Avraham and the Children of Heth
By Rabbi Yehudah ben Shomeyr

1. Genesis 23
1And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were
the years of the life of Sarah.
2And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of
Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.
3And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons
of Heth, saying,
4I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a
burying place with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.
5And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him,
6Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice
of our sepulchers bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee
his sepulcher, but that thou mayest bury thy dead.
7And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land,
even to the children of Heth.
8And he communed with them, saying, If it be your mind that I should
bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and intreat for me to Ephron
the son of Zohar,
9That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is
in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall
give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you.
10And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite
answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, even of all
that went in at the gate of his city, saying,
11Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is
therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give
I it thee: bury thy dead.
12And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land.
13And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land,
saying, But if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me: I will give
thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.
14And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him,
15My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of
silver; what is that betwixt me and thee? bury therefore thy dead.
16And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron
the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth,
four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.
17And the field of Ephron which was in Machpelah, which was before
Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees
that were in the field, that were in all the borders round about, were

made sure
18Unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city.
19And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan.
20And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the sons of Heth.

I want to focus on verses specifically dealing with the monetary transaction between Avraham and Ephron of Heth.

I know what the Rabbi's have said, but I don't buy it. I almost get the impression the Rabbi's just want to make the Goyim look bad.

Here is what Rabbi's have traditionally have said and has never rang true in my spirit when I read them and attempted to apply them to the passage at hand:

"As the later verses reveal, Ephron's public generosity was a sham. Not only had he no intention of making a gift, he hypocritically implied to Avraham that he expected an outrageously high price. As the sages put it, the righteous say little but do much, but the wicked promise much and perform not even a little. They would offer to anoint with oil from an empty flask." – Stone's Edition of the Tanach commentary on Gen. 23:11

Said Rabbi Eleazar: The righteous promise little and perform much--Abraham promised his guests "a morsel of bread" (Genesis 18:5) and then "ran to the herd and fetched a calf tender and good, and he hurried to prepare it" (ibid., v. 7).

On the other hand, the wicked promise much and do not perform even a little. Initially Ephron proclaimed, "A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between me and you?" But in the end, "Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver which he had named in the hearing of the sons of Het four hundred shekels of silver in negotiable currency."
(Talmud, Bava Metzia 87a)

"Abraham negotiated with Ephron, who at first flattered Abraham and told him he'd give him the Machpela Cave as a gift. When Abraham insisted on paying for it and Ephron saw his money (verse 13), Ephron's true nature came out and he asked for 400 silver shekels! A

high price!" -- Michael Schneider,
http://www.israeltoday.co.il/default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=10331

"Nonetheless, Abraham understood what Ephron really meant. Abraham weighed out for Ephron the amount of silver that he had mentioned in the presence of the Hittites, 400 full-sized shekels, which are universally-negotiable currency. Despite the fact that Ephron had loudly proclaimed his largesse in being willing to give the property to Abraham for free, he in fact did accept Abraham's extravagant overpayment. By paying its full price, Abraham entirely severed any legal association of Ephron's with the field." -- Interpolated Translation for Parshah Chayei Sarah, **www.chabad.org**

First off it is clear that the Children of Heth thought a lot of Avraham and was highly respected in their eyes. He probably did business with them on a regular basis and had a good business and neighborly relationship with these people. Being in good standing with these people it is unlikely they would want to rip him off, especially in a time of grief, thus the offering at first to have the land for free. What good person would assist in anyway to make ones grief a little lighter during such a time? I wholeheartedly believe Ephron's intentions were pure. Besides, as a Jew I'd rather give one the benefit of the doubt than to commit LaShone Hara (slander) and interpret this passage as Avraham being ripped off because by a Goy because he was a Jew.

Also, archeologically there are few land claim documents or economic evidence of true value of especially a burial cave during the time of Avraham, so there is no tell tale proof that that amount quoted by Ephron was and exorbitant amount.

The text plainly shows form the get go Avraham was willing and wanted to pay full price for the land. Why? Because of several reasons; burying the dead is the last great mitzvah one can do for another human being because that person cannot return the favor. So in performing this mitzvah, the mitzvah has to come from the person, not as gift to you and then to the deceased. IF the cave was given, Avraham would have not rightfully fulfilled the mitzvah, because even though Avraham may but the body in the cave, Ephron would have fit the bill for the burial, so Ephron would have been credited with burying Sarah. Just like David not accepting his subjects offer of animals to sacrifice, he said that he would not sacrifice the YHWH that which didn't cost him anything (II Sam. 24:24).

If Avraham would accept a shoe latchet (Gen. 14:23) what makes you think he'd accept the gift of a burial cave?

However, I do agree with this rabbinical statement and thus shows more reasons in my opinion that Avraham bought the cave and wasn't ripped off:

"I am giving you the money for the field: Another reason Abraham insisted on not accepting the field gratis, or even at a discount, is because he wanted to sever all ties between it and its former owners. When someone gives a gift, the recipient remains forever indebted to the giver, no matter how selfless the latter's intentions; thus, the giver forever retains a slight connection to the gift. On the other hand, in a purchase, there remains no one-sided sense of dependency; a mutually satisfactory exchange has taken place, and the seller has severed virtually all connection with the sold object." – Chassidic Insights for Parasha Chayei Sarah, **www.chabad.org**

Avraham was by no means a pauper. He was a VERY wealthy man and 400 shekels to a man such as Avraham Avinu was most likely chump change. Avraham essentially said, "Don't gouge me or even cut me some slack just because my wife died, I want to pay top dollar for this burial cave." He just wanted to own the land legitimately, free and clear and so as to fulfill his final mitzvah toward his wife.