Confronting Hatred: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Toledot

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“Now all the wells which his father’s servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac: Go from us; for you are much mightier than we.” (Bereishith 26:15-16)

In an arid land, Abraham had his servants dig wells to provide water for people, animals and fields. Rabbinic tradition refers to this as work on behalf of human settlement, *yishuvo shel olam*. Everyone in the area benefitted from the wells, not just Abraham and his entourage.

Yet, the Philistines’ hatred of Abraham and family was so great, they filled the wells with earth so that no one—not even themselves—would benefit from the water. Why would they do such a malicious and self-destructive thing? What are the sources for such visceral hatred?

The Torah informs us that Abimelech, head of the Philistines, told Isaac to go away from his territory *ki atsamta mimenu me’od*. This phrase is generally translated: “for you are mightier than we.” Yet, the Philistines were well in the majority and Isaac posed no physical threat to them. On the contrary, Isaac followed his father’s example of being a constructive member of society.

Hatred is not necessarily based on objective reality. To the Philistines, Isaac’s very existence was perceived as a threat. They had their own “conspiracy theory” that Isaac was really more powerful than they, and that he would seek to control and rule them. They were jealous of Isaac’s success and fearful that he would continue to succeed.

Nechama Leibowitz cites various commentators who provide another dimension to this episode. They translate *ki atsamta mimenu me’od*: for you have become very strong through us. You have plundered us, you have taken away from us in order to enrich yourself. In this interpretation, the hatred of the Philistines was based not merely on fear or jealousy: it was based on a vicious claim that Isaac was successful because he was exploiting the Philistines. They couldn’t imagine that he was an honest man doing honest work; rather, they imagined him to be a parasite who robbed them of their property.

How was Isaac to deal with such irrational hatred? The Torah tells us that Isaac left Abimelech’s territory, but he also re-dug the wells that Abraham’s servants had dug and that the Philistines had

plugged up. As he continued to move away, Isaac's men dug new wells but were challenged by the other shepherds in the vicinity. He finally found an area where he was left alone.

But no sooner had he re-established himself, Abimelech came after him with the captain of his army. Isaac said: "Why have you come to me seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?" Abimelech replies: "We saw plainly that the Lord was with you…Let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no hurt, as we have not touched you and as we have done unto you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace; you are now the blessed of the Lord."

Abimelech's words are remarkable. On the plus side, he realized that Isaac was blessed by the Lord, that Isaac had not deprived the Philistines of anything. He somehow was able to dismiss the "conspiracy theories" that had turned him and his people so cruelly against Isaac.

On the minus side, Abimelech presented himself in a false light. Instead of the hateful leader who drove Isaac away, Abimelech describes himself as one who never did any harm to Isaac but actually only acted nicely to him. He rewrote events to make himself look good and to exonerate himself for his misdeeds.

Isaac did not reject Abimelech's request for a mutual covenant. They ate a festive meal together, after which Isaac sent off Abimelech on peaceful terms.

This episode points to the roots of hatred and conspiracy theories. It indicates that it is possible for haters to overcome their animosity and actually to see the virtues of those they once feared and despised. And it shows the importance of forgiving those who want covenants of peace, even if their presentation of facts falsely presents them in a positive light.

The story of Isaac and Abimelech repeats itself in various forms throughout history. It is a reminder of human conflict and reconciliation, enmity and peaceful relations. It is a story that speaks to us today.