BS”D

Parshas Vayera 5774

The Well of Contention, the Well of Peace

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The Torah tells us that Avimelech, the king of Grar, asked Avraham to swear that he and his descendants would have peace with Avimelech. He said to Avraham, “G-d is with you in everything you do.”

The Akeidas Yitzchok explains that Avimelech saw Hashem’s Providence in three things. Avraham’s victory over the four kings, Avraham and Sarah escaping unscathed from two kings (Pharoah and Avimelech himself), and that they had a son, Yitzchok, in their old age.

I find this interpretation particularly interesting in light of what I mentioned in last week’s article that, according to the interpretation of the Akeidas Yitzchak, Avraham and Sarah steadily grew in their awareness of personal Divine Providence. Apparently, their awareness influenced the outside world as well, for Avimelech and his people acknowledged the Divine Providence experienced by Avraham and Sarah.

Avraham agrees to swear. However, he complained that Avimelech’s servants had stolen a well of water from him.

Why did he bring this up at this point?

Avraham did not want to swear an oath of peace to a wicked man. If Avimelech tolerated his servants’ conduct and failed to put a stop to it, Avraham would not swear. So he rebuked Avimelech to give him a chance to respond and to remedy the injustice.

Avimelech defended himself by saying, “I don’t know who did this, you never told me, and I never knew until today.”

The Akeidah explains that if you see an injustice being perpetrated by someone, you must stop it. Avimelech said he did not know who did the injustice. (Had he known, in other words, he would have stopped it.)

Furthermore, if the person treated unfairly complains, the authority has the obligation to do something. Here, too, Avimelech said, “You never told me.” Had you told me, I would have done something.

Finally, if you hear of the injustice even though you do not know the perpetrator or the victim, you must put an end to it. But, said Avimelech, “I never heard about it before.”

Avraham accepted Avimelech’s response. He was indeed committed to justice. In that case, Avraham was ready to swear.

The Torah continues saying Avraham gave Avimelech sheep and cattle. Afterwards, he took seven sheep and gave them to Avimelech as an attestation that Avraham had dug the well. They then took an oath and called that place Be’er Sheva (the well of the seven and the well of the oath.)

The Akeida explains that Avraham actually bought the land around the well. The sheep and cattle were the payment. The sheep and cattle were the symbolic affirmation of the oath. Avraham was intending to make this place an “*eishel*” (see below) where he would proclaim G-d, so he purchased it.

Rabeinu B’chaya says that the word for oath, *shvua*, and the word for seven (*sheva*) are related. When you swear, you are affirming the seven Divine attributes.

The Midrash gives three interpretations of what the “eishel” that Avraham set up in Be’er Sheva was. One is that it was an orchard which would provide food for weary travelers. A second explanation is that it was an inn where travelers could stay. A third view is that it was a court of law where legal disputes could be resolved. Avraham provided food, lodging, and a place where justice could be had. Through this, the people learned of “Hashem, the eternal G-d.”

The Ramban gives three explanations of this phrase: the G-d of time, the G-d of the world, and the G-d who always was.

Commentaries also point out that the word “eishel” can be read as an acrostic for achila (eating), shtiya (drinking), and levaya (accompanying). When you have a guest, you should provide food and drink and accompany him partway on his journey. This doesn’t mean merely walking him to the door. It means setting him on the proper path to his destination, giving him good directions, and providing food and, if necessary, money to help him on his journey. This is actually considered the most important aspect of *hachnosas orchim*, taking in of guests.

I mentioned earlier that in order to make proper peace with Avimelech, Avraham had to get to the root of the injustice that he thought Avimelech was responsible for and correct that injustice.

The Midrash further expounds on this theme. *Tochacha* (moral instruction or rebuke) leads to love, as the proverb states, “Instruct a wise man, and he will love you.” (Mishlei) Love without tochacha is not love.

Tochacha brings to peace as it is written, “Avraham rebuked Avimelech.” Any peace without tochacha is not peace.

The Torah teaches us, “Love your fellow as yourself.” But what if your fellow is wronging you, or is just doing bad things? How are you supposed to love him?

One approach is not to love, but to tolerate. Now, toleration is a better choice than hating, but it is still far from love.

In order to be able to truly love, you must confront the misconduct of your fellow. You and he must work on correcting what is wrong, not on overlooking it. Because if it is overlooked, it cannot be true love. Tochacha, i.e., confronting the problem and working on it and solving it, is the only way to authentic love and to authentic peace. Obviously, goodwill is needed on both sides for this to work. However, ignoring the problem, avoiding communication, allowing wrongdoing to continue, is a far cry from true love and from true peace.

Avraham sought to correct the problem with Avimelech to achieve true peace. Avimelech responded properly and the issue was resolved.

We should walk in Avraham’s ways and follow his approach to achieve authentic love and authentic peace.