

It is Shabbat, time to leave behind the troubles and sorrows and worries of the week. But how can we achieve that in these perturbing days and weeks? I will not elaborate on these thoughts but just leave some blanks. Each and every one of you will be able to fill in these blanks yourselves. At first glance even this week's parashah seems not to give us guidance out of every day's darkness into the light of Shabbat. Of all places, the narration plays in Kiryat Arba, near Hebron on the field of Ephron the Hittite at the Cave of Machpelah. And there we are in the middle of the conflict which seems to be so utterly irresolvable. However, I feel surprised and consoled that our parashah does offer perspectives. What is the significance of the Cave of Machpelah for us? The Talmudic-era commentary, the midrash Bereshit Rabbah, offers the following explanation: "Said R. Yudan bar Simon: This is one of the three places about which the nations of the world cannot taunt Israel saying, these are stolen lands, and these are they: the Cave of Machpelah, the Temple, and the burial place of Joseph (Shechem). The Cave of Machpelah as it is written. (23:16) "And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver" ... (Bereshit Rabbah 79,7) And Ibn Ezra follows this train of thought emphasizing that this chapter had been written "to make known the pre-eminence of the land of Israel over all other lands, both for the living and the dead." Surprisingly enough it is the Ramban, who opposes Ibn Ezra's interpretation; surprising because the Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman from Gerona in Catalonia, was the one who started rebuilding the devastated Jewish community of Jerusalem after its destruction by the Crusaders. Says Ramban: "What praise is that for the Holy Land? Surely, he (Abraham) would not have taken her (Sara) to another land to bury her!" Ibn Ezra adds another reason for the sale of the burial plot: "To confirm the word of the Lord to Abraham that it would be his inheritance." That would, as Ibn Ezra argues, be the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promise in Lech lecha *לְיָרְעֶךָ אֶתְּךָ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת* "I will assign this land to your offspring" and *וְאֶגְדְּלָהּ שְׁמֶךָ* "I will make your name great," since the Hittites reply addressing Abraham: *שְׁמַעְנוּ אֲדֹנָי נְשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה בְּתוֹכֵנוּ* "Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God among us." (23:6). This reasoning can easily be used – or I would argue, abused – to claim the whole land of Jehuda and Shomron as the sole and exclusive inheritance of the people of Israel. But further observations of our sages make me wary and hesitant to make such a claim. The 13th century French Rabbi and Bible commentator Hezekiah ben Manoah, called the Chizkuni, elaborates on our sidra: "And Abraham rose up and bowed down to the people of the land" (v. 7)-Abraham needed all of them. Though Ephron had sold him the field, Abraham was not authorized to use it as a burial ground without the permission of his fellow citizens. He therefore had to rise up in order to bow down to all of them, even to those behind him." So far the Chizkuni. I find Chizkuni's commentary quite convincing. First, Abraham's name is not made great, or does the narration prove Abraham's wisdom. He wants to call a piece of land his own to bury his wife Sarah; a piece of land which promises to be left in peace. But he does not claim it against the will of, but in obeisance toward, his fellow citizens. Calling a piece of land your own does not necessarily contradict to live in peace with your neighbours. That is what Abraham understood and that is what generations of a Sephardi minority worshipping at the Cave of Machpela did for centuries before the 1929 massacre: living in peace with the fellow minority of Christians and the majority of Muslim Arabs. Our sidra points out how we could live in peace with our neighbours. All the commentators hasten to point out that the Cave of Machpelah was not stolen by Abraham or seized by force but legally acquired at a fair sales price. This was to the best of my understanding the original concept of the early Zionist aliyot, preceding the concept of claiming/seizing the whole land exclusively in the name of a messianic Zionism. Second, our sidra emphasizes the need for a proper burial place. Burying your dead is a task of human rights and human dignity. Therefore, in a way "consequently," it was a feature of the Nazi's malicious abasement of their victims to burn them and disperse the ashes on fields or in rivers. Abraham purchases the plot of land and buries his wife, Sarah. That piece of land worth 400 Shekels is all that Abraham will see in his lifetime of God's promise. But it is sufficient to grant him the human right to bury his deceased and grant the deceased human dignity. When I lived in Israel almost 20 years ago, I witnessed in awe the efforts of the *Chewrot Kadishah*, the burial societies, and their painstaking efforts to restore human dignity to victims of terror attacks. And honestly, I try very hard not to graphically imagine the efforts of the forensic doctors and the *Chewrot Kadishah* in these days to restore the dignity of the victims of the October 7 massacre. Those utterly brave and admirable people allow the relatives of the murdered to give them a dignified burial. Yes, it is Shabbat, and still, we are troubled and afraid, in Israel and in Sweden, in the United States and in Germany, in Finland and in France. But as the late Rabbi Lord Sacks has taught us, faith is not acceptance. And despair is not a Jewish emotion. Therefore we have the courage to hope for the better world to be. Our sidra carries God's promise that we will have a place to bury our dead and live in peace, not in fighting or subduing our neighbours, but in mutual respect. And we are meant to contribute to the healing of the world.

Shabbat shalom