

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash  
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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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PARASHAT TOLDOT

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**"After the doings of the land of Egypt... you shall not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan... you shall not do" – The Three Stories of the Matriarchs Taken to the King<sup>1</sup>**

**Rav Gad Eldad**

Last week, we examined the manner in which the locals related to Avraham, who was forced to seek their assistance because of his unfortunate circumstances. It became clear to us that behind their polite and ceremonial behavior lurked a hidden interest; they sought to milk the stranger for as much as possible in an elegant and legal manner. This week, we will once again examine this type of behavior, but in a different context. In our *parasha* we encounter for the third time one of the patriarchs wishing to settle in a new place as a foreign subject, and soon after his arrival the locals discover his wife:

And Yitzchak dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, My wife; lest the men of the place should kill me for Rivka, because she is fair to look upon. And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Avimelekh king of the Pelishtim looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold, Yitzchak was sporting with Rivka his wife. And Avimelekh called Yitzchak, and said, "Behold, surely she is your wife, so how did you say, She is my sister?" And Yitzchak said to him, "Because I said, Lest I die because of her." And Avimelekh said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." And Avimelekh charged all the people, saying, "He that touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (*Bereishit* 26:6-11)

This had happened previously to Avraham. The first time was when he went down to Egypt:

And there was a famine in the land; and Avram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was sore in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "Behold now, I know that you are a fair woman to look upon. And it will come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but you they will keep alive. Say, I pray you, you are my sister; that it may be well with me for your sake, and that my soul may live because of you." And it came to pass that when Avram was come into Egypt, the

Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. And the princes of Pharaoh saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he dealt well with Avram for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and she-asses, and camels. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Avram's wife. And Pharaoh called Avram, and said, "What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister'? so that I took her to be my wife; now therefore behold your wife, take her, and go your way." And Pharaoh gave men charge concerning him; and they brought him on the way, and his wife, and all that he had. (12:10-20)

And it happened a second time in Gerar, with the king who was called by the traditional name, Avimelekh:

And Avraham journeyed from there toward the land of the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Avraham said of Sara his wife, "She is my sister." And Avimelekh king of Gerar sent and took Sara. But God came to Avimelekh in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you shall die, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife..." Then Avimelekh called Avraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? And wherein have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done..." And Avraham said, "Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you shall show me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, 'He is my brother.'" And Avimelekh took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them to Avraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.

All three incidents share a similar plot:

1. Upon arriving in a new place, concern is raised about the conduct of the locals with regard to the new woman who has come their way.
2. To reduce the concern about what was to happen in the future, it is decided to present the woman as a sister.
3. Both times that this happens to Avraham, Sara is indeed taken to the king's house. God intervenes and prevents contact between the king and the woman, and at the same time the king realizes that he has been misled.
4. The plot ends with the king's reproach about his having been misled, and with Sarah and Avraham's receiving compensation for what had happened.

The story in our *parasha* involving Yitzchak differs from the other two in that the king figures out Yitzchak's deception in time. Accordingly, Rivka was not taken to the king's house and he

<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical references are to the book of *Bereishit*. See in this context R. Prof. Yonatan Grossman, *Avraham – Sippuro shel Masa* (2014): "Yeridat Avram Ve-Sarai Le-Mitzrayim" (pp. 50-59), "Sara Ve-Avraham Be-Gerar" (pp.238-262). See also his *shiur* on *Parashat Toledot* on the VBM website: "Avraham Holid et Yitzchak." See also M. Emanueli, *Sefer Bereishit – Hesberim Ve-He'arot* (1978), pp. 189-195; R. Y. Bin-Nun, "Parshiyot Yitzchak," *Megadim* 25, pp. 35-77, especially chapters 2 and 5.

does not have to compensate her, but he also complains to Yitzchak for having deceived him.

Although these are three different cases, it is possible to draw a connection between the first and second and between the second and third links in this series of events. The first and second stories involve Avraham, and accordingly there is a certain relationship between them, which we will try to clarify below. The second and third stories take place in Gerar, and so it is reasonable to assume that they too relate to each other. From this perspective, the middle story is the link that connects all three stories, and it is indeed the most detailed of them.

### "Say, I pray you, you are my sister"

Avraham approaches Egypt and asks Sara to present herself as his sister. In this way, he seeks to save his own life, while abandoning his wife to her fate in a foreign country, as the local population will see her as an unmarried woman. This reading is not very flattering to Avraham, and it earns Avraham a sharp censure on the part of the Ramban:

Know that Avraham inadvertently committed a great sin when he entered his righteous wife into a situation of possible sin because of his fear that he would be killed. He should have trusted in God that He would save him and his wife, and all that was his, for God has the power to help and save... (Ramban, 12:10)

Other commentators, however, understood this story in a completely different way. Avraham in fact tried to extricate Sara from the fate that awaited her by way of a subterfuge. They would present themselves as brother and sister, and thus whoever wished her hand in marriage would have to negotiate a dowry with her older brother. Avraham, on his part, would mislead the candidates, impose certain conditions, and never finalize the matter, and thus the two of them would be saved. What upset their plan was that Sara was taken to the king. Avraham did not foresee such a possibility, since he could not play with the king as he pleased. Thus, they find themselves helpless in the face of a bleak situation that they had not anticipated. At this point, God comes to the rescue and saves Sara from the hands of Pharaoh.

Against this background, let us examine the case that follows.

### "And Avraham said of Sara his wife: She is my sister"

After having become entangled in Egypt, Avraham should have considered the possibility that Sara would once again be taken to the house of the king when he arrives in Gerar. Nevertheless, he uses the same trick, which, as expected, proves itself ineffective in such a case. Thus, Sara finds herself once again in the king's house, and once again God is forced to come to her aid. This time, however, the story is more complex. This time, Scripture reveals to us the dialogue that God conducts with Avimelekh, to whom He reveals Himself in order to save him from the sin that Avraham had brought to his door:

**But God came to Avimelekh in a dream of the night,** and said to him, "Behold, you shall die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife." **Now Avimelekh had not come near her; and he said,** "Lord, will You slay even a righteous nation?" (20:3-4)

As a result, he summons Avraham and reproaches him for abandoning him to sin, but this time Scripture spells out Avraham's answer in detail:

**Then Avimelekh called Avraham, and said to him,** "What have you done to us? And wherein have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done..." **And Avraham said,** "Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her: 'This is your kindness which you shall show to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.'" (20:9-13)

There are two striking differences in the details of the stories, and the common denominator of those differences lies in the dialogue. God reveals Himself to Avimelekh with the goal of dissuading him from sinning, and a dialogue develops between them, something that did not happen with Pharaoh. In the continuation, after Avimelekh rebukes Avraham, the text details Avraham's justification of his decision to present Sara as his sister.

It seems that these two details seek to create an impression that is different from that left by the case in Egypt. In that context, Scripture wishes to allude that the sole culprit is Pharaoh, and he is therefore not worthy of God's revelation, which would explain the situation to him, but he is rather immediately punished. In addition, Scripture does not bother to bring Avraham's explanation. The impression is that the explanation for his conduct was already given earlier. Exposing the fact that Sara is his wife could have cost Avraham his life, and no cry on the part of Pharaoh would change that, and therefore there is no point or need to repeat the explanation from Avraham's side.

In any event, we understand that in Avimelekh's case, things are different. He receives a Divine revelation because he does not deserve to fall into sin. In order to emphasize his innocence, Scripture even puts into his mouth the moral argument that Avraham had put forward when he petitioned on behalf of the people of Sedom:

And Avraham drew near, and said, "**Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?**" (18:23)

But this time, this argument is sounded by Avimelekh, who is the victim of that very same Avraham:

Now Avimelekh had not come near her; and he said, Lord, "**Will You slay even a righteous nation?**" (20:4)

In addition, the text "demands" that Avraham explain his action, and therefore cites his words in response to Avimelekh's rebuke. There is even a hint of criticism of Avraham's explanation:

And Avraham said, "Because I thought: **Surely the fear of God is not in this place;** and they will slay me for my wife's sake." (20:11)

This follows the text that had already noted that this is not so:

And Avimelekh rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears; **and the men were sore afraid.** (20:8)

The understanding that is shown for Avimelekh's claim is

expressed even in the words of God (20:6):

And God said to him in the dream, "Yes I know that in the simplicity of your heart you have done this, and I also withheld you from sinning against Me. Therefore I did not let you touch her."

At the end of the story, even though he had been misled by him, Avimelekh allows Avraham to remain in Gerar, whereas Pharaoh had sent him away. This fact too is credited to Avimelekh. We will attempt to examine our conclusion based on the continuation of the story.

### "I know not who has done this thing"

The continuation of the story presents us with Avimelekh, who goes to Avraham in order to ensure the recompense for his fair treatment of Avraham:

And it came to pass at that time that Avimelekh and Fikhol the captain of his host spoke to Avraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son; but according to the kindness that I have done to you, you shall do to me, and to the land wherein you have sojourned." And Avraham said, "I will swear." And Avraham reproved Avimelekh because of the well of water, which Avimelekh's servants had violently taken away. And Avimelekh said, "I know not who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but today." (21:22-26)

After Avraham briefly responds to Avimelekh's request, he begins to rebuke him. Avimelekh's answer is cumbersome and repetitive. It is easy to discern the discomfort that this question causes him and the great effort he makes to convince Avraham that he had no part in it. But the awkward wording is not convincing, and it makes him even more suspicious.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Avimelekh's phrasing reveals a small element of his conduct. Perhaps Avimelekh is conducting a policy based on evasion of responsibility, because he "does not know," or he does not want to know, or he wants affairs to be conducted in such a way that will leave him room to maneuver arguing that he did not know what was happening.<sup>3</sup> Now let us go back and re-examine the story of Sara's having been taken to his palace.

### "Behold, you shall die, because of the woman whom you have taken"

We have already read the speech in which Avimelekh claims his innocence, a speech that receives God's approval, but one question remains hanging in the air:

But God came to Avimelekh in a dream of the night, and

<sup>2</sup> The Alshikh proposes an amazing explanation of this verse that integrates three elements into this conversation. Avimelekh himself said: "I know not who has done this thing," and then he turns to Fikhol the captain of his host and says to him: "Neither did you tell me," and then Fikhol responds with: "Neither yet heard I of it, but today." Emanueli (above, note 1) also explains the verse in this manner. However, the very fact that Scripture chose such an ambiguous formulation is reason not to accept this explanation.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can understand why Avraham initiates making a covenant with Avimelekh immediately afterwards. Avraham may have understood Avimelekh's conduct and was not convinced by his answer, and therefore he wishes to make an open legal agreement with him, which would obligate both parties and leave no room for evading responsibility.

said to him, "**Behold, you shall die, because of the woman whom you have taken;** for she is a man's wife." Now Avimelekh had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay even a righteous nation? Did not he himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she, even she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the simplicity of my heart and the innocence of my hands have I done this." And God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the simplicity of your heart you have done this, and I also withheld you from sinning against Me. Therefore suffered I you not to touch her. Now therefore restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live; **and if you do not restore her, know you that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours.**"

If Avimelekh were the righteous man he pretends to be, we would expect a different formulation of God's words to him. In the case of a righteous person who inadvertently stumbles, it suffices to inform him of his mistake, and he will then immediately mend his ways, for all he desires is uprightness and decency. Why, then, does God have to open with heavy and decisive threats, and also conclude in that manner?

Unless Avimelekh is not really the man he pretends to be. While it is true that he rightly claims that he did not know that Sarah had a husband, it should be noted that once again, we are faced with a situation in which Avimelekh is rebuked for his actions, and his answer amounts to: "I know not who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but today." But if this is already the second time that he answers in this manner, perhaps there is a pattern.

### "So how did you say: She is my sister?"

Now let us move on to the third link in order to complete our study of the relationship that it maintains with the previous link:

And Yitzchak dwelt in Gerar. And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, My wife; lest the men of the place should kill me for Rivka, because she is fair to look upon. And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Avimelekh king of the Pelishtim looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold, Yitzchak was sporting with Rivka his wife. And Avimelekh called Yitzchak, and said, "Behold, surely she is your wife, so how did you say, 'She is my sister'?" And Yitzchak said to him, "Because I said: Lest I die because of her." And Avimelekh said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." And Avimelekh charged all the people, saying, "He that touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death."

Ostensibly, this story begins in the same way as did the previous one. Yitzchak arrives in Gerar, the people ask him about his wife, and he presents her as his sister. Unlike the previous case, this time she is not taken to the king's house, but eventually Avimelekh realizes that Yitzchak had lied to him about his wife. There is no hint in the text as to why this time Avimelekh did not conduct himself as he had done earlier. However, if Rivka did not arouse his interest, he would have no reason to be angry with Yitzchak for having lied to him. Scripture presents Yitzchak's having been caught as having happened by chance, but we must ask ourselves whether it is the way of a king to look by chance at what is going on in other people's houses. Or perhaps the truth is entirely different.

It seems that echoes of the incident involving Avimelekh and Sara were still resonating in Gerar. This time, Avimelekh refrains from dealing with her daughter-in-law Rivka, and precisely because of the similar conduct on the part of Avraham's son, he waits for developments and follows them from time to time. We do not know if it was Avimelekh himself who caught them in the act, but if it was not he himself, it was someone whom he assigned to this task, and perhaps he summoned him when there was something to see.

The details of this event teach us something about the previous event. It turns out that in time, the behavior of a man and a woman who have arrived in a new place will reveal whether they are man and wife or brother and sister, but the previous time Avimelekh did not wait – because he did not want to know.

Now Avimelekh's claim of innocence is illuminated in an entirely different light.

### "Will You slay even a righteous nation?"

We have already noted the similarity of this argument to Avraham's argument in Sedom, which strengthens the moral force of Avimelekh's claim. The comparison might, however, highlight the difference between the two arguments. Avraham argues for the rescue of the righteous, while he stands outside the picture. Avimelekh argues for the rescue of the righteous, while it is he who is crowning himself with that title. In view of the full picture, the following argument may be put forward.

In the case of Pharaoh, we have already suggested that Avraham was totally innocent, because he did not anticipate what would happen, but in the case of Avimelekh, he should already have prepared himself differently. On the other hand, we learn that taking a beautiful foreign woman as soon as she arrives in a new place was not Pharaoh's personal custom, but rather a code of behavior. It is precisely in the second case that a confrontation takes place between Avraham, who this time was aware of the possibility, and Avimelekh, who realized it. On the face of it, Avimelekh seems to be right, as he was misled, but from a broader perspective, the Torah tries to convey to us an entirely different message. Even if Avraham claimed that Sara is his sister, he did not do so voluntarily, but rather because he had no alternative against a foreign and aggressive culture, and his conduct therefore does not justify the very existence of such a culture.

The fear of God that overtook the local inhabitants is a fear of God after the fact, in the wake of a real threat from God, and not the fear of righteous people. God in His response to Avimelekh alludes to him that he is aware of his conduct, but that this time He will suffice with a warning.<sup>4</sup> Avimelekh, on his part, publicizes the case in his characteristic manner, in order to manipulate God's words about him in order to cover up his conduct, which is characterized by immorality but wrapped in integrity.<sup>5</sup> It seems, however, that he understood the message; therefore, despite the fact that he had been "misled," he

<sup>4</sup> See also the words of Rashi, which are anchored in the wording of the verses, in light of the difference between the formulation of Avimelekh's argument and the formulation of God's answer (20:6): "I know that in the simplicity of your heart – It is true that at first you had no intention of sinning, but you cannot claim innocence."

<sup>5</sup> Attention should be paid to the way Avimelekh describes his relationship with Yitzchak when he wishes to enter into a covenant with him (26:29): "That you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you, **and as we have done to you nothing but good**, and have sent you away in peace; you are now the blessed of the Lord," despite the fact that he had sent him away and stopped up his wells.

compensates Sara. Moreover, the echoes of the threat remain for those who will come after him, and even his successor will hesitate before starting up again with Avraham's family.

### "For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Avimelekh"

The Torah hints at this by way of a brilliant literary device, concluding the story of Avimelekh and Sara with the addition of a certain detail that paints the entire picture in a different color:

And Avraham prayed to God; and God healed Avimelekh, and his wife, and his maid-servants; and they bore children. For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Avimelekh, because of Sara Avraham's wife. (20:17-18)

It turns out that Avimelekh's full obedience to God's command did not stem from genuine integrity and morality, but from coercion. From the moment that Avimelekh started up with Sara, his house was struck by a plague, such that in reality he had no other choice but to cooperate.<sup>6</sup> This reading fits in with everything that we said above, but we must still understand why the Torah leaves out this detail until the very end, even though it has important ramifications the entire length of the story.

It seems that the Torah deliberately omits this essential detail precisely to create a "false image" of Avimelekh, in order to hint to us that this is the crux of the story. The story is concerned with a culture that is based on "false images"!

Thus, in one moment, when the reader reaches the end of the story, Avimelekh's image collapses all at once. It turns out that in fact Avimelekh had not been misled; rather, it is the reader himself who fell into his net. In this way the Torah succeeds in demonstrating to the reader the ability of a "false image" to create feelings of identification in the outside observer, but if he is able to look at the picture in its entirety, it will become clear to him that he is being deceived.

In conclusion, the Torah once again portrays the conduct of the Canaanites with respect to foreigners who arrive in their area. On the face of it, their conduct is anchored in law and honesty, but in practice it allows for the maximum exploitation of the weak, this time in matters of sexual relations. In this way the Torah wishes to help us remove the masks of innocence from their faces and guides us to the true path of the just: "After the doings of the land of Egypt... you shall not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan... you shall not do."

Translated by David Strauss

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<sup>6</sup> This might be the reason that he related his dream to the members of his household, as they had an interest in the matter, since God closed up all the wombs in the house of Avimelekh. It is possible that someone drew a connection between Sara's arrival and the beginning of the punishment, in which case the story was meant to defend his good name, and did not follow from a genuine fear of heaven.