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He Hunted With His Mouth

During the 1968 presidential campaign, Vice President Hubert Humphrey made a campaign stop to Brooklyn to visit Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the leader of the Satmar Hasidic court, known simply as the “Satmar Rav.” During the meeting, Humphrey described his commitment to some of the political priorities for the Satmar community and also described how he was going to support Israel. After he left the rebbe’s office, one of the rebbe’s assistants approached the rebbe and said, “How outrageous! Doesn’t he know that we Satmar Hasidim are opposed to Zionism! What a fool! He’s trying to win our votes by claiming to support a policy that we reject!”

“You don’t understand,” the rebbe responded. “We are opposed to Zionism because we believe that the Torah forbids us from having our own state until the time of *Mashiach*. But Hubert Humphrey isn’t Jewish! He doesn’t have to follow the Torah’s commands. He thinks that supporting Israel is a way to show that he likes Jews. Therefore, we should be happy that he made that comment because, even though we don’t care about the specific way that he is supporting Israel, it’s good to know that he wants to make us happy. He says nice things about Israel because he wants to show he is not an antisemite.”

I think this is a clever story, and I find it somewhat charming, but ultimately, I hope you all find the story deeply unsatisfying. We, who care about Israel cannot be satisfied with the attitude of the Satmar Rav. He was content to say “the policies themselves don’t matter because we don’t want Israel to survive—all that matters is that American politicians want to make Jews happy.” We who care about Israel have a responsibility to evaluate specific policies that we think will be in Israel’s best interest—if the policy is the priority. A politician trying to make us feel good must be secondary.

And yet, last spring, ironically enough at the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington D.C., something took place which, upon reflection, is nothing more than the attitude of the Satmar Rav played out on a grand scale. I heard a politician deliver a speech to a cheering crowd and mention how he was committed to cancelling the Iran nuclear deal. “My number one priority,” he said, “is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran.” That received a lot of applause—the Iran deal is not very popular among AIPAC members. But then, three or four minutes later, he reversed himself. To the same cheers from the crowd, he advocated the exact opposite policy saying, “we must enforce the terms of the previous deal to hold Iran totally accountable. And we will enforce it like you’ve never seen a contract enforced before, folks, believe me.”

That moment is important because the speaker, who contradicted himself and told two opposite things to the pro-Israel community in the span of three minutes and was cheered for both things that he said, is going to become the next president of the United States in just a few weeks. President Trump will be able to make a decision about Iran policy. Either he’ll cancel the deal, or he’ll enforce it, or he’ll figure out some way to reconcile those two options. And, through organizations like AIPAC, those who care about Israel will be able to encourage him to make decisions that will hopefully keep us safe. And none of you need me to tell you how to advise and lobby the president. But we ought to take stock of how it could be that the pro-Israel community heard two contradictory things and responded, “all of the above.”

Although I heard the speech from the AIPAC Policy Conference right when it was given, I was distracted by the spectacle of the moment and missed the contradiction. But it wasn’t missed by others. A few days later, back in Chicago, I heard journalists on the radio focusing on the contradiction. And those journalists were ridiculing us. What does the pro-Israel community want? What does the pro-Israel community care about? Preventing a nuclear Iran has been the number one priority for much of the pro-Israel community for years.

despite evidence to the contrary. But, fortunately, for the sake of Jewish survival, Yitzhak learned to become a better judge of character when confronting the outside world. Away from his family, Yitzhak is shrewd and successful.

When famine comes again to *Eretz Yisrael*, Yitzhak begins to travel south towards Egypt when God intervenes and tells Yitzhak not to leave *Eretz Yisrael*. Instead, Yitzhak remains in the southern portion of *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Grar, a territory ruled by Avimelekh, the king of the Philistines. Like his father before him, Yitzhak fears that he will be murdered by jealous men who wish to kidnap Rivka and so Yitzhak tells his neighbors that Rivka is his sister. Avimelekh, sometime later, peering through an open window sees Yitzhak and Rivka behaving like a married couple and realizes they are not siblings. He then confronts Yitzhak, in an astonishing display of chutzpah and says, essentially, “don’t misundereestimate me!”

אִשׁוֹ: עַל יְנוּ וְהַבֵּאתִי אֶת־אִשְׁתִּי הֵן הָעַם אַחֲדֵי שָׁכַבְתָּ בְּכִי מֵעַט לְנוֹ עָשִׂיתָ מֵהַיִּת אֶת אֲבִימִלְךָ וַיִּאָּמַר

Avimelekh said, “What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.”

If the dictionary definition of chutzpah is murdering your parents and begging the court for mercy as an orphan, the second definition is Avimelekh’s statement to Yitzhak. “How dare you,” Avimelekh accuses Yitzhak, “not tell us that Rivka was your wife—I was just about to kidnap and rape her and would not have realized she was a married woman.”

What was Yitzhak thinking at that moment? I imagine something like, “Cry me a river, Avimelekh.” But we don’t know what he was thinking. He says nothing. Instead, he plants seeds. He grows crops. He digs wells. He is successful year after year after year. He doesn’t antagonize Avimelekh. He doesn’t intentionally offend him. He just goes about the business of securing his family’s future in *Eretz Yisrael*. Yitzhak understands that Avimelekh lives by no moral code that deserved Yitzhak’s respect and therefore Yitzhak understood that Avimelekh was irrelevant to everything important that Yitzhak was trying to accomplish in his life.

A generation earlier Avraham had not responded to the challenge of Avimelekh in a way that was quite as successful. Avraham too claimed that his wife was his sister when he traveled to Grar. Avraham too is confronted by Avimelekh when the subterfuge is revealed (could be the same Avimelekh, could be a different king with the same name—either way, they behave in the same way). But Avraham “misunderestimates” Avimelekh and responds to Avimelekh’s challenges as if it would have been justifiable for Avimelekh to kidnap Sarah thinking she was “only” Avraham’s sister.

Avimelekh saw that he had leverage over Avraham and later pursues Avraham and asks for a treaty. Avraham complies but the negotiations hit an impasse. Avraham wants Avimelekh to admit that his servants had stolen one of Avraham’s wells.

אֲבִימִלְךָ: עֶבְדִי גָזְלוּ אֶשְׁרֵי הַמַּיִם בְּאֵר עַל־אֲדֹתֵי אֲבִימִלְךָ אֲבָרְהָם וְהִזְכִּיר
 “Then Abraham reproached Avimelekh for the well of water which the servants of Avimelekh had seized.”

But Avimelekh brushes off the accusation with a bald faced lie:

שָׁמַעְתִּי לֹא אֲנִי וְגַם לֹא אֶהְיֶה וְגַם אֲדֹתֵי וְגַם אֲתֵּי הַמַּיִם הַזֶּה אֶת־הַדְּבָר עָשָׂה מִי יָדַעְתִּי לֹא אֲבִימִלְךָ וַיִּאָּמַר
 הַיּוֹם: בִּלְתִּי

“I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until today.”

In contemporary terms we might call this “gas-lighting.” Avimelekh pushes Avraham to deny what he very well knew to be true. And Avraham relents. He pays off Avimelekh to get his own wells back that had been stolen from him by Avimelekh’s servants. This deal is criticized by Rashbam and by others as a failure on Avraham’s part. Avraham’s failure emerged because he established a dynamic with Avimelekh in which

Avraham never acknowledged the fundamental moral bankruptcy of Avimelekh. He continued to accept the framing that Avimelekh himself provided and so Avraham's interests always came last.

Yitzhak doesn't fall for this trap. Once he realizes Avimelekh's moral bankruptcy, he never treats Avimelekh's demands as being compelling in any way. Avimelekh asks Yitzhak to move away. Yitzhak complies and redigs and reclaims the wells that Avraham had dug a generation earlier and that the Philistines had filled with soil. He reinforces his presence in *Eretz Yisrael* by living his life and by being persistent in defense of his values even when the political climate was hostile.

Ultimately, this earns him the grudging respect of Avimelekh. When Avimelekh visits Yitzhak to ask for peace, Yitzhak is unfazed and unperturbed. Yitzhak takes possession of all of his family's wells without the need to pay off Avimelekh for the "favor" of returning stolen property. This fortitude and patience, this *gevurah* in the language of the rabbis, is what enabled Yitzhak to become the first Jew to live in *Eretz Yisrael* for his entire life.

Yitzhak never makes any grand journeys. He never goes on a foreign adventure like his father and like his son. He has fewer speaking lines than any of the other patriarchs. But he has something to teach us. This is his week. This is his *parashah*. And his message is timely. Yitzhak let himself be misled by Esav. There were tragic consequences of that misjudgment, but there is also something so human and so understandable about it. If we will be naive and assume the best of others, let it be like Yitzhak, with members of our own family whom we refuse to give up on. And when we find ourselves confronted by those with power, let us be like Yitzhak and not allow their power to distract us from our values and from our mission.

Yitzhak's life is a study in contrasts—having endless love for an undeserving son and preserving his moral integrity in the face of a challenging neighbor. We too need to distinguish between times that can allow us to be naive and embracing and times that call on us to be discerning and judgmental.