

The Deep Roots of the Tamarisk Jonathan Golden, PhD.

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Conflict is best resolved when the very parties involved have direct input in the mediation process. In Genesis 20, a machlochet develops between Abimelech and Abraham when the latter is untruthful about his relationship with Sarah, and the former “had her brought to him”, thus creating a situation that is highly embarrassing for all parties. At first, God intervenes with heavy hand, visiting the king in his dreams, threatening his life and lifeline; there is no negotiation. What happens next is fascinating. Racing to address the conflict, Abimelech immediately summons Abraham and confronts him about his act of deceit. The two then engage in direct dialogue concerning their dispute. Abimelech delves deeper than sheer indignation, explaining exactly why the situation is so heinous to him – adultery is a great sin that brings shame to the king and his entire house. Abraham, for his part, explains his own motivation concerning this same great sin: his fear that in a foreign land he would be exposed to murder, a crime deemed a lesser offense than adultery. Through direct engagement, the two are able to uncover the deep concerns that drive the other, and together, and after the king publically bestows gifts on his guests - they settle the matter.

The two will later return for yet another round of negotiations, this time initiated by Abimelech, who proposes to Abraham what is in essence a pact of mutual nonaggression. Abraham swears not to deal falsely with the king, nor his descendants (Genesis 21: 22-24) and it seems they have reached an agreement. In the next line though, Abraham introduces an issue that is completely new to Abimelech, laying claim to a well that his servants have seized. Abraham offers sheep and oxen to Abimelech, and whether as payment for the well or just a sign of good faith, it works and the two complete their covenant. But what has happened here? Is Abraham behaving like a shifty dealer, introducing entirely new terms at the last minute? Was this intended as a dealbreaker? Or is this simply a tactic of shrewd negotiation? Abraham clearly sees the benefit of entering the pact, and does not wish to scuttle it. But he also understands that the issue of the well, if left unresolved, could leave a festering problem in the future. Though raising this matter could increase tension and complicate the talks, Abraham’s long-term goal is to ensure that together they can build a peace that will last.

There are several important principles at work here. To begin, mediating conflict ultimately works best when responsibility rests with parties in conflict. Attempting to solve the problem *for* the parties can actually prevent deeper engagement, where parties reach down and search for root causes of the conflict. Dealing with matters on this deeper level can bring more substantive solutions for the present, while preventing further conflict in the future. Further, we are all tempted at times to settle for superficial solutions that seem to alleviate tension. But solutions found easily can easily dissolve. Resolving deep-seated conflict entails serious reflection and probing for underlying causes. Mediations are often tough business, but must be embraced as *machlochet lashem shamayim*, if peace can be achieved. In the end, Abraham marks the covenant by planting beside the well a tamarisk, a beautiful tree known for its deep roots.