

Light Insight

When It's a Wrench to Be a Mentch

G-d tested Abraham with ten tests in his life. Most commentators explain that his final and greatest test was the binding of his son Isaac for sacrifice at G-d's command. However, Rabbeinu Yona explains that Abraham's tenth test was finding a grave for his wife Sarah.

Why was this such a test for Abraham? How did finding a grave for Sarah prove that he was worthy to be the progenitor of G-d's people?

Imagine a used-car salesman. With a smile right out of a tooth-paste ad which can blind at ten paces, he'll tell you that the jalopy he's leaning on will run for another 50,000 miles at least. When he moves his arm, the car sags like an exhausted mule.

Abraham thought he was the legitimate heir to the Land of Israel. He assumed that he could bury his beloved wife wherever he chose. Instead, to buy a burial plot for Sarah he had to enter into a haggling match with Efron

which made buying a used car look like dealing with a Rolls-Royce salesman.

Add the emotional upheaval of the binding of Isaac, followed directly by the news of Sarah's death, and one could forgive Abraham for treating Efron, the world's prototypical used-car salesman, with the disdain he deserved. But is that how Abraham treated him?

The verse says that "Abraham prostrated himself before the members of the council..." Abraham treated Efron like the most honorable of people. He didn't protest or belittle Efron, he didn't bring up the life-shaking events that had just befallen him by way of excuse for unacceptable behavior, he didn't even act coolly towards the whole situation.

Abraham remembered that Efron, a human being, deserved to be treated like the image of G-d that he was. Abraham didn't react to Efron according to Efron's level. He behaved as a Jew should. If Abraham had suffered tragedy, why should Efron have to bear it?

Sometimes the little pebbles in life's path trip us up more easily

than its giant boulders. A person who understands that life is no more than one giant test will recognize a large test, as Abraham certainly did. But how about someone pushing in in line on a hot day when you're in a hurry? Do we react with the aplomb, patience and even loving-kindness that a Jew is expected to display? Sometimes the little annoyances of life are more of a test than the cataclysmic events. A Jew must be a mentch even when treated in a most unmentchlich way.

It takes enormous self-control, tremendous self-mastery to always treat every human being, Jew or non-Jew, with dignity.

Abraham's tenth test was really two tests in one. He was under the greatest stress and he was confronted with a person who was somewhat less than a prince. Nevertheless, he accorded him honor. It was this test that showed that Abraham was fit to be the father of the Jewish People — G-d's ambassadors in the world.

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LOVE of the LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel

Hebron

“Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron, in the Land of Canaan.”

(Genesis 23:2)

Kiryat Arba (the Town of the Four) is so called because of the four couples buried

there: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.”
(Midrash Rabba)

Ancient Hebron was not only linked to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs but is also mentioned regarding the spies sent by Moses to scout the Land of Israel before the Jewish People entered it on their way back from Egypt. In fact, one of them — Calev ben Yefunah — was

awarded this part of the Land of Israel for his faithful report. Hebron was also the seat of King David’s reign for seven and a half years before he made Jerusalem his capital.

Hebron is today under Palestinian rule, but there is a Jewish settlement in the city and in adjoining Kiryat Arba. The Machpela Cave where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried continues to attract Jewish worshippers and visitors from all over the world.

Response Line

Gabriel Dalfin wrote:

*Dear Rabbi,
The custom in my country is that when a person dies, the inscription on the matzeiva (grave stone) is written in Hebrew and Spanish. I’ve heard that you can only write in Hebrew on a matzeiva. Should we follow the custom of our country, or only write in Hebrew?*

Dear Gabriel,

The universal custom of building a matzeiva over a grave dates back at least as far as Jacob: “And Jacob erected a monument on her grave; this is Rachel’s Tomb, a monument till today.” (Genesis 35:20) Another famous matzeiva is Absalom’s Pillar, which we here in

Jerusalem can see from the window of the bus on the way to the Western Wall.

To answer your question, we need to understand some of the reasons for a matzeiva:

- To show respect for the departed, especially a parent. Mystically, it benefits the soul, giving it a place or an address, so to speak.
- To glorify the name of the deceased and perpetuate it.
- To show that someone is buried there, so people will avoid passing over the grave and becoming spiritually impure. This was especially important when the Temple stood, when purity and impurity had many practical applications in everyday life. Some authorities maintain that for this reason, a *matzeiva* is virtually a Biblical command.

Concerning the lettering, one should use Hebrew only. Hebrew is

the Holy Language. It’s the language of the Torah and the language with which the world was created. Since the matzeiva shows respect for the soul of the departed, it’s proper to use Hebrew, since it has this spiritual component.

In deference to local custom, however, you can write something in Spanish, too. I suggest that the Hebrew inscription be more prominent than the Spanish. If at all possible, use only the Jewish date of death (and birth, if included), and not the secular date.

In any case, the *matzeiva* shouldn’t be gaudy or ostentatious. Rather, it should conform to the average *matzeiva* in the community. Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan writes that rather than buying an elaborate monument, children wishing to perpetuate their parents’ names and benefit their souls would do much better donating the extra money to a charity which helps people do *mitzvot* and study Torah.