

Power and Pacts

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BH

Let us pass over the Torah portions of Vayyeira and move to just one moment in Chayyei Sarah. First, we'll set the stage. Sarah is dead, Isaac has survived his father's attempt on his life. Abraham is now at that point of his life when he is putting things in order so that he can die in peace. He needs to find a good wife for Isaac. This, by itself, is very strange. Most of our Torah patriarchs find their own wives but Abraham does not seem to trust Isaac to find himself the right wife.

We have to remember that Abraham had experience with pacts in which one party is clearly the inferior party. At the beginning of his journey, he makes the covenant between the pieces (Genesis 15:8-21). This is a treaty form between a king and a suzerain. Animals are cut in half and separated. A pathway is created between the pieces in which, in the normal way of things, the senior party would stand at one end and the junior party would walk between the pieces and then promise, before the king, to be faithful. Just imagine it: you would literally be walking through a path of blood. The unspoken message couldn't be clearer: keep this covenant or you will end up hacked to bits like these animals. But that's not what happens here. In this case, God's heavenly fire passes between the pieces. God is going toward Abraham to make the covenant. It's a statement that says,

“This covenant isn't about Me commanding you. It's Me coming toward you, to tell you I'll be faithful to you.”

But this was an exception to the rule. Most covenants were made between those that understood the power dynamic. Certainly that's the case when Abraham makes his slave, Eliezer, swear to find Isaac a wife. Abraham makes Eliezer swear upon his thigh (Genesis 24:2) that he will find Isaac a wife.

In the Torah, when someone asks another party to do something, we almost always find that it informs us that the person, did, in fact, do what was commanded. Here, Eliezer does make the vow by placing his hand on Abraham's thigh (Genesis 24:9).

Discussion Questions

1. I brought this episode, which is often overlooked, for a few reasons. First, why does Isaac not get his own wife? Why is the task entrusted to Eliezer?
2. The method of placing one's hand on another's "thigh", a euphemism for genitals, and making an oath occurs only here and later in the Joseph story in the whole Tanach. What does it tell us that this treaty form is so rare? Is there some emotional desperation attached to it?
3. Do any of you know whether this form of oath exists in other cultures? If so, please tell us about it.
4. Why does the text not betray the slightest embarrassment at Avram's behavior?
5. In all of God's communications with Avram in this Torah portion, is Sarai involved in any way? If so, what might God have said to convince Sarai to leave home to go to points unknown?

When we see this sort of covenant again, the result will be quite different.

As always, looking forward to your insights!