

I have given you the field, and as for the cave that is in it, I have given to you....bury your dead. Land worth four hundred silver shekels; between you and I--what is it? Bury your dead. (23:11,15)

What made Efron change his mind so radically? At first, he appeared to be a wonderful, refined gentleman who opened his land to Avraham. He granted him a place in which to bury Sarah without asking any compensation. Suddenly Efron showed a different side to his personality, when he "intimated" that he would be inclined to "give" the property to Avraham for a mere four hundred silver *shekels*, which constituted an outrageous amount of money. Something must have transpired that catalyzed this sudden change. What was it?

Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl, cites the **Alter M'Kelm** who responds to the question by applying a famous story that occurred concerning the *Rambam*. The *Rambam* had a dispute with a group of secular philosophers who contended that cats can be trained to act as human beings. They felt that with proper training and environment, an animal could be transformed. The *Rambam* argued that it was impossible to alter the nature of an animal. They established a date when the philosophers' trained cats would be put to a test.

It happened that the Sultan was visiting on the appointed day. It was decided that he would observe the cats' behavior and be the judge of their "humanness." A large group gathered to gape in wonder, as the cats set a table for the Sultan and his distinguished entourage. Each dignitary was assigned a specific place, while the Sultan was at the head of the table. Word was fast spreading that the *Rambam's* theory was refuted. Yet, the *Rambam* sat there unperturbed by the proceedings. The meal was about to begin. The cats came out of the kitchen carrying large tureens of hot soup. Everyone was visibly impressed with the poise with which the cats carried out their functions. As soon as the cats came close to the table with the hot soup, the *Rambam* opened up a little bag that he had brought with him. Suddenly, a little mouse appeared for all to see. At the sight of the mouse, all of the cats were thrown into a frenzy. They dropped the pots, causing the hot soup to spill all over the tables and the guests, and chased after the mouse.

Everyone was now wet and fully aware of the *Rambam's* lesson. We might succeed in superficially training the cats, but their internal nature, their essence, cannot change. A cat is, and will always be, a cat.

This analogy applies likewise to Efron. As long as he did not see the money, he could act refined, dignified and almost human. As soon as Avraham said, "Take my money," and Efron saw the money with his own two eyes, he reverted to the money-hungry, deceitful person that he had always been. Human nature is difficult enough to change when one seeks to transform himself. What can we expect from Efron, who was comfortable with his current position?!