burying-place by the children of Heath".

**Analysis, Verse 20:** The author is, once more, telling us the final result of the entire process, the field and the cave are now under Abraham's possession, this time indicating exactly who were the previous owners of the property.

### **Discussion**

In this section we highlight specific, relevant aspects of the negotiation strategies employed in this case study:

### **The involvement of the Heath people before Ephron the Heath**

Abraham uses the public opinion of the Heath people as a step to support his challenge of achieving the Machpelah cave. First, he approaches them and informs them about his desire through an emotional-communications channel. Thus, they became mediators and supporters, in a way, to his process of purchasing the cave.

### **Payment in Desirable Currency**

Abraham pays with silver shekels ingots, as acceptable in that time and area, further easing the transaction. Abraham insisted on paying Ephron the Heath, and rejected having the Machpelah cave as a gift. This was due to a deep understanding that a gift is given based on goodwill carries with it a chance to be taken back. The elements, strategy, and tactics used by Abraham could serve as an effective framework for successful negotiations anywhere, anytime.

### **Use of Emotions**

The use of emotions, when done well, can help advance a negotiation session. Abraham approaches the Hittites with an **emotional** argument, from the start of the negotiations. He is provoking the emotional response of empathy, "*I am a stranger, I am a foreigner*". This approach by the Patriarch Abraham is designed to elicit two important emotions in the people of Heath: the first is a feeling of control, and the second is the awakening of a desire to show mercy and be magnanimous. These two feelings together are effective at the beginning of any negotiations, but especially in an asymmetric negotiation for the weaker side, such as Abraham's in this case study.

In addition, this emotion-based approach is effective while talking to many people at once. The reason for this is that emotions tend to have a significant

impact on crowds, while rational negotiations demand thinking, evaluation, and calculation, which is difficult to achieve with multiple participants. This is the case because there is a good chance that there will be multiple opinions and/or arguments in a group of people.

### **Conclusions and Rationalization**

The negotiation process between Abraham and Ephron that took place nearly 3,800 years ago, is an example of how negotiations are a basic instrument in daily life. This has been the case since time immemorial. Additionally, it demonstrates how the basic elements and methods that were used then are universal and timeless and can still be found today.

Then, as now, people engage in multiple negotiation sessions to procure possessions and/or property. To that end, this case study presents a fairly general case of negotiations, shedding light on the negotiation practices of the time and more specifically, on the negotiation strategy of Abraham the Patriarch.

The following subsections present the main conclusions derived from the analysis of the relevant verses, along with a brief rationalization in support of the highlighted conclusion:

**Negotiations are often asymmetrical and such a format requires special tools.**

The story of Abraham's quest to purchase the Machpelah cave is a clear demonstration of an asymmetric negotiation scenario. Abraham is a sojourner, a stranger to the Heath people, and his goal was a substantial one: to buy land. We can see that even when we start a negotiation session from an asymmetric position it is possible to succeed and negotiate fruitfully. This can be accomplished by

using the instruments utilized by the Patriarch Abraham during his negotiations with the Heath people, and Ephron the Heath.

**It is important to start a negotiation session with some useful preliminaries**

Abraham prepares himself for the negotiation process by studying the points where he can influence the Heath people and Ephron. Abraham is *gathering information* to try to learn in advance about possible obstacles and difficulties that might arise in the course of the negotiations.<sup>4</sup> [6]

**It is essential to take cultural factors into account**

We can see that Abraham understands the people involved in the negotiations. Abraham uses a language that is understood by the Heath people. The use of clear well-known language is a key instrument to success. Along with that, Abraham is using a *bill of sale* as was used in those times to ensure his ownership over the Machpelah cave.<sup>5</sup> [5] That proves familiarity with **local customs**.<sup>6</sup> [Known in the Middle East as "Urf ". The very local customs and behavior of the village area and district.] Abraham is aware of the fact that keeping the honor of the Heath and the landlord Ephron, and using the people of Heath as mediators, will help him succeed in his desire to buy the land and the cave.<sup>7</sup> [4]

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<sup>4</sup> Moses Winnefeld, *The Bible World*, Davidson, 1993, p.147.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah, 32, 14-17.

<sup>6</sup> Known in the Middle East as "Urf ". The very local customs and behavior of the village area and district.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis, 23, 8-9.

### **The importance of reciprocity**

In order to achieve you must give<sup>8</sup>. [In convincing and influencing methods, supported with reciprocity the act of giving something or doing something coerces the other side most of the time to do the same.] Abraham uses local customs and takes the time and ritualistic effort, to pay respect to the people of Heath and Ephron himself.

### **Taking confidence-building measures and creating positive public opinion is essential**

Abraham is well aware of the fact that public opinion and public support are a key instrument to his success, and therefore he approaches the people of Heath before starting to negotiate with Ephron; Abraham wishes to create the optimal positive atmosphere before the start of the actual negotiations. By bowing in front of the assembly, Abraham shows respect, deference, and subservience, which were all excellent confidence-building measures, particularly in tribal negotiation contexts. The second aspect was utilizing the Heath people as an "evidence tribunal" to the process and the final agreement.

We can learn from the analysis above that negotiating while experiencing difficult emotions is possible and that the ultimate key to success lies within one's knowledge of the counterpart's culture and customs.

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[3] Genesis, 23:4: "And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spoke unto the children of Heath".

[4] Genesis, 23, 8-9.

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