

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



DOES THE TORAH SUPPORT THE AVRAHAM ACCORDS?

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Around the time of Yishmael's expulsion, the Philistine King Avimelekh came to Avraham, together with the head of his military, and proposed a treaty. "*G-d is with you in all that you do. Now swear to me etc.*". Avraham said: "*I will swear*". Then Avraham rebuked Avimelekh about the illegal and corrupt activities of his subordinates, and Avimelekh denied knowing anything about them. Then Avraham gave Avimelekh stuff for free, and they cut a deal/covenant. Sometime after that, G-d said to Avraham: *Take, please, your son, your unique one, who, you have loved, Yitzchak. . .*"

It's not clear why this story is in Torah. It seems to change nothing. In next week's parshah, Yitzchak copies his father's trick of passing his wife Rivkah off as his sister when he moves to Gerar, demonstrating that Yitzchak believes that there is still no fear of G-d in Philistia. The result is different only because Avimelekh is warier this time around. Also, Yitzchak finds his father's wells vandalized, and his own are vandalized as well, and eventually he is asked to leave.

We don't know for certain whether Avraham and Yitzchak's assessment of Philistia as a G-d-fearless society is correct. Evidence for their view is that in Genesis 26:11, Avimelekh restrains his society by threatening the death penalty for maltreating *the man or his wife*, not simply by revealing that she is his wife. Also, his language "*hanogeid*" seems intended to recall the plague (*vayenaga*) that G-d sent in 12:17 for maltreating Sarah – perhaps one can have a society that fears G-d only in very narrow ways. Regardless, Avraham is willing to covenant with a society that he believes lacks all fear of G-d, in which visiting women can be confiscated by the monarch. Was that wrong of him?

Rashbam says that making the treaty was wrong. In a characteristically brute-force effort to explain why the Akeidah is introduced by "It happened after these things", Rashbam comments:

אף נאן, "אחר הדברים" שכרת אברהם ברית לאבימלך, לו ולנינו ולנכדו של אברהם, ונתן לו שבע כבשות הצאן. וחרה אפו של הק' על זאת, שהרי ארץ פלשתים בכלל גבול ישראל, והק' ציוה עליהם לא תחיה כל נשמה...

לכן והאלהים נסה את אברהם = קינתו וציערו... כדב' הנסה דבר אליך תלאה, על נסותם את יי', מסה ומריבה, בחנני יי' ונסני. כלומר נתגאיתו בן שנתתיו לכרות ברית ביניכם ובין בניהם, ועתה לך והעלה לעולה ויראה מה הועילה כריתות ברית שלך. So too here, "after these things" means after Avraham cut a covenant with Avimelekh, with him and running through his grandchildren and Avraham's, and gave him the seven sheep. The anger of the Holy Blessed One was kindled by this, because the land of the Philistines was included within the boundary of Israel, and G-d commanded regarding them "You must not leave any soul alive". Therefore "and G-d tested Avraham, meaning that he harassed and afflicted him...

I experience Rashbam's reading as doing violence to the text. The Akeidah is not a punishment – that much at least is clear from G-d saying "please" at its outset. I like the argument that this episode is introduced with "It happened at that same time" specifically to exclude it from the general sequence of the narrative and prevent Rashbam's argument (albeit it seems to have failed at that task). But discounting Rashbam's evidence, we are left with his opinion that making the treaty expressed a lack of faith.

This too fails to convince me. The Covenant Between the Pieces tells Avraham that his descendants will not inherit the Land until the fourth generation, and this covenant seems to run only for three generation rather than eternally (although *nin* and *nekbed* may not have their contemporary meaning here). Indeed, we can learn from the example of the Giv'onim that maintaining a sworn treaty commitment would have overridden the mitzvah of "You must not leave any soul alive", and yet no mention is made of any such commitment when the Jews return to the Land after the interlude in Egypt. (Philistines are also not mentioned as residents of Canaan at all in the Torah, even though their presence is a given in Judges and Samuel, which is a separate but possibly in-some-way-related issue.)

In contrast to Rashbam, Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky ([Emet P'Yaakov](#) Genesis 21:2) expresses a positive view of both Avimelekh and the treaty, while retaining a deeply negative view of Philistine culture:

What seems correct is that after the angel guaranteed that Yishmael would become a great nation, and it is mentioned in the name of the Zohar that it was in the merit of circumcision that Yishmael merited having the Land of Israel under his hand until the coming of the redeemer – therefore Scripture introduces Avraham's cutting the covenant with Avimelekh King of the Philistines, because no nation that is identified with lack of circumcision so much as the Philistines, as we find several times in Tanakh – see Judges 14:3 “to take a wife from among the daughters of the uncircumcised Philistines”, and so also Judges 15:18, 1 Samuel 14:6 and 31:4, 2 Samuel 1:20, 2 Chronicles 10:4 -vso we see that the Philistines symbolize the uncircumcisedness in the world, but nonetheless Avraham did not refrain from cutting a covenant with their king, because he was an *ish yashar* = “man of integrity”, which shows that circumcision is not the main thing . . .

Note however that the covenant mentions nothing whatsoever about Avraham's relationship with the Philistine people. It seems to be a personal alliance with the rulers of an immoral society. The truth is that even Rashbam criticizes the treaty only because it reflects a lack of faith, not because it reflects an accommodation with evil.

How can we square all this with Avraham's inspiring refusal in 14:23 to accept anything from the King of Sodom “so that you will not (be able to) say: I made Avraham wealthy”? I see at least three fundamental approaches:

1) Sodom was much worse than Gerar, and its king was no different than any of his subjects. In this regard, it is worth reflecting on the king's non-appearance in the subsequent story of Lot and the angels. It is also worth reflecting on the reality that much of Avraham's wealth came from the King of Mitzrayim's gifts after his own mistreatment of Sarah.

2) Unlike Avimelekh, the King of Sodom did not ask for a covenant of mutual interest, but rather sought to bribe Avraham.

3) Avraham regretted his decision about Sodom, and deliberately acted differently with regard to Avimelekh and Gerar.

The third approach seems most attractive to me, as follows: After the destruction of Sodom, Avraham realized that non-engagement had been a disaster. Perhaps he should have taken both the people and the money, and tried to build a better society! Not having that option in Gerar, he decided that maintaining some form of *realpolitik* influence was worth the cost of being tarnished by association.

But the Torah never tells us how this calculation worked out. Maybe Avraham's influence kept Gerar from becoming Sodom. Or maybe engagement is worthwhile, and nation-building possible, only when you have the capacity to completely redo an evil but defeated society, and here Avraham became an unintentional accessory to evil.

In both foreign policy and individual relationships, there is no sure way to maximize the good when dealing with evil, and the Torah does not pretend otherwise. Effective policy may depend on many characteristics of those involved other than their goodness or evil, and on overall context.

Recognizing this complexity does not mean that there is no space for impassioned advocacy, as for example [this op-ed by Rabbi Avidan Freedman](#) against Israeli arms sales to human rights abusers.

I don't know which/whether today's covenantal partners are parallel to Sodom, Gerar, or Avraham's genuine friends Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, or something else entirely. But I'm grateful to be challenged to think about it.

Shabbat Shalom!