

Parashat Toledot תולדת

Torah: Genesis 25:19–28:9

Haftarah: Malachi 1:1–2:7

Thoughts on God's Sovereignty

General Overview

S.R. Hanina b. Papa commented thus: "Many things You have done, O Lord my God, even Your wondrous works, and Your thoughts toward us." (Psalm 40:6) Said S.R. Hanina: "All the works and thoughts which You hast wrought have been toward us, for our sake. Thus, why did Isaac's eyes grow dim? So that Jacob might come and receive the blessings." (Bereshit Rabbah 65.8)

It is easy to read through the stories about the patriarchs and get lost in the details. When we examine the passages closely it seems that all we see are human decisions, human error, and human strength or weakness. It is like standing very close to an oil painting where we can see each brush stroke clearly but occasionally miss the overall theme of the painting.

The same peril might await us in our Torah studies if we do not take the time to step back a little from the text in order to see the big picture that the Holy One is unfolding before us.

Parashat Toledot is a good example of this. Here, we vividly witness fleshly human dealings, deceptions, conflict, and even hatred. Lest we get lost in the mire of biased human reactions and affairs, we need to step back and attempt to analyze these actions through the sovereign eyes of God.

Thus, we will study this Torah portion to see what we can learn about divine sovereignty. To be sure, the sovereignty of God is a recurrent theme throughout the Torah. For example, it will surface again in the story of Joseph. The repetition of this theme in the Torah means, among other things, that the Lord wants us to keep it fresh in our minds. God wants to encourage and strengthen us with this revelation of Himself.

With all of this in mind, here is this week's study outline:

Introduction — A Word About Genealogy

- I. God's Sovereignty in Birth
- II. God's Sovereignty Over The Land
- III. God's Sovereignty Over Inheritance

In this excerpt from Parashat Toledot, we will focus on the section II, God's Sovereignty Over The Land.

II. God's Sovereignty Over The Land

Chapter 26 relates another earthy, human experience. A famine struck the land. Isaac was told by the Lord not to flee to Egypt, but to remain in

the land. Thus, instead of going to Egypt, he moved his family to Gerar, a city in the vicinity of the Philistines.

A. Another Philistine Problem

Just as in a previous parasha, so also here, we are confronted with another Philistine problem. Most historical sources indicate that the Philistines did not take official residence in the Promised Land until after 1200 BCE, when they were defeated by the Egyptians and made to settle on the coast of southwest Canaan. It seems that the Egyptians intended to use these skilful warriors as a kind of military buffer.

The approximate date of Isaac's life is somewhere around 1800 BCE — at least 500 or 600 years before the permanent Philistine colony in Canaan began. Moreover, there is hardly any archaeological evidence to confirm a Philistine presence in Canaan during the time of the patriarchs. What, therefore, are we to make of the reference to the Philistines in 26:1?

There are at least two possibilities of understanding this reference to the Philistines. The first suggestion, which is the least acceptable, suggests that Moshe was calling the people group led by Abimelech by the name of Philistines because this is the ethnic group which was present in that part of Canaan during the time he (Moshe) was writing. In other words, according to Dr. Robert Steiglitz,

Most scholars regard the biblical references to Philistines during the Patriarchal Period as anachronistic — that is an identification inserted by a later writer or editor despite the fact that the events themselves occurred in a period hundreds of years before the arrival of the Philistines.¹

The second possible understanding is, in our opinion, more acceptable. This is to suggest that even though the Philistines, as a force, did not settle in southwest Canaan before 1200 BCE, nevertheless, there may have been sporadic settlements before that time. It is much like the Hittites who lived in Canaan centuries before their Empire brought Canaan under their control.

The Philistines were sea invaders who originated from the Aegean Sea area. Surely they explored or traded with people from Canaan before 1200 BCE. Dr. Trude Dothan, a recognized Philistine expert, opens this door of possible understanding for us when she writes:

While the major settlement phase of the Sea Peoples following their defeat at the hands of Rameses III (1200 BCE) in his eighth year has long been recognized from the literary and archaeological record, an ever-increasing corpus of evidence from recent excavations in Canaan and on the coast of Syria, and in Cyprus is increasingly pointing not only to raids but to an initial wave of settlements in the eastern Mediterranean by Sea Peoples prior to their defeat by Rameses III.²

In all honesty, we do not think that Dothan had the patriarchal age in mind in her remarks. However, she does point out an important principle for us: The complete evidence is not yet in! Recent discoveries have caused the long-standing theories for a date of the Philistine arrival in

Canaan to change. Perhaps more information will also be uncovered to confirm the biblical account of a Philistine presence in Canaan during the time of the Patriarchs.

B. The War of the Wells

While living among the Philistines, Isaac “became great and kept becoming greater until he was very great. He acquired flocks and herds and many enterprises; and the Philistines envied him” (26:13–14). Due to their envy, the Philistines tried to drive Isaac away from them. One way by which they attempted to do so was to destroy the wells that he and Abraham had dug. The text relates the conflict that broke out because of the wells. Perhaps we could call this battle, “The War of the Wells!” Isaac would dig a well only to have it stopped up by the Philistines.

It all came to a head in 26:28. Isaac did not win a great military victory, nor did he purchase their favour with his wealth. Instead, God sovereignly gave him the victory by moving upon the hearts of the idolatrous Philistines. Thus in verse 28, Abimelech and his general visited Isaac when he was busy digging yet another well. Isaac greeted them with justified scepticism about their friendly intentions. Then they completely astonished Isaac with the following declaration, “We have indeed seen that the Lord has been with you, O blessed of the Lord.”

What brought about this seemingly sudden change of heart from the Philistines? They themselves gave us a hint when they told Isaac, “We have seen that the Lord has been with you.” What evidence of God’s presence in Isaac’s life did they see?

First and foremost, they undoubtedly saw all of the wealth that Isaac had amassed, although this is not what prompted the change in the Philistines. The material goods only led the Philistines to envy, not to peace.

Secondly, let us suggest something else, something more subtle. Perhaps they saw something in the digging of the wells all over the region by both Abraham and his son, Isaac. When they dug wells, they left a subtle, yet powerful testimony to the existence of the one true God and His goodness toward sinful man. There were at least two ways in which this was accomplished.

First, they provided water both for themselves and for all who wanted to use it. “Water means life for man, land, and animal, for the immediate place and the whole neighbourhood.” Therefore, in essence the Philistines were “cutting off their nose to spite their face and withholding benefits from both themselves and their cattle!”³

In other words, the Patriarchs, acting according to divine mandate, were demonstrating their appreciation for the land, as well as their concern for others by providing water, whereas, the godless Philistines were attempting to hurt others. In following the dictates of their gods, they were also hurting themselves. Therefore, which theological system was life producing, theirs or the patriarchs? God sovereignly made the correct answer known.

There is a second way that the Lord moved the Philistines to make peace with Isaac. Whenever Abraham dug wells, he named them. Isaac also did the same. As for the wells of his father that Isaac re-opened, “he called their names after the names by which his father called them” (26:18). Moreover, each name meant something. When a Patriarch named a well, he called it by a name that would drive home the lesson of the reality and existence of the one true God. By this he would arouse in them (the Philistines or others) an awareness of the truth by saying, “Let us go and draw water from the well of the eternal God!” Since the wells were a public necessity, in this manner, the people were initiated into knowledge of the true God.⁴

The point of all this is that the Lord was sovereignly causing His Name and His character to be made known throughout Canaan by the simple human act of digging and naming a well. In this way, the good news about Himself was spreading sovereignly through human means to those who needed to hear it.

C. Modern Testimony

We find an amazing parallel to what was happening in the patriarchal period and what the Lord is doing in our present age.

Today, in the age of Jewish renaissance in the homeland, wells are being literally dug in the same land in which our forefathers had sunk wells, like Abraham and Isaac, especially in the dry Negev.

We can appreciate the greatness of the patriarchs who combined their dissemination of the true faith with the practical reclamation of the soil by digging wells and watering the ground.⁵

Indeed, the present enemies are similar to the Canaanites and Philistines. They are still trying to stop up the wells and hinder the spread of the knowledge of the God of Israel throughout the land. However, the Lord, as always, reigns as the supreme Sovereign of the universe. He is making His great Name known increasingly throughout the land.

The foregoing paragraphs showed us how God acted sovereignly on a large, national scale in the dealings between Isaac and the Philistines. However, God never does one thing at a time. As He was sovereignly moving among the nations, He was also sovereignly working in individual hearts. He was working a work of sanctification with Isaac at the same time revealing Himself to the Philistines.

¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, July / August 1982, 28.

² *Biblical Archaeology Today*, 166.

³ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, 258.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.