



**SERMON CHAYEI SARAH:¹
ROMANCE IS NOT DEAD**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 3 November 2018

Wimbledon Synagogue

Aufruf of Daisy and Barney

- 1 The Talmud tells us² that when a funeral procession and a wedding procession are approaching a crossroads simultaneously, the mourners have to wait while the wedding procession goes first. Even at times of sadness, we prioritise life-affirming happiness. And so despite the funereal atmosphere of the week, and indeed the funereal atmosphere of our parasha, I am going to draw a weddingy message out of it.
- 2 Because the story of Sarah's death was co-opted by the rabbis of old to give a seemingly unrelated passage of Talmud hidden depths. And since it's one of the passages of Talmud that deals with marriage, how appropriate that today we're marking this aufruf.
- 3 When I heard that this term at Leo Baeck College, we were going to be studying Masechet Kiddushin – the tractate of the Talmud dealing with the laws of betrothal – I was very excited, partly because I have my own wedding coming up next year so it seemed topical, and partly because I knew I was going to be speaking at an aufruf, and I hoped that that I'd get some good material.
- 4 Then I read the opening paragraph of Masechet Kiddushin and I was less excited. "A woman can be acquired in three ways," it begins, "by money [my heart began to sink yet further], by writ or by intercourse. And she can



acquire herself back in two ways: by receiving a document of divorce from her husband, or by the death of her husband.”³

- 5 And they dare to claim that the age of romance is dead! That’s how the Mishnah, written by the earliest generation of rabbis, chose to introduce the subject of marriage.
- 6 I’m not even sure where to start listing the issues this raises. Perhaps one of the most obvious is that neither of the two methods for the woman ‘acquiring herself back’ are actually within her control at all: she can wait for her husband to divorce her or wait for him to die. Not so empowering! Then there’s the total absence of the concept of consent. And the concept of marriage as being the acquisition by a man of a woman with money – and the text even goes on to discuss the minimum price. It’s not a comfortable read for modern Jews.
- 7 The structure of the Talmud is that, after a clause or two of Mishnah, the Gemara – commentary from a later generation of rabbis – comes in to clarify and troubleshoot what we’ve read so far. And there’s definitely plenty to troubleshoot here. I started reading it looking forward to my mind being eased on some of the issues I’d identified. So, the rabbis of the Gemara dived straight in with the most significant problem they could find in this extremely dodgy passage. And the most significant problem, felt the rabbis, was... the fact that one of the verbs used is fractionally different to a verb used later on in the Mishnah.
- 8 So we’re immediately diverted into a dense and technical grammatical discussion. And the Gemara⁴ justifies the use of the verb קנה, ‘to buy’ or ‘acquire’, by comparing three Biblical verses. The first is a verse in Deuteronomy⁵ which refers to marriage as a man “taking” a woman, then, by



slightly strained analogy, another verse in which the word “taking” is used: one from our Torah reading today,⁶ Abraham telling Ephron the Hittite, “I have offered you money for the field – take the money from me!”, and then, finally, a verse from a couple of chapters later⁷ which refers to Abraham’s purchase of Ephron’s field as an act of קנין, acquisition or purchase.

- 9 So we’ve come full-circle and made our way back to the language of the Mishnah, which has now been semi-justified by a roundabout and not-entirely-convincing tour through some verses cherrypicked from our reading this morning.
- 10 But, what if they’re not entirely cherrypicked? They don’t serve any sensible logical purpose – the argument by analogy is really very weak – so perhaps they were included in the Gemara for some other reason.
- 11 My teacher, Rabbi Mark Solomon, has a theory. The early text of the Mishnah, which I read out at the beginning, is dry, legalistic, unromantic and devoid of emotion. It portrays marriage as transactional and nothing but transactional.
- 12 But those verses, that story we read today, about Abraham buying the field... That’s a very different vision of marriage. Abraham had lost his wife, his life partner, but their connection lasted beyond her life, as, after her death, he sought to find a suitable place to bury her. The field where, later, he was buried alongside her. And what was his first act as a widower? The very next chapter after today’s reading tells the story of Abraham sending out a servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. In his grief, he sought to kindle new love and new life. That is the story that flows from the negotiations to buy the field, the story that flows from the verse the Gemara quoted for ostensibly grammatical purposes only.



- 13 Perhaps the later rabbis, dissatisfied with the cold-blooded Mishnah, used these verses to smuggle into their commentary, just under its surface, a more emotionally-developed model of partnership, bringing some romance and humanity to a dull legal topic.
- 14 Because there is something exhaustingly mundane about the Mishnah's debate over exactly how much money is needed to contract a marriage, and about the Gemara's grammatical technicalities. (And just try studying them in the original Aramaic...) But hiding in that mundane-ness is something beautiful and fulfilling. Likewise for Abraham himself: what seemed, on the surface, a tiresome episode of haggling over the purchase of some land was in fact a final gesture of love and eternal companionship between him and the late Sarah.
- 15 There are exhaustingly mundane moments in every human relationship as well; paying the council tax, unloading the dishwasher, have you got the carkeys. But beneath them, as for Abraham's haggling and the Gemara's hair-splitting, there is an undercurrent of love and of holiness.

Check against delivery.

GW 03.11.18

¹ Genesis 23:1-20

² bKetubot 17a

³ mKiddushin 1:1

⁴ bKiddushin 2a-b

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:1

⁶ Genesis 23:13

⁷ Genesis 25:10