

November 10, 2012

Chayei Sarah (Genesis 23:1-25:18)

Mostly, Torah study focuses on what we see in front of us on the page, which breaks down into books, chapters, verses, sentences, words and letters. Today we looked at two sets of words: one is a name; the other is an adverb, spoken twice by someone who is nameless (though the tradition ascribes a name to him). And in both cases, we concentrated not on what was there, but on what was missing.

The name is Ephron, and he is the Hittite who sold Abraham the field and cave of Machpelah, the first piece of the land of Canaan which would become the property of one of God's people. Ephron's name is mentioned eight times in this sidra, and in seven of the times, it is spelled ayin-pei-resh-vav-nun. The remaining time, it is spelled ayin-pei-resh-nun.

The adverb can be translated "perhaps," or "what if" or "suppose that" or "maybe." (Part of the fun of Torah study is playing with the multiple ways in which the Hebrew can be rendered into English.) This word appears twice, both in speech by the unnamed servant or slave of Abraham, generally thought to have been Eliezer. The first time, the word is spelled ayin-lamed-yud-vav, and the second time, ayin-lamed-yud.

We discussed the missing vav in both instances and explored what the meaning could be of leaving it out. What is the text trying to tell us by the absence of this single letter—and the same letter on each occasion?