

Least known of all of Parashah Vayeira's stories, but perhaps the most far-reaching of all, is the story of the covenant between Abraham and Avimelech at the end of Chapter 21, which acts as a sort of buffer between the dramatic stories of Ishmael and Hagar, and the binding of Isaac. Chapter 20 opens with a story strikingly similar to the story of Abraham and Pharaoh in last week's parashah: Avimelech, king of Gerar, learns to his chagrin that Sarah is Abraham's wife, not his sister. The two men part in peace, with Abraham gaining possessions as well as the right to live wherever he wishes in Avimelech's kingdom. Their second encounter occurs several years later. Avimelech and his general Pichol arrive at Abraham's camp to propose a peace treaty, only to find Abraham angry about a well that the servants of Avimelech had seized by force. Avimelech professes to know nothing about this. A dispute that could easily have led to war is diffused by the forbearance of both men. It is noteworthy that before Abraham mentions the well, he solemnly pledges to deal fairly with Avimelech, his son, and his grandson – a peace treaty lasting for three generations. He could have brought up the issue with the well first, but instead, he behaves prudently in the interest of peaceful negotiation. We have no idea what has prompted Avimelech's action. Despite what he tells Abraham, did he actually know about the well and was worried about repercussions? After all, he took his general with him, which means he was prepared to defend himself should it become necessary. Or perhaps he remembers two very important things about Abraham: that he is blessed by HaShem – i.e. he is powerful and wealthy, and that he once deceived him. Whatever his motive, he now seeks a binding non-aggression pact – a noble act, but one presented in his capacity as overlord of the land in which Abraham has been living, as he reminds him. His mention of this fact makes it clear that this is a treaty between ruler and vassal, not between equals. But the treaty Abraham then proposes in order to secure his water rights puts them on equal footing. In Chapter 20, he leaves Avimelech laden with gifts, and he now reciprocates with generous gifts of his own. In addition, he offers seven ewe lambs to formally ratify their covenant and establish his legal claim to the well at Beersheva. The name *Beersheva* carries meaning, as do nearly all Hebrew names. *Beer* means well, and *sheva* means oath, as well as seven. So Beersheva is the well of oath, and this oath is sealed with the gift of seven ewe lambs. After Avimelech and Pichol depart, Abraham plants an *eshel*. Midrash Tehillim 106 teaches that the word *אשל* is actually an acronym for eating (אכילה), drinking (שתיה), and staying overnight (לינה) – a reference to Abraham's hospitality. The *eshel* (tamarisk) is a hardy tree that thrives in saline as well as in alkaline soils. It can take up to 400 years to fully mature, its leaves collect water vapor to cool the hot desert air, and when insects feed on it, they secrete a sweet, white substance that might have fed our ancestors in their trek across the desert. Do you see some connections? A treaty encompassing three generations – from Abraham to his grandson Joseph – sealed between people of two cultures living in the land of the Philistines; a tree that will provide sustenance 400 years later as the Israelites leave Egypt. This short encounter, although dwarfed by the story that it precedes, is the quintessence of one of Judaism's defining attributes: the pursuit of peace. *שלום* (*shalom*), the Hebrew word for peace, derives from the root *שלם*, meaning whole, complete, in agreement, to pay back, to compensate – all concepts that lead to peace. Peace is not simply the absence of war, it is a delicate, ongoing balancing act. In the eloquent words of Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978), Senator from my home State of Minnesota, Vice President under Lyndon Johnson, and Democrat candidate for President in 1968: "Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not 'happen,' it requires work." Peace in Abraham's time was rare, even in his own home. Abraham, wandering a strange land, must not only be strong, he must also be careful not to offend its inhabitants. This is hard work indeed, and it has made him cautious in dealing with people. In his efforts to gain justice for Sodom he never engages directly with its citizens to first try to effect change; instead, he pleads with HaShem from a distance after it is too late. Perhaps his new alliance with Avimelech inspires him to create actual relationships with the strangers among whom he dwells. In planting the *eshel*, which is thought to have been anything from an orchard to an inn, Abraham is beginning to enact HaShem's initial promise: that he will be a blessing. And what greater blessing is there than peace? Our scriptures and prayers attest mightily to that. We end the Amidah with *shalom rav* (abundant peace) or *sim shalom* (grant peace), the priestly blessing ends with a blessing for peace, at the end of the *kaddish* and the table blessings we ask HaShem to grant us peace, and Psalm 34:15 commands us to actively pursue peace. Beginning with Abraham's pact with Avimelech, it is upon us, as the midrash tells us, to seek peace not only at home, but wherever we go. Right now, when our world is so fraught with strife compounded by the pandemic, we can, and we must strive however we are able, to do our part to uphold the fragile balance that ensures peace.

Shabbat shalom!