



# Sermon Tidbits

NOVEMBER 13, 2017

## Parashat Toldot

### Stability in an Unstable Region

These are the generations of Isaac (Genesis 25:19)

ואלה תולדות יצחק (בראשית כה:יט)

We often say that Israelis live in a “dangerous neighborhood.” Recent events remind us that this neighborhood—the Middle East—is not only dangerous; it’s also inherently unstable. Last week, the [Washington Post reported](#) that Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri “stunned Lebanon and its leaders...when he announced his resignation in a televised statement recorded in Saudi Arabia, citing Iranian and Hezbollah meddling in Arab affairs...Hariri’s abrupt resignation has set off anxious chatter about Lebanon’s unstable political configuration and put it at the center of a spiraling regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.” After the resignation, the [New York Times reported](#) that, “fears for Lebanon’s stability were running high,” as the move represented a Saudi effort to “curb Iran’s growing dominance in the region.” According to [the Jerusalem Post](#), “With Saad Hariri’s shocking resignation as prime minister of Lebanon on Saturday evening, Israel’s northern border has become even more unstable...”

Without stability, when turmoil inevitably arises we lose our equilibrium, balance and sense of self-identity. As *Parashat Toldot* unfolds, the life of Isaac as described in the Torah teaches us the critical value of stability fundamental to the foundation of a great nation. After reading three *parashiot* about the various trials and tribulations that Abraham endured as he spread the message of monotheism across the region, we would expect our *parashah*, which relates to the life of Isaac, to offer new stories that diverge from Abraham’s path. Yet, we find precisely the opposite beginning in the very first verse: “And these are the generations (or stories) of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham begot Isaac.” (25:19) The most fundamental element of Isaac’s personality is his lineage—“Abraham begot Isaac.” Moreover, most of the events related in *Toldot* about Isaac seem to repeat portions of Abraham’s life: Just as Abraham fled famine in a foreign land, so did Isaac. Abraham argued over the digging of wells and Isaac followed suit. Abraham claimed that his wife is his sister and Isaac did exactly the same thing. Where is Isaac’s innovation? What does he add to the story? Why is he considered a “forefather”—a critical progenitor of the Jewish people?

Rabbi Dov Linzer [explains](#) that Isaac’s critical contribution to Jewish history is the element of stability. “There is little that is new or innovative in Isaac’s life. He chose not to set out on his own but to continue in the way of Abraham. It is easy to dismiss such a life as mundane and meaningless, but in fact, without Isaac we would not have survived. Isaac took all of Abraham’s creativity, all of Abraham’s innovations and vision, and ensured its continuity. Abraham was the creator, the founder, the charismatic leader; Isaac was the one who took that charisma and creativity and institutionalized it...If another Abraham had followed the first there would have been no progress. All the amazing ideas, visions, and goals of Abraham would have been forgotten in the excitement and passion of his successor. Re-digging the wells, doing the hard day-to-day work necessary to sustain the vision one has inherited and bring it into the next generation, can often be unexciting and thankless. Such was Isaac’s task. But had it not been for him, all of Abraham’s contributions would have been lost.”

In 1917, the year the Balfour Declaration was presented, the entirety of the Middle East was also being negotiated and borders were being re-drawn by Western powers. Of all the countries created in the years after World War I, today, Israel is the only country in the Middle East that is democratic *and* stable. This stability isn’t just important for the Jewish people. It’s critically important for the United States as well. In an increasingly uncertain Middle East, Israel is the one stable democratic ally upon which America can consistently depend. When we work to strengthen cooperation

between the two countries in intelligence, homeland security, missile defense and counterterrorism, we're not only helping Israel. By ensuring Israel's stability, we are also helping the United States meet its security challenges. ■

## Sadat's Visit to Israel: A Meaningful and Important Gesture

**Then Abimelech went to him (Genesis 26:6)**

**ואבימלך הלך אליו (בראשית כו:כו)**

“I come to you today on solid ground to shape a new life and to establish peace. We all love this land, the land of God, we all, Moslems, Christians and Jews, all worship God. Under God, God's teachings and commandments are: love, sincerity, security and peace.” With these words, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat opened his [historic speech](#) to the members of Israel's Knesset in November of 1977, exactly forty years ago this week. In his address, he frankly accepted Israel's existence and reached out personally to the people of Israel to end the decades of war between the two nations that had caused untold misery, cost thousands of lives, and left the two nations mired in an untenable and unsustainable conflict.

The visit marked a break with a longstanding Arab policy of not dealing directly with the Jewish state that had endured since Israel's establishment in 1948. Sadat's sincere efforts bore fruit, leading ultimately to the signing of the Camp David accords in September of 1978 and a formal peace treaty in March of 1979—a peace treaty that has endured for nearly four decades. Israel warmly received Sadat's efforts for the simple reason that he backed his words with actions. He not only said that he wanted peace; when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin proffered an invitation to address the Knesset, he shocked the world by accepting the invitation and expressing hope for a future of peace and coexistence.

In his brave act of peace, Anwar Sadat followed the example of another foreign leader seeking a peace agreement, which we read about in this week's *parashah*. Following a series of conflicts between Isaac and Abimelech, the King of the Philistines, Isaac separated from Abimelech and settled in Beersheba. We read that, “Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath, his friend, and Phicol the captain of his host.” (26:26) During their meeting Isaac and Abimelech established a covenant of mutual peace that lasted until the era of King David, many centuries later. What prompted Isaac to accept Abimelech's proposal and establish a treaty? According to one Midrash, Abimelech's initial gesture played a major role in their rapprochement. The Midrash wonders why the verse mentions not only Abimelech, but also his friend Ahuzzath and Phicol his military leader. What role did they play in this story? The Midrash (*Habeor* – see *Torah Sheleimah vol 2. P 1062*) explains: “Originally [Abimelech] sent [Phicol] his Minister of Defense, and [Isaac] was not appeased. He then sent Ahuzzath his friend and [Isaac] was not appeased. Finally he came himself [and Isaac was] appeased...” Isaac finally agreed to accept Abimelech's request for peace when the Philistine king's actions demonstrated not only his remorse, but his desire for peace. More than any words or messengers could convey, his willingness to travel to his adversary conveyed his genuine sincerity and led to an agreement that lasted for many years.

Like Abimelech, Anwar Sadat's words and deeds convinced skeptical Israelis that he had indeed changed, and prompted Israel to make painful, difficult concessions for a lasting peace agreement. The Camp David peace agreement required Israel to withdraw from the Sinai desert, a huge landmass that served as a significant security buffer between Israel and Egypt, and dismantle and abandon several settlements it had built in the Sinai.

As we mark the forty-year anniversary of the gesture that demonstrated that Egypt represented a serious partner for peace, we must also remember that Israel's desire for peace has not waned. Time and time again, Israel has demonstrated its willingness to make painful, difficult concessions to reach a permanent peace agreement with an adversary.

When Israel's neighbors demonstrates not only in words, but also in actions that they truly desires peace with the Jewish state—as Jordan did in 1994—Israel will be waiting with open arms. ■

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