

NO BONES OF CONTENTION

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the interaction between Yitzchok and the Philistine king, Avimelech. After abducting Rivka, Avimelech and his entire household were stricken with Divine retribution in the form of a painful illness. Avimelech reacted by immediately restoring Rivka to Yitzchok, while proclaiming his innocence and issuing them a royal decree of protection. The declaration was of little lasting value as the Philistine people grew jealous of Yitzchok's financial success and retaliated by plugging up the wells his servants had dug, and driving him out of the land.

Yitzchok resettled in the neighboring land of Canaan and flourished, while the Pelishtim experienced one setback after another. With their wells drying up and their trees becoming barren, they began to suspect a connection between these misfortunes and their persecution of Yitzchok. In desperation, Avimelech came to reestablish the old pact of friendship that he had made with Avrohom.

Upon his arrival, Yitzchok asked him, "Why have you come to me? You hate me. You've driven me out of your midst!" Avimelech responds with unabashed impudence: "What do you mean? Just as we have not molested you and have in fact treated you well and sent you away in peace, you ought now to respond likewise and give us Hashem's blessing!"

How could Avimelech be so shameless as to contend that he had acted graciously with Yitzchok when, with his approval, his servants had stopped up Yitzchok's wells and chased him from their land?

The persecution of Yitzchok and his expulsion, followed by Avimelech's renewing a pact of friendship with him, is a narrative that has echoed and re-echoed throughout Jewish history. Jews have been expelled from one country after another by hostile and jealous populations only to be invited back decades later, when the host country needed Jewish financial and entrepreneurial skills to give their economy a boost.

The Midrash, in highlighting the self-serving nature of Avimelech's solicitation of friendship, offers a beautiful parable (chapter 64/10).

The lion, the king of the beasts, pawed the floor of his forest lair in pain and frustration. The bone of an animal that he had devoured had become firmly lodged in his throat. Unable to speak, he beckoned to the animals of the forest to help him, intimating that whoever could extract the bone would be honored with lavish gifts.

Cautiously, a stork approached. The lion opened its mouth wide while the stork inserted his long beak inside and gently and carefully extracted the bone. The stork then stood by, waiting for her just reward. The lion glared at the stork and barked, "Your reward is that after putting your beak in my throat, you have emerged unscathed. What living thing could expect to keep its head after sticking it in a lion's mouth?"

It is startling to see how history continually repeats itself. Israel is surrounded by Arab governments that would benefit greatly by recognizing the Jewish state and establishing a peace treaty with it. Yet the level of hatred and jealousy toward Israel is so great that it blocks all efforts to achieve peace. The most Israel has been able to win from its enemies are short-lived "truces." As for real peace and the recognition of Israel's statehood? Sadly (but predictably), the message is, "Be grateful that we haven't shoved you into the ocean-yet."

How does one respond to this skewed thinking? Let us consider Yitzchok's response to Avimelech's audacious behavior. Yitzchok listens to Avimelech's rant and instead of retorting, prepares a feast for the king's entourage. Without challenging Avimelech's assertions, he establishes the pact the king proposed and sends him away in peace.

Yitzchok recognized that negotiating and rationalizing with someone committed to a warped philosophy is futile. He understood, as we must, that in exile one must be grateful for whatever good one can obtain-even if it falls short of true justice and fairness.

This is an important message. Instead of asserting our rights and maintaining a dominant profile, we need to recognize that we are in galus and should be grateful that we can maintain our tradition in a benevolent environment. We need to be thankful for the liberties and freedoms that are extended to us. In the face of growing anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish sentiments worldwide, our response need not be to champion our rights and demonstrate our superior virtue. We should rather maintain a low profile and appreciate that the wrath of our enemies is directed more at our "wells" and wealth, than against us in person.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos .

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