

Students of the *parsha* have long struggled to navigate the wrinkles present in our reading of the interaction between Avraham and Efron. In his sefer *HaAvot V' HaShevatim*, R' Avraham Korman writes that many have made a fundamental mistake in interpreting the storyline with regard to the personalities mentioned. Consider the following:

3 Then Abraham...spoke to the **Hittites**, saying,

5 And the **Hittites** replied to Abraham

...

7 Thereupon Abraham bowed low to **the people of the land, the Hittites**,

8 and he said to them, "...you must agree to intercede for me with **Ephron son of Zohar**.

...

10 Ephron dwelled among the Hittites; so **Ephron the Hittite** answered Abraham in the hearing of the **Hittites**, all who entered the gate of his town, saying,

11 "No, my lord, hear me: I have given you the field and I have given you the cave that is in it; **I have given it to you in the presence of my people**. Bury your dead."

12 Then Abraham bowed low before **the people of the land**,

...

17 So **Ephron's land** in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of that field—**passed**

18 to Abraham as his possession, in the presence of the Hittites, of all who entered the gate of his town.

...

20 Thus the field with its cave **passed from the Hittites to Abraham**, as a burial site.

It is not at all clear exactly who Efron is from these verses. Is he a Hittite as implied by verse 10? Or is Efron himself also a foreigner abusing another foreigner, Avraham? Furthermore, who are "the people of the land"? Lastly, from whom did Avraham actually acquire the field? From Efron, as stated in verse 17, or from the Hittites, as would seem to be the conclusion in verse 20?

The view taken by Rashi (among others) is that Efron was in fact a Hittite. Here, "the people of the land" is not merely another term for the Hittite people as a whole, but rather to their governing body (See Da'at Mikra and <https://goo.gl/JSrUit>, pg. 20). Efron wasn't just a Hittite, he was the newly minted head of this very council. In the end, Avraham succeeds in purchasing the field from Efron, with the approval of the council who represented the entire Hittite people.

R' Avraham Korman, on the other hand, notes these linguistic oddities and argues that Efron was *not* a Hittite. He understands, "Ephron dwelled [בְּשֵׁיבַת] among the Hittites" as being quite simply that he lived amongst them, but was not actually one of them. This is almost completely opposite to the approach taken by Rashi who explains that the term dwelled [בְּשֵׁיבַת] is a hint to sitting in judgment (that is on the local council). R' Korman isolates four distinct populations present in the story: the Hittites, people of the land, all who entered the gate of his town, and Efron. The Hittites were the native population who had control over the region. The "people of the land" were the members of the

Hittite governing council. “All who entered the gate of his town” were compatriots of Efron who lived in the Hittite area.

R' Korman explains the course of events as follows. Avraham approached Efron first in his pursuit to acquire a burial plot for Sarah. This initial interaction took place before, “my [Efron’s] people.” R' Korman assumes that Efron’s “people” are one and the same with, “all who entered the gate of his town.” Only later does Avraham approach the Hittites, bowing to “the people of the land, the Hittites,” that is, the Hittite council. R' Korman adduces this innovative timeline from the striking fact that the conversation between Efron and Avraham in verse 11 is completely in the past tense, while their dealings before the council are all in the future tense. As such, it would appear that they are arguing over a past business transaction that had soured. This initial deal was never completed and Avraham, not wanting to be beholden to Efron in the future, turns to the council to intercede on his behalf and facilitate the sale. The council hears the case and compels Efron to lawfully sell the plot to Avraham, which R' Korman assumes must have involved a second transfer of funds to Efron by Avraham.

R' Korman shifts our understanding of a few, subtle key words and thereby changes a surprising amount of the plot line. This novel approach also transforms the episode from a scenario in which Avraham is admittedly a stranger, but also a rightful inheritor of the land, into a fascinating precedent for a theme that will become clear later in the Torah: the protection of the dignity and rights of the stranger. As the Netziv notes in *HaEmek Davar* (Introduction to *Sefer Bereishit*), the acts of justice found throughout Sefer Bereishit garner it the alternate name, “*Sefer HaYashar*.” While the Netziv frames this around the acts of the Avot, it seems appropriate to apply it to the Hittites defense of Avraham (See *Bereishit Rabba* 53:12, where the Hittites are praised for their actions). Accordingly, perhaps R' Korman’s suggestion can provide for us not only a fresh perspective on a familiar story, but also food for thought in these politically tumultuous times.