

# AVIMELECH VS. PHARAOH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Dedicated in loving memory of Yosef Chaim ben Yaffa, z"l, - The Matmon Family

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*"What have you done to us? What did I do to you that you brought upon me and upon my kingdom this great transgression? You should not have done this! What did you see that caused you to do such a thing?"*

Avraham said, "I saw that there is no fear of God in this place, [and that] they would kill me for my wife." (Bereishis 20:9-11)

The lesson being taught here is obvious, and it is typically Avraham Avinu: . Arriving in the land of the Philistines, it was a rare opportunity for Avraham Avinu to be a guest for a change, and not the world-famous host he had become. Unfortunately, the Philistines, unlike their celebrity guest, put their own personal desires ahead of those of others, and rather than be taken care of by his host nation, he had to instead worry about his life.

But, there is a less obvious message in this section of the parshah, but equally important, and it emerges from comparing this episode with the first, similar one, during which Sarah was abducted by Pharaoh, when they had gone down to Egypt because of the famine in Canaan. There also Avraham had referred to Sarah, his wife, as his sister, and this prompted Pharaoh to take her for himself, prompting God to inflict him to protect Sarah.

Realizing what Avraham had done, like Avimelech in this week's parshah, Pharaoh too questioned him on what he did and why. However, unlike with respect to the interchange between Avraham and Avimelech, Pharaoh neither received an answer nor did he wait for one. He simply complained and then sent Avraham and his entire entourage packing, albeit with great gifts and wealth.

What is the difference between the two episodes, and what, if anything, is there to learn from it?

To begin with, there was a fundamental difference between Avimelech and Pharaoh. While Pharaoh suffered for having taken Sarah, we don't find God explaining to him why it happened, or who Sarah actually was. Apparently, he finds out through less supernatural means, and terrified by the entire incident, he sends Avraham away completely.

Not so with :

*God said to him in the dream, "I know that you did this innocently. [But] it was I who prevented you from erring against Me; I did not let you touch her. Return the wife, for he is a prophet. He will pray for you and you will live. If you do not return her, know that you will certainly die, you and all that is yours." (Bereishis 20:6-7)*

Indeed, not only did God speak to Avimelech, but he even vindicated his behavior. He just made a point of telling Avimelech that, had it not been for Him, Avimelech would have gone ahead and performed a terrible sin, even if it had been by accident.

Secondly, compare the protests of Pharaoh and Avimelech. Pharaoh said:

*"What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She's my sister,' and let me take her for a wife for myself?" (Bereishis 12:18-19)*

whereas Avimelech questioned Avraham by asking:

*What did you see that caused you to do such a thing?" (Bereishis 20:10)*

Notice how Pharaoh assumes that any reason Avraham had for pulling the wool over his eyes had to do with him, Avraham, and not Pharaoh and his people. His assumption was that Avraham was the dishonest one, not the Egyptian people, and felt no sympathy for him or his plight. What do you answer a person who will not be open to the truth? Nothing.

Avimelech, on the other hand, asked Avraham about what it was that he saw in the Philistine people that compelled him to lie about Sarah. Apparently, he gave Avraham some of the benefit of the doubt, assumed that he wouldn't have jeopardized his wife or another people for no good reason, and he wanted to know what that reason was. To such a person, you can tell the truth.

You can see this difference in people when doing outreach. You learn very early that, just because someone asks a question doesn't mean that he wants to know the answer. Sometimes statements come out as questions, and the person is really telling you, "Don't tell me the truth is like this, or like that!" You can tell that, behind their somewhat calm exterior is a far less calm interior that doesn't want to know that their present way of life is unacceptable to God. They are the Pharaoh-type.

Other people, on the other hand, put truth before personal comfort. They know that asking questions can lead to answers that obligate them to at least consider changing their lives. Nevertheless, they ask anyhow, because living in denial of truth hurts them more than having to face the music about their direction in life. They may not change right away, or at all, but at least they know the truth. They are of the Avimelech-type.

So what did Avraham Avinu answer Avimelech?

*Avraham said, "I saw that there is no fear of God in this place, [and that] they would kill me for my wife." (Bereishis 20:9-11)*

You have to admire Avraham's bravery for being so frank. Even though Avimelech may have been somewhat closer to truth than Pharaoh was, he could have still taken offense by the statement, and killed Avraham for insulting him, instead of for his wife. What gave Avraham the courage to be so bold? To answer this question, it is important to first understand what Avraham meant that there was no fear of God.

It was not that Avimelech wasn't aware of God, or that he wasn't able to recognize Him. The fact that God came to him in a dream and conversed with him showed otherwise. From the dialogue that took place, Avimelech seemed quite comfortable with the idea of prophecy.

Rather, Avraham meant that in spite of the God-awareness that Avimelech and his people may have had, it was extremely limited. They did not, and could not, understand the idea of Hashgochah Pratis, personalized Divine Providence through which God remains directly and intimately involved in the affairs of man. They were not real with the Divine cause-and effect relationship, meaning that they acted as if God did not pay much heed to what they did.

Everyone is born with a yetzer hara, and therefore everyone has selfish tendencies that can make him lazy, or greedy, or covetous, etc.

*Consider three things and you will not come to sin. Know what is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)*

However, it is more than just knowing that God is up there watching us and recording our deeds for the ultimate Day of Judgment. Even an Avimelech can believe that. Rather, a person has to also believe that whatever he does down here is not only seen in Heaven, but that Heaven responds to it in kind, if not immediately, then soon after. When we act down here, we set in motion events that are direct consequences of what we ourselves initiated.

As Avraham Avinu surveyed the people of Gerar, he noticed that the way they lived their lives indicated that they were not real, or even aware of Hashgochah Pratis. Their carefree, self-serving lifestyle made it evident that they believed that they could act with impunity, as long as no human being caught them, or could stop them. Hence, they took Sarah away from Avraham right in front of him.

That all changed, at least for Avimelech, once God inflicted him and his people for having taken Sarah. So that no confusion or doubt should ensue from what happened, God Himself spelled it out for Avimelech, making it perfectly clear that He pays attention to the actions of men, and responds

in this world as well as in the next one.

Avraham knew that Avimelech had become a wiser man for it, and that God stood up for him before Avimelech. For this reason, he could afford to be more specific about what he had seen to warrant his behavior, which Avimelech took like a man. Perhaps his name-my father, king-was a prophecy about his ability to relate to the God of Avraham, on enough of a level that God saw fit to give him prophecy.

This is what the entire parshah is about, levels of spiritual realization. There are some 20 references to vision in a parshah called, "And he saw ." because, after last week's parshah and the mitzvah of Bris Milah, the Torah is telling us how to build upon such a holy foundation in order to rise to higher levels of spiritual awareness and vision. That's what life is all about.

According to Kabbalah, God made Creation to reveal Himself to man, something that can only happen if man is fitting for such a high and intense level of spiritual revelation. Apparently, it has everything to do with divesting oneself of the physical world, at least the pursuit of it for its own sake.

For, the more absorbed one is in the material world, the less he will be able to handle the light of God. Just like in the physical world, where, if a person eats unhealthy, his body will deteriorate and make him vulnerable to illness and injury, likewise, in the spiritual world, dependence on material pleasures greatly weakens a person's spiritual strength, and makes him vulnerable to spiritual injury.

That is why the parshah finishes with the Akeidah-the binding of Yitzchak. The willingness to sacrifice one's own son shows just how divorced Avraham was from the material world; how prepared he was to use it only in the service of God. And, even though Avraham Avinu was not forced to go through with the actual slaughter of his beloved son, his willingness to do so alone was sufficient to grant him an extraordinary vision of God's light. Hence, he includes the experience by saying:

*Avraham called the place Ado-nai-Yireh-God will be seen-after which people said, "On God's mountain it will be seen." (Bereishis 22:14)*

What will be seen? The light of God, the ultimate reward for the person who seeks the true vision of reality, and God Who is behind it.

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