

# CHIZUK AND IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra  
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael -  
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

The Torah's editorial policies can seem very vague: Whereas precious little information is provided in regard to Avraham and Sarah's background and ancestry, the Torah chooses to present us with a highly detailed depiction of the negotiations between Avraham and Efron. As Avraham seeks a burial place for his wife Sarah, he approaches Efron who at first promises the cave of Machpela, together with the adjacent field, as a gift: "The field that I have given you and the cave in it, to you have I given it." Avraham does not want to receive a gift lest the transaction be made conditional. Thinking of the long-term future he insists on paying the full price. The matter ends off with Efron's sly response: "My Lord, listen to me, a piece of land worth 400 Shekels of silver - what is that between you and me? And you can bury your dead." Avraham accepts the terms of the deal and hands over the money.

The Alter or Saba of Kelm found the description puzzling, finding it hard to understand how a gift is so swiftly transformed into a sale. Although, one could postulate, as some Biblical scholars do, that what transpired between Avraham and Efron was simply a classic example of "Middle Eastern style" negotiations, the Saba suggested a different take.

A well known tale speaks of a philosophical debate between one of the Torah greats of the past, and the leading philosophers of his time, on the question

of whether animal nature could be changed and refined through a lengthy educational process. The day finally arrived when the philosophers tried to prove their contention introducing a cat which had been trained to walk on his hind legs while serving drinks like a waiter. The cat was wowing all of the assembled filling his role beautifully. Just as the philosophers were ready to smugly declare victory, the Rambam (or Maharal or R. Yehobnasan Eiebeschutz ...) opened up a small box they had placed before them and let a tiny mouse loose. Upon seeing the mouse, the cat immediately dropped the pitcher of wine, fell on all fours, and began to pursue its prey.

Efron HaChiti, said the Saba of Kelm, may be likened to this same cat: He had assumed an altruistic veneer, offering to make the cave a gift of goodwill, and yet since this stance was only surface deep, the moment he smelled money he reverted back to his natural self.

This same mashal may be applied to certain contemporary events. We recently commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the Balfour declaration. Here too, we witnessed an Efron-like show of generosity become quickly

transformed into a cynical show of diplomatic real-politic. This generous show of support for the Jewish people and the establishment of a "national home", was followed shortly thereafter by the British Mandate's Policy in Palestine which severely curtailed the hopes of bringing the previous promises to fruition.

[The original declaration may have been an indirect result of the great influx, in

the late 1890s, of tens of thousands of poor and unskilled Russian Jews fleeing persecution. Without delving too deeply into past history, in the year 1905 the British Parliament introduced the Alien Act which put into effect immigration restrictions into Britain (ostensibly, to curb the entry of criminal elements). This may have been the backdrop for the Balfour Declaration some years later]. In any event, the Balfour Declaration was a major step forward as the idea of a National Home for the Jews gained prominence. One should not overlook the efforts of Lord Herbert Samuel, who then was the cabinet secretary of Britain, whose memorandum on the topic was central to propelling forward the discussion of the matter. Lord Samuel was subsequently requested to serve as the first civil Governor of Palestine. In his memoirs, Lord Samuel described the feeling in Jerusalem after he was appointed, and was honored with the reading of the Maftir on Shabbat Nachamu in the packed Churva synagogue: "I was called to the reading of the Law and from the platform I recited in Hebrew "Racheim al Zion - Have mercy on Zion for it is the home of our life, and save her that is grieved in spirit speedily in our days ... Blessed are You O Lord who makes Zion joyful for her children." These words were preceded by the words of Yeshayahu: "Nachamu Nachamu Ami - Comfort you, comfort you my People". Lord Samuel concludes: "The emotion that I could not but feel seemed to spread throughout the vast congregation. Many wept and I could almost hear the sigh of generations".

Fast-forwarding a hundred years later, today Jews are the majority in Jerusalem and in all of Israel. The land promised to

Avraham has been re-inhabited by his descendants, and no longer are we required to plead before an Efron, or to beseech a foreign superpower.

Some might ask whether we have not accomplished the desired end and are now at the portals of the Messianic era. Yet, one must remember that according to the Rambam in Hilchot Melachim, as well as the preponderance of Jewish sources, the Messianic Era will be a natural unfolding of human endeavor, as we slowly but surely make our way home. Blessed are we to live in such a time - to not only hear the sighs of previous generations but their gleeful shouts of joy!

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