There Is a Place

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There is a cemetery in Woodbridge, NJ in which my dad is buried. Though I live states away and rarely visit, I think about it often. It takes shape before me. I imagine the place where my dad is buried and it pulls on me.

Parashat Hayyei Sarah tells the story of not only Sarah's burial but Avraham's as well. When Sarah dies, Avraham negotiates to purchase a plot of land in Hebron upon which to bury Sarah. Avraham buys the land that we call Me'arat ha-Makhpelah from the Hittites and buries Sarah there. The Torah is precise in telling us the exact location of the land, piling modifier upon modifier to help us—or perhaps Avraham and Sarah's descendants—know the location of their graves.

בראשית כג:יט

אַחֲרֵי כֵן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל מְעָרַת שְׂדֵה הַמַּכְפֵּלָה עַל פְּנֵי מַמְרֵא הִוא חֶבְרוֹן בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן׃

Genesis 23:19

And then Avraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Makhpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan.

It's as if the Torah is acknowledging: in Avraham's day, this was not our land and we were not destined to be here for many generations. But one day, when you want to find this plot, here's a roadmap how to find it. Or, perhaps, the descriptors are not to help later generations to locate the land at all. Perhaps the Torah knows that, given the many years in which we'll be geographically separated from this land, every modifier, every descriptor will help us feel closer to it, at least in our hearts.

Before Sarah's death and after her burial, Avraham was living in Beersheva. After he buried Sarah in Hebron, he did not stay close to her grave. Rather, he went back to Beersheva, where he lived out the rest of his days. I imagine what it was like for Avraham knowing and feeling closely the place of Sarah's burial, even as he lived a distance away. Did he think about the earth in which he buried her? Did he imagine the surrounding terrain and did it take shape in his mind? Did it pull on him even as he lived at least a day's travel away?

It is like that for me when I think about where my dad is buried. First, I think about the cemetery itself. Then, I think about the restaurants and stores that are in the surrounding area. Then, I think about the mall which is located just minutes from the cemetery. Finally, I think about the exit on the highways that run close by. Each modifier makes that plot of land feel more real, more three-dimensional, even as I sit hundreds of miles away.

And then with his own death thirty-eight years later, Yitzhak and Yishmael came together to bury Avraham in the land he had purchased decades earlier.[1] With Avraham's death, the narrative of the Torah moves us far away from Me'arat ha-Makhpelah, the place of Avraham

[1] Genesis 25:9.

and Sarah's burial in Hebron. The Israelites descend into Egypt and find themselves enslaved there for hundreds of years. When they emerge, rather than make quick entry into the promised land of Israel, which would bring them back into proximity with Sarah and Avraham's burial site, they instead wander for forty years in the wilderness. It will be about 650 years until Yehoshua finally conquers the land and the Jewish people are once again in the land in which Avraham buried Sarah so many years before.

But I wonder, if during all of those years of geographic distance, during the years of oppression and wandering in the wilderness, if the place in which their earliest ancestors were buried didn't exert some kind of pull on their heart. When they were crying out to God in Egypt, did they feel a sense of anchoring to the land of Canaan, with Sarah and Avraham's gravesite marking a promise that would one day be fulfilled? When they were delayed in the wilderness, unsure where they were going and when they would arrive, was Me'arat ha-Makhpelah a point on the map of the hearts that directed their wanderings?

The Talmud seems to think so. A *midrash* describes that when Calev entered the land with the spies to check out the land, he made a private detour to Me'arat ha-Makhpelah to pray to God at the burial site of Avraham and Sarah.[2] There are two aspects of this *midrash* that are striking to me. First, Calev, who had never previously been in the Land of Israel, somehow knew the precise location of Me'arat ha-Makhpelah. The geographic details of Avraham and Sarah's burial ground must have been handed down from generation to generation such that, hundreds of years later, Calev would know exactly where to go when he arrived in the Land of

[2] Bavli Sotah 34b.

Israel. Second, Me'arat ha-Makhpelah carried such emotional significance for Calev that he saw it as a holy destination in which to pray to God.

Once they had captured the land under Yehoshua's leadership, Calev requested that he be given the land of Hebron, the land that housed the burial grounds of Avraham and Sarah, that he visited forty-five years earlier.[3] He and the Jewish people had been distant from this land for nearly 700 years and yet, it was always in their hearts. They knew precisely the plot of land upon which their ancestors were buried. It was in the cave of the field of Makhpelah. It was facing Mamre. It was in Hebron. In the land of Canaan. And, it had been waiting for them.

If I'm honest, I began writing this Dvar Torah from a place of guilt. I think of my father buried, without surrounding family to visit his grave, and I am states away. I am not physically in that place with him. But, I end feeling a burgeoning comfort that perhaps I carry my father's burial place within me just as the Israelites carried the burial place of Avraham and Sarah with them, so many years in the wilderness. His burial ground pulls on me as I imagine it pulled on Avraham after he buried Sarah and pulled on Calev and many Israelites in between. And it waits for me as it waited for them, full of memory, meaning and holiness.

[3] Joshua 14:7-10, 12-14.