

When it comes to setting expectations and following through on them, one is advised to under promise and over deliver. Talk is cheap. The proof is in the pudding. No where is this idea more visible than in **פרשת חיי שרה**. The Gemara tells us (בבא מציעא פז:א):

כתיב (**בראשית יח, ה**) ואקחה פת לחם וכתיב (**בראשית יח, ז**) ואל הבקר רץ אברהם אמר **רבי אלעזר** מכאן שצדיקים אומרים מעט ועושים הרבה רשעים אומרים הרבה ואפילו מעט אינם עושים מנלן מעפרון מעיקרא כתיב (**בראשית כג, טו**) ארץ ארבע מאות שקל כסף ולבסוף כתיב (**בראשית כג, טז**) וישמע אברהם אל עפרון וישקל אברהם לעפרון את הכסף אשר דבר באזני בני חת ארבע מאות שקל כסף עובר לסוחר דלא שקל מיניה אלא קנטרי דאיכא דוכתא דקרי ליה לתיקלא קנטירא

Abraham under promised when he told his guests that he would bring them bread to satiate themselves. He over delivered by bringing them a major meal with all the trimmings. On the other hand, Ephron over promised when he told Abraham that he would give him the **מערת המכפלה** for a burial plot for Sarah free of charge. He under performed by demanding 400 perfect silver coins before he would allow Abraham to bury Sarah. Indeed the entire local population appeared to be in on the deal and exhibited the same behavior of delivering less than their original commitment. They initially told Abraham to use any burial plot he desired to bury Sarah and ended up observing Ephron's duplicity without comment or protest on behalf of Abraham.

Looking carefully at the dialogue between Abraham and the local Hittite population as well as the conversation with Ephron, one can see how the Torah emphasized the contrast between Ephron and Abraham mentioned by the Gemara. The people initially offer their own burial plots to Abraham. (**בראשית כג:ו**)

שָׁמְעוּ אֲדָנִי נְשִׂיא אֱלֹהִים אֶתְּהָ בְּתוֹכָנוּ בְּמִבְחָר קִבְּלֵנוּ קֹבֶר אֶת־מֵתְךָ אִישׁ מִמֶּנּוּ אֶת־קִבְּרוֹ לֹא־יְכַלָּה מִמֶּךָּ מִקֹּבֶר מֵתְךָ:

No price is mentioned and it is not clear if they would have requested payment for the plots. While no one would prevent Abraham from taking their personal burial plots, would they have requested compensation for it? Abraham thanks them for their offer but requests they intercede with Ephron on his behalf so he can purchase, for full value, the specific field and cave he was interested in. The people accompany Abraham when he meets with Ephron. Ephron speaks first and makes a grand offer for all the people to hear: (**בראשית כג:יא**):

לֹא־אֲדָנִי שְׁמַעְנִי הַשְׁדָּה נָתַתִּי לָךְ וְהַמַּעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר־בָּהּ לָךְ נִתְּתִיהָ לְעֵינִי בְּנִי־עַמִּי נִתְּתִיהָ לָךְ קֹבֶר מֵתְךָ:

Ephron offers the field as a gift knowing full well that Abraham has already offered to pay full price for it. When Abraham reiterates his offer to pay for the burial plot, Ephron responds:

אֲדָנִי שְׁמַעְנִי אֶרֶץ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שְׁקֶל־כֶּסֶף בִּינִי וּבִינָהּ מֵהָהוּא וְאֶת־מֵתְךָ קֹבֶר:

Suddenly, Ephron changes his tone and demands an exorbitant sum for the field. Abraham complies:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָהָם אֶל־עֲפְרוֹן וַיִּשְׁקַל אַבְרָהָם לְעֲפְרוֹן אֶת־הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי־חַת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שְׁקֶל כֶּסֶף עֹבֵר לַסֹּחֵר:

Perhaps the key to understanding this story and the behavior of the protagonists is by understanding the use of the word **שמע**, listen. **שמיעה** does not mean to simply hear, it means to listen and understand. We refer to Gd as **שומע תפלה**. Regardless of the response we receive to our supplications, we are confident that Gd listens to them and fully understands them. The word **שמע** is used by Abraham, Ephron and the Hittite population. The Hittites originally informed Abraham that they are willing to allow Abraham bury Sarah among their own dead. They understood Abraham's desperation to bury Sarah and though

offering to assist, they did not preclude charging him for their plots. They use the word שמענו to inform Abraham that their services will not be free. Abraham understands this and informs them he is ready to pay but he has a specific area in mind.

Ephron initially repeats the same offer the local population made to Abraham, to take his plot and bury Sarah. It is interesting that he prefaces his remarks by saying לא אדוני שמעני. Ephron knew full well that his initial offer was a sham and he had no intention of gifting the field to Abraham. However he wanted to sound magnanimous in front of the local Hittite population. So he tells Abraham, do not listen to what I am about to announce, that I am willing to gift you the field, לא אדוני שמעני, as this statement is not for you but rather it is meant for the local population. I have no intention to follow through on the offer of gifting you the land I am about to make. Abraham hears and understands Ephron's intention and responds publicly that he is prepared to pay for the land:

וַיִּדְבֹר אֶל-עֶפְרוֹן בְּאָזְנֵי עַם-הָאֶרֶץ לֵאמֹר אֵךְ אִם-אַתָּה לֹא שָׁמַעְנִי נִתְּתִי כֶסֶף הַשְּׂדֶה קֶחַ מִמֶּנִּי וְאִקְבְּרָה אֶת-מֵתִי שָׁמָּה:

Ephron now responds directly to Abraham, with no public announcement, אֲדֹנִי שָׁמַעְנִי, now listen to me my master: the price is 400 universally accepted silver coins. Abraham understands Ephron's intention and complies:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲבִרְהָם אֶל-עֶפְרוֹן וַיִּשְׁקַל אֲבִרְהָם לְעֶפְרוֹן אֶת-הַכֶּסֶף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵי-חֵת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל כֶּסֶף עֶבֶר לִפְתָּח:

Abraham fulfills the promise he initially made to the local Hittite population, as well as the second commitment he made to Ephron in front of them, to pay full price for Ephron's field. Ephron who initially over promised to give Abraham the field for nothing under delivered by demanding full payment of an exorbitant amount prior to allowing Abraham to bury Sarah.