



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

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## Searching for Peace

**D**éjà vu all over again?

Many events in Yitzchak's life mirror events that occurred to his father, Avraham.

Consider, for example, the encounter between Yitzchak and the Philistine King, Avimelech, chronicled in *Parshat Toldot*. A seemingly parallel earlier meeting between Avraham and the king is described in this week's parsha, *Chayei Sarah*.

Strikingly, however, the rabbis view these two events very differently. While Avraham is roundly criticized by Chazal for the covenant that he enacts with Avimelech, no such criticism is levelled against Yitzchak over the agreements he reaches, a generation later, with the Philistine king.

A careful reading of the text reveals why Yitzchak escapes such censure. Even more importantly, Yitzchak's encounter with Avimelech, at the dawn of our history, proves to be as relevant as today's headlines.

As Avimelech and his entourage approach, Yitzchak immediately objects: "Why have you come to me? [It is obvious that] you

hate me, for you exiled me from among you."

Avimelech responds by insisting that he has come to contract a *brit*, a covenant, with the Patriarch: "That you shall not to do evil to us; just as we did not harm you; and as we did only good to you, for we sent you away in peace."

It is critical to note, at this point in the interchange, that *there is no disagreement between Yitzchak and Avimelech about the facts*. They both acknowledge that their past interactions resulted in Yitzchak's exile from Philistine territory.

There is, however, profound disagreement over a much more significant issue. *Yitzchak and Avimelech are arguing about the definition of "peace."*

To paraphrase the subliminal dialogue taking place between the two...

Yitzchak opens with the objection: *How*

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can you possibly approach me now? A peace treaty? Really? Your intentions until now have been **anything but peaceful**. Did you not revile me and exile me from your land?

Avimelech responds: *How can you say that we hate you? Our intentions were obviously peaceful. All we did was send you away. Had we hated you, we would have killed you!*

The Patriarch and the Philistine king live in two different worlds...

Avimelech defines “peace” as the absence of war and physical violence. As long as two parties are not killing each other, in the king’s eyes, they are living in peace.

To Yitzchak, however, “peace” means much more. For true peace to exist there must be both an absence of hostility *and an effort towards cooperation*. Anything less cannot be considered peace.

Returning to the encounter, what Yitzchak does next seems abundantly strange...

Instead of responding to Avimelech’s rejoinder, Yitzchak abruptly ends the conversation. Without another word, he throws a party for Avimelech and his followers “and they ate and they drank.”

*What is going on? What is Yitzchak’s plan?*

Yitzchak recognizes that further conversation with the Philistine king would be futile. You can only negotiate with someone who shares your reality. An unbridgeable chasm separates the Yitzchak from Avimelech. *If two parties can’t even agree*

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on the definition of peace, they **certainly** cannot contract a peace treaty.

Yitzchak, therefore, ends the conversation. As a smokescreen, he throws a celebratory party that lasts through the night.

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## Arab partners are appearing on the scene whose definition of peace matches our own

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Upon awakening the next morning, Yitzchak and Avimelech exchange promises with each other. Tellingly, however, the text makes no mention of an agreed-upon *brit*, covenant. Unlike his father, Yitzchak does not commit to a formal treaty with the Philistines. He recognizes that temporary agreements with Avimelech are possible; but a lasting covenant cannot be drawn.

Finally, and with brilliant irony, Yitzchak then executes the coup de grace...

The Torah relates: “He [Yitzchak] sent them away; and they went from him in peace.”

Yitzchak closes the encounter by turning the tables on Avimelech. In effect, he says: *I will deal with you as you dealt with me in the past-according to your definition of peace. Just as you sent me away ‘in peace’; I now send you away ‘in peace’.*

Recognizing the continued danger of further dealings with Avimelech, Yitzchak insists on physical separation. He understands that the Philistines can be trusted only in minimal fashion- and even then-

only from afar. “True peace” will have to wait until a “true partner for peace” is found.

As is always the case, the Torah’s narrative is uncannily relevant to our time, even when it speaks of historical events that unfolded centuries ago.

We have watched with wonder over these past weeks as; with so much else going wrong around the world; a brilliant ray of light has appeared in the Middle East...

After decades of being held hostage to Palestinian intransigence, true peace has apparently begun to unfold between the State of Israel and its Arab neighbors. Scenes of friendship, respect and cooperation that would have seemed impossible a few months ago, greet our eyes daily.

These scenes present a stark contrast, not only to the hatred of our enemies, but even to the “cold peace” forged in the past with Egypt and Jordan. For the first time, Arab partners are appearing on the scene whose definition of peace matches our own.

And... the benefits emerging from our newfound agreements are already causing others “in the neighborhood” to consider partnering with the Jewish State.

Yitzchak’s dream of true peace with his neighbors is finally becoming a reality for his descendants. May we, with God’s help, merit the full realization of that dream in our time. ■

*Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU press volumes “Unlocking the Torah Text,” and “Unlocking the Haggada.*