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Lehrhaus Over Shabbat

Lekh Lekha

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Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing articles that were previously scheduled. In this way, we hope to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.

Shechem, Place Of Brit

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Author's note: When I first penned this article in August, my son was beginning a lengthy stint in Shechem as an IDF officer. He is still there at this agonizing time, protecting the residents of the yishuvim *around Shechem, guarding the rare visits to Joseph's tomb. May Hashem keep him and his soldiers safe from all harm, and in the merit of their steadfast faithfulness, may we all soon see the* brit areivut, *the covenant of mutuality and unity which bonds together the entire Jewish people, flourish once again in Shechem.*

There is perhaps no better prototype of an evocative biblical place than Shechem. It is saturated in biblical history, ripe for association, nearly all of it negative:

> Shechem is a place ordained for calamity. In Shechem, they tormented and raped Dinah; in the outskirts of Shechem the brothers sold Joseph; in Shechem the kingdom of the house of David was divided. (*Sanhedrin* 102a)

The Sages' ominous list careens from sexual violation to near fratricide to monarchal disintegration; it overwhelms us with the

magnitude of just how much disaster was sourced in one place. And yet, as the stories of the Bible unfurl, Shechem seems a place initially designated for covenant, not rupture! Each of Shechem's tragic stories always starts promisingly:

- When Jacob settled near Shechem after his long sojourn outside of the land, his daughter Dinah went seeking friendship amongst the Canaanite girls.[1] (Genesis 34:1)
- The king of Shechem at that time, Hamor, wished to join the two peoples – his Canaanite subjects and Jacob's clan – together to form one nation, so he acted on Jacob's sons' demand that all males in Shechem undergo a *brit milah*, the circumcision covenant. (Genesis 34:20-24)
- Joseph tried to reconnect with his estranged brothers in Shechem. (Genesis 37:14)
- Later on, Rehoboam, son of Solomon, traveled from his capital in Jerusalem up to Shechem to seek accord with a disgruntled northern population. (I Kings 12:1)

For all of the negative associations cataloged above in the Talmud, Shechem is equally evocative of fraternity, and the yearning to find commonality.

The calamities associated with Shechem are all the more shocking because we are oriented to expect the warmth of *brit* (covenant) there. This is because the Bible's introduction to the city is so redolent with promise. Shechem was the very first place that Abraham arrived in his destined land; it was the very first place where God ever appeared to him in a vision (Genesis 12:6-7).[2] The patriarch's encounter with the place was as unforgettable, as everlasting, as the moment when a groom swoops his bride over the threshold of his door. In that formative moment, when dreams and plans materialized into firm reality, when Abraham's feet were on the good plain between two mountains in the land destined for him, God assured him: *To your seed will I give this land*. So began the love story between Abraham's family and the land of Canaan, there in Shechem. And so we are primed to consider Shechem as a special place, a redemptive place.

This is why we are unsurprised when Moses instructed Israel to head to Shechem as soon as they could upon entering the land.[3] There they were to forge a new *brit* with God,[4] strengthening and redefining the terms of their covenant with the divine. This *brit* was dangerous, and sublime, and inevitable: it marked an acceptance of mutual

[1] Hirsch, Genesis 34:1.

[2] See Ramban, *Kli Yakar*, Malbim, and *Ha-Emek Davar* on Genesis 12:7.

[3] Deuteronomy 11:29-30, 27:1-26. Only Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal, the two mountains which rise over Elon Moreh, are mentioned explicitly. Rashi on Deuteronomy 11:30 links Elon Moreh with Shechem, based on Genesis 12:6 and *Sotah* 32a. Regarding when exactly the ceremony was held, see *Sotah* 33b and *Sanhedrin* 44a.

[4] Deuteronomy 28:69, *Mekhilta d-Rabi Yishmael- Mishpatim*, *Mesechta d-Kaspa- Parashah* 20; also *Midrash Tannaim*- Deuteronomy 23 and *Yalkut Shimoni* 359.

responsibility within Israel.

> Once (Israel) crossed over the Jordan and enacted the covenant of Blessings and Curses at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal, they were from then on liable for each other's behavior, and would be collectively punished for an individual's sins, even for those sins committed in private. (Rashi, *Sanhedrin* 43b)

The landscape around Shechem encouraged *brit*: two mountains bisected by a plain with the holy ark nestled between them, similar to the halved animals in the *brit ben ha-betarim* (Covenant of the Pieces) with the divine smoke and fire that passed between them.[5] Staged as redux of Sinai, the tableau around Shechem was deliberately inverted: this time, instead of gazing up at God from the foot of Mt. Sinai, Israel would be divided between the two mountaintops looming over Shechem, half of the tribes on Mt. Gerizim and the other half on Mt. Ebal. From their superior vantage points, Israel would peer down at the Ark of the Covenant set within the ancient, storied city of Shechem. Shechem would serve as their focal point of contemplating the promised land, and their new responsibilities and obligations towards one another, completing the circle that Abraham had begun at the very outset.

When the Sages, therefore, drew up their forbidding list, and characterized Shechem as a place of calamity, they prod us towards a more thorough probing into the erstwhile city of *brit*. We discover in short order that nearly all of the earnest attempts at connection mentioned above fell short:

- Dinah is sexually violated by the prince of Shechem. (Genesis 34:2)
- The circumcision *brit* undertaken by all of Shechem imploded when Jacob's sons set upon the recovering residents, brutally slaughtering them all. (Genesis 34:25-29)
- Joseph's friendly overtures towards his brothers were rebuffed, and he was only spared from death in Shechem by the brothers' last-minute decision to sell him as a slave instead. (Genesis 37:18-28)
- Rehoboam's harsh ultimatums were rejected by the nation in Shechem, and he fled back to Jerusalem with just a shred of his monarchy still intact. (I Kings 12:16)

A place that seemed to draw out of people a desire for fraternity and interconnectedness consistently ended up perverting those intentions. So many catastrophes happened in Shechem that the city assumed infamy, synonymous with divisiveness and violation in the House of Israel.

There are two additional examples of *brit*-gone-

[5] Yoel Elitzur, *Makom Ba-Mikrah*, 404-405 (Hebrew). See also Jeremiah 34:18.

awry in Shechem that are worth examining. The first is the pagan *Ba'al-brit* cult, centered in Shechem in the days of Abimelech, son of Gideon. "And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went astray after the *ba'alim*, and made *Ba'al-brit* their god" (Judges 8:33).

Ba'al worship was ubiquitous in Canaan, but what was the nature of the specific cult of the *Ba'al-brit*? The *midrash* suggests that *Ba'al-brit* was synonymous with the Philistine cult of *Ba'al-zebub*:

> And they made *Ba'al-brit* their god: this was the cult of *Ba'al-zebub*, the god of Ekron. We are to learn from here that each worshiper fashioned an image of the god and kept it in his pocket. Whenever he thought of it, he would take it out, hug it and kiss it. (*Shabbat* 83b)

These were pocket icons, no larger than a *zevuv*, a fly.[6] The icon was carried by the worshiper as a talisman, easily available to him at all times for him to embrace, to adore. This made his relationship with his god personal, immediate and always accessible–warm and intimate, unlike cults where the deity was dutifully (and distantly) worshiped only within a temple context. The pocket-icon cult was sanitized in the text as *Ba'al-brit*, and not the hated and infamous Philistine *Ba'al-zebub*, to effectively convey the emotional, personal relationship that the worshiper had with his god.

Understood thusly, the Israelites were categorical idolators, worshiping a pagan Philistine deity.[7] Though they had fallen prey to worship of the Canaanite deities *ba'al* and *asherah* in the past,[8] the cult of *Ba'al-brit* marked a particularly low point. It meant that their idolatry wasn't perfunctory. Now they were emotionally invested in the *ba'al*, distanced even further from a relationship with God.

In a notable twist, the Talmud Yerushalmi version of the *midrash*[9] interprets the *Ba'al-brit* cult to mean something very different for Israel:

> Rebbi Ḥuna, Rebbi Ḥama bar Gorion said in the name of Rav: *Ba'al* was the penis gland the size of a bean, as it says: *They selected the Ba'al of circumcision as god*. (*Y. Shabbat* 9:1)

True, it was a *Ba'al-zebub*-like cult in that each worshiper had his own portable pocket icon. But the icon wasn't an insect–it was a phallus, specifically a circumcised phallus. It was a *ba'al* with a *brit milah*.

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[6] According to Tosafot, the icon itself was of a fly.

[7] Interestingly, "Abimelech" is a toponym for Philistine kings (see Rashbam's comment on Genesis 41:10). Though Gideon's son Abimelech was clearly an Israelite, he was funded by the *Ba'al-zebub* Philistine cult (Judges 9:4).

[8] Judges 2:13, 3:7, 6:25-32.

[9] The text quoted is loyal to the Biblical verse "They selected the *Ba'al-brit* (*Ba'al* of covenant) as god, but the intent of "*brit*" is *brit milah* (*Penei Moshe*). See also *Y. Avodahh Zarah* 3:6. See also Ramban's commentary on *B. Shabbat* 83b.

Phallic iconography is fundamental to human symbolism, rooted in the most primitive and ancient cults, potent enough of a symbol to endure up through the present.[10] All that was necessary to "Hebraicize" a phallic icon was to circumcise it. The *ba'al-brit* embodied a naive attempt to honor the covenant with God by a people unable to let go of concrete representations of Divine power. The phallus, primal symbol of fertility, power, and life itself, was taken by the Israelites as an idol that they made their own by whittling down the foreskin. The Israelites carried the symbol of their *brit* with them wherever they went.

Ba'al-brit was a syncretized cult, merging worship of God with Canaanite *ba'al* veneration. It suggests a confused Israel, loyal both to their ancestral faith and to the prevalent cultural norms, and so identifying with both, like a contemporary Jew erecting a Christmas tree but topping it with a *Magen David*.[11]

It is unsurprising, then, that the *Ba'al-brit* cult is headquartered in Shechem, since it conceptually represented an attempt at harmonizing disparate elements. The Israelite-Shechemites were grasping at ways to connect with God with their portable, mass-produced, *brit* talismans. Just as with the earlier iteration of *milah* and Shechem, when all of the local Canaanite males circumcised themselves at the behest of Jacob's sons as the precondition for joining with the family of Israel, here too the symbol of connectedness and holiness was ruined, perverted to disastrous consequences.

The second, late example of a failed experiment with *brit* in Shechem that bears note drew its inspiration from one of the most formative events in the lives of Jacob and his clan. After Dinah was raped, and Jacob's promise to Shechem was violated by his sons who defied him by slaughtering the entire city, Jacob confiscated all of the idols and pagan accoutrements that were still hidden away in his household and interred them there, "underneath the *elah* tree in Shechem" (Genesis 35:4). Why didn't he smash them, destroy them? Instead, he buried them. It was as if he wanted to permanently desecrate the foundations of this ruinous city.

A millennium later, in his massive relocation campaign of shifting populations away from their indigenous lands and planting them elsewhere, King Shalmaneser of Assyria transferred foreign peoples to Samaria. There these dislocated populations developed syncretistic cults, blending reverence of imported deities with worship of God. "They feared the Lord, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations of the countries from which they were carried away" (II Kings 17:33). Eventually they melded into a single faith

[10] Phallic worship was introduced into Israel later on by Maacha, wife of King Rehoboam of Judah and matriarch of Abiyam and Asa. *Avodah Zara* 44a, quoted by Rashi on I Kings 15:13.

[11] This is not an exact analogy, since such contemporary blending of different faith practices generally expresses a cultural affiliation with different sectors, rather than syncretizing different religious sensibilities. A purer example of such religious syncretism in iconography would be hermanubis, a Greco-Egyptian fusion of the Greek Hermes and the Egyptian Anubis.

community called the Samaritans, with a cult centered around Mt. Gerizim.

Why Mt. Gerizim? Perhaps it was because of the legends of ancient Israel that linked that mountain with blessings, and so the Samaritans, already in the region, chose it for its auspiciousness. But the Sages saw Samaritan worship at Gerizim as a foil for a much deeper, more profound draw to the area. They traced the pull of these relative latecomers not to Gerizim per se, but to what lay at its base.

> Rabbi Ishmael ben Rabbi Yose went to the well known Neapolis (the Roman name for Shechem).[12] The Samaritans came to him. He told them, I am seeing you bowing down not to this mountain but to the idols under it, as it is written, he hid them under the terebinth near Shechem (*Y. Avodah Zarah* 5:4)
>
> (Rabbi Ishmael was saying:) It is clear to me that you are not worshiping the mountain (which the Samaritans hold sacred), but what is interred at its base, namely the idols that Jacob had buried in Shechem. (*Pnei Moshe*)

The association between Jacob's time in Shechem and the Samaritan cult is striking. Like the Samaritans, Jacob's household had also stashed along icons from far-off homelands on their journey to Canaan, preserving relics of old faiths. These he buried in Shechem. For his clan, they were useless baggage. But for future peoples, they would serve as sources of inspiration, part of the deeply-grounded character of the land. Rooted in Shechem is the yearning for connection. At times this manifested with syncretic blending of different faiths, such as with *Ba'al-brit* and the amalgamated Samaritan cult.

Yet there are other relics buried within Shechem, holy and sacred to this day:

> Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the Torah of God, and took a great stone, **and set it up there under the *elah* tree**, that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said to all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord which he spoke to us: it shall be therefore a witness to you, lest you deny your God. (Joshua 24:25-27)
>
> This is the same tree under which Jacob buried his household's idols. (Radak)

[12] On the identification of Neapolis with Shechem, see *Bamidbar Rabbah* 23:14 and Pliny's *Natural History*, 5:14:18.

> In his final days, Joshua convened all of Israel once again to Shechem to reaffirm their pledge to refrain from worshiping foreign gods. With unmistakable symbolism, he mounted a stone, symbol of the covenant with God, in the very same place that Jacob had interred the family idols, centuries earlier. This is the richest earth to mine possible intent: was the symbolic stone meant to counter the idols? To cancel them? To remind Israel that idolatry dogged them from their very inception as a people, and they must always be on guard against it? We cannot know – we do not even know if Joshua knew of the buried idols! – but we do feel the weight of both of those legacies heavy in a single place.

The stone monument, and the idols of Jacob's household, are not the only relics buried in Shechem. At the same time that he erected his monument, Joshua also reinterred the bones of the ancestor whose last moments of freedom were spent in Shechem:

> The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem. (Joshua 24:32)

Shechem might be a broken place, but it is not beyond redemption, and Joseph is the symbol of that redemption. The one who served the nation as the model of faithfulness, who spent his life seeking out commonality with others, and who eternally permeates Shechem with his very self, can inspire Israel to restore a successful *brit*.

To assert that Joseph can inspire Israel towards mutuality and successful *brit* doesn't seem quite right. After all, Joseph was the brother who shattered the fraternity. He had sojourned to Shechem at Jacob's behest to mend the frayed ties with his brothers. They wouldn't have it, and would have killed him (or left him to die) had they not sold him to a passing caravan of Midianites. But in Egypt, first as a slave and then as a virtual king, Joseph realized his vast capacity to connect, to establish relationships, to be productive. These are all powers symbolized by the phallus, linked in the Jewish mystical tradition to Joseph.[13] It was specifically his *brit milah* that was the key to his success:

> His master's (Potiphar's) wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Sleep with me." But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with

[13] Within this tradition, the Divine attributes are linked to the seven seminal biblical archetypes (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David). Joseph is emblematic of *yesod* (foundation), which has as its physical association the circumcised penis (*Patach Eliyahu*/ *Tikkunei Zohar* 17a, and Gikatilla, *Shaarei Orah*, *Shaar* 2), symbolizing the reliability of the *tzaddik*, and his faithfulness which supports the entirety of Creation:

The tzaddik *is the foundation (*Yesod*) of the world. (*Proverbs 10:25*)*

> me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" (Genesis 39:7-9)
>
> His brothers were dumbfounded when he told them that he was Joseph (they did not believe him). So he showed them his *milah*, saying "I have only attained my stature by keeping faithful to this." (*Zohar* 1:93b)

Resisting Potiphar's wife proved Joseph's commitment to the ancestral covenant of the *brit milah*, of his responsibility to God and to his family.[14] His *milah* becomes so central to his character that it is the tool through which he expanded to be able to provide for all of Egypt:

> Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do." (Genesis 41:55)
>
> He gave them this order because Joseph had told them to be circumcised. (Rashi)[15]
>
> Understand this: Joseph was the *mashbir* (the provider) because he kept the covenant of *brit milah* and didn't sleep with the gentile woman. They (the Egyptians) would only merit being provided for by Joseph if they themselves were party to that covenant. (*Gur Aryeh*)

Joseph shared the *brit milah* with Egypt, bonding with them, emulating his father Jacob's overtures to pagan Shechem. In Shechem, *brit* failed. In Egypt, *brit* succeeded. The openness, connection, vulnerability, and sensitivity symbolized by the Egyptians' willingness to circumcise themselves at Joseph's behest brought bounty and blessing to that land. Fated initially for disastrous famine, Egypt instead retained its stature as the breadbasket of the Near East. "All the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world" (Genesis 41:57).

Joseph, bound eternally to Shechem through burial, reminds us that though complicated and prone to failure, *brit* **is** possible. He modeled how success in finding fellowship with the world was predicated on faithfulness. Joseph's faithfulness was to God, and to himself as a *ben Israel*. By maintaining his

[14] *He saw the image of his father…and he did not succumb* (*Sotah* 36b), the Sages submit, meaning that at that moment he awakened to who he truly was – that his father lived within him.

[15] See also *Bereishit Rabbah* 91:5.

distinctiveness and remaining true to his covenant with God, he prospered in Egypt, and made all of Egypt prosperous. But Joseph did not belong to Egypt. He belonged to Shechem, his rootedness there reinforcing the hope of Israel that even a place ripe for discord holds potential for harmonious peace.

Brit succeeds when there is faithfulness, and mutuality. Both parties must be confident in who they are, what they stand for, and what they want. Each must be willing to partner with the other without compromising his integrity. Lack of mutuality is what doomed every single overture of *brit* in Shechem, except for the *brit* forged between God and Israel when they first entered their land. (That *brit* of blessings and curses delivered to Israel through her land remains eternal, and we have triumphed and suffered as per its conditions up through the present day.)

The idols that Jacob despised, and the remains of his most beloved son, lie side by side, forever bound up in the roots of this city of contradictions. They are incongruities that together form the nature of a city suspended in the space between expectation and disappointment. One symbolizes the existential failure of trying to connect with the Divine through human artifice; the other, the possibility that the man of faith can sustain a beautiful, mutual relationship with the Other. The earth itself of Shechem bears both impulses; history will decide which will triumph, and how Shechem will ultimately fare.

My War Diary

Susan Weingarten is an archaeologist and food historian living in Jerusalem, where she is an associate fellow of the WF Albright Institute for Archaeological Research.

October 6th

I do not like Simhat Torah: the noise, the chaos, the hanging around during the *hakafot*. Therefore, for the last few years I have gone from my home in Jerusalem to Kibbutz Sa'ad on the Gazan border in order to spend the *hag* with my brother Elihu and his wife, Hanush. At Kibbutz Sa'ad, the women have taken their own approach to celebrating Simhat Torah and have arranged a program of *shiurim* for themselves while the men dance.

Hanush's 100-year-old mother, Yocheved, will join us from the other side of the kibbutz. Yocheved is a Holocaust survivor who has just written a book— *With Head Held High: The Story of Yocheved Gold*—about her experiences in Europe and during the War of Independence. Hanush's brother and his wife came down to spend the *hag* with their mother, and their sister Naomi came from nearby Allumim, another religious kibbutz. We all eat together happily in the evening.

October 7th

I am woken up around 6:30 the next morning by what sounds like many planes and sonic booms, and I lie in my bed thinking that the air force should not be doing exercises on Shabbat and *hag*. Then there are some muffled sounds on loudspeakers outside, and Hanush appears at my bedside and calmly

suggests that I join them in the *mamad*, their fortified bedroom. As we go, I can now hear more clearly *tzeva adom* (a red alert), the emergency code on the loudspeakers. Hanush and Elihu have lived for many years on the Gazan border and are old hands at coping with rocket attacks. They can distinguish between the boom of a missile and the boom of the Iron Dome defense system exploding one. We have 15 seconds to get into the *mamad*, so we are in and out of it all day. There is no question of going to *shul* or *shiurim*. I lose count of the red alerts. At least they do not last very long; we leave the shelter after we hear the boom.

Hanush is concerned about people on the kibbutz with problems and spends much time on her telephone finding them and calming them. At some point, she is told by the kibbutz defense group that we should lock the doors. This just seems to be a reasonable precaution; we have no news of what is happening otherwise. We do not turn on the radio because of Shabbat and *hag*. Both of them tell me that they have never known such a prolonged rocket attack.

Elihu is a *sofer sta"m*, and he leyns to us from the *Sefer Torah* he wrote in memory of our parents, which he keeps at home. At some point my phone rings, and I realize it must be one of my children worrying about us. But before I can get to the phone to answer it, there is another red alert. Even when there is no alert, the house shakes from the explosions we hear constantly outside. After *havdalah*, I send a WhatsApp to my children to say I am safe, and they phone and tell us some of the dreadful things that have been happening around us while Kibbutz Sa'ad remained untouched. It is clear that we are in the middle of a war.

They had been in fear for us all day. Kibbutz Sa'ad indeed was one of the only places—perhaps the only place—on the Gazan border that was not attacked by terrorists on the ground. Naomi speaks to people in Allumim and hears of the atrocities there, including 16 Thai workers who were slaughtered. Later, their numbers climb up to 20. I throw my things into a suitcase and ask Elihu to send a message around the kibbutz to say I am going to Jerusalem whenever it is allowed and that I have 3 available seats in my car. We all sleep in the *mamad* together that night, insofar as any of us can sleep.

October 8th

In the morning there is a lull in the fighting, and they tell us one or two people are allowed out of the kibbutz if we take the road that passes Netivot. It is somewhat surreal: having been locked in all day and night, we open the door to a most beautiful dewy morning with swirls of mist around the cypress trees—and then dozens of soldiers around my car ask very sweetly if I need help. I am glad I have company in the car: a newly married couple, two students who study in Jerusalem. Immediately outside the gate of the kibbutz, we see a car all shot up. There are other shot-up cars later, but they had told me which route was safe to take...

I am the only civilian car for a long while, with army cars going south on my left, empty tank transporters going north on my right, and jeeps all over the fields searching for terrorists and making huge clouds of dust. It stops being surreal when I get to a traffic jam

on highway 6 from the army roadblock, which for a change is very reassuring.

Back in Jerusalem, I go straight down to the hardware shop to sort out keys for our house shelter. We had this shelter cleared out and cleaned the last time there were rockets on Jerusalem, and we had arguments with the neighbors over keeping it clean and free from all of the old rubbish they wanted to store there. Now at least it is pleasant to sit in.

October 9th

There have only been two rocket alerts, and Jerusalem is quiet, if tense, apart from an attack and shootout at a police station on Salah-a-Din street.

I am an associate fellow of the Albright Archaeological Institute further up the same street. I guess I won't be going there for a while, but I send them an email of support. I don't know whether any of the resident fellows are still there. My son and grandson in the army are in relatively safe places; only my son-in-law is a doctor for an army unit in the south and goes with them in the field. His twin boys come and take down my *sukkah* for me all by themselves. They will be *b'nei mitzvah* on *Rosh Hodesh* Adar. Who knows what things will be like by then? A friend of mine reports that her 17-year-old grandson and his class have been called on to help dig graves.

October 10th

Elihu gave me his *etrog* when I left, and mine is particularly fragrant this year, so I spend some time making *etrog* jam. I have very few jars to put it in, so I use the glass jars from *yahrzeit* candles. I hope this will not prove significant. I am trying to write a book about food in the Talmud, but I just can't concentrate. I go to the supermarket, only to find many shelves empty. There is no bottled water, only spelt flour (and very little of that). People are stocking up to a ridiculous extent. I remember *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 5:

> You do not hoard in the Land of Israel things which are essential to life: i.e., wines, oils, flours, and fruits. But things which are not essential to life such as cumin and spice [*tavlin*], these are permitted… In a year of drought, one should not [hoard] even a *qab* of carobs…

There are still carobs on the tree outside my kitchen window. No one has thought of hoarding them yet.

I go to my regular women's *gemara shiur* at *shul*, and we begin by saying *tehillim*. I never was one for *tehillim zogen,* reading *tehillim* by rote: my late husband was openly scornful. But this time it has a new meaning, and it has become real: ה' ישמור צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם—'God will guard your going out and coming in from now forever.' In the evening the rabbi gives a *shiur* on *tefillah b'et tzarah*, prayer in a time of trouble. It is helpful to think of how the Jewish people have suffered over the centuries and still survived. We discuss which events this reminds us of: the *sho'ah*, pogroms, or the 'religious' massacres of the Crusades.

October 11th

Elihu, Hanush, and all the members of Kibbutz Sa'ad have now been evacuated to hotels at the Dead Sea. I send an email to the rabbi to ask to *bench ha-Gomel* in our *shul* on Shabbat. I realize now that this *brakhah* is a brilliant conception. We thank God for deliverance, that's obvious. But הגומל לחייבים טובות thanks God, 'Who does good to the undeserving,' which is all about dealing with survivor's guilt. I still don't understand why the terrorists missed Kibbutz Sa'ad, when all of the other *kibbutzim* around us were decimated.

October 15th

NBC News publishes detailed maps of the Gazan border they found on the bodies of some terrorists. They include a detailed map of Kibbutz Sa'ad, marking the primary schools where they planned to kill the children or take them hostage. I cry for the first time. Elihu tells me that all the kibbutz members made a communal הגומל on Shabbat.

בשורות טובות

Susan Weingarten

Military Might as Reluctant Religious Virtue: The Bizarre Inclusion of Genesis 14 in Tanakh

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Author's Note: This article was drafted during Hol Ha-Mo'eid Sukkot. *As such, it was not written with any intent to have a greater resonance due to the tragic events in Israel. While readers are invited to derive strength from this article should they find it, it is not intended to explicitly address current events.*

I.

The most jarring indication that something is profoundly *wrong* with Genesis 14 — the Abrahamic narrative best known as "the war of the four kings against the five" — is found in an admittedly unusual and deeply untraditional source for any religious reader of Tanakh: E. A. Speiser's *Anchor Bible Commentary*. Though Speiser's work may be theological anathema to many a traditional reader, a quick peruse of its contents succinctly captures one of the great interpretative challenges of not only Genesis, but of the entire Hebrew Bible.

Speiser identifies each and every narrative unit (themselves divisions of his own devising) with its Documentary Author, in keeping with his academic want. The reader thus encounters the labels *J, E,* or *P* — sometimes alone, sometimes combined, and sometimes annotated with additional question marks and the like — attached to each narrative unit's title.

Save, that is, for two instances. The second of which, Gen. 49 ("The Testament of Jacob"), is not the concern of this article. But the first, in which Speiser offers a curious label for Gen. 14, is. Here, "Invasion from the East. Abraham and Melchizedek"

is designated neither with any of the conventional *J, E,* or *P* labels, nor with any possible combination or annotation, but with a simple and mysterious *X*.[1]

In explaining his rationale, Speiser lists several significant and strange features of Gen. 14: "The setting is international, the approach impersonal, and the narrative notable for its unusual style and vocabulary." Speiser thus declares the chapter to have been authored by what he terms "an isolated source," the mysterious, unknown *X*.[2]

And while Speiser's *theology* leads to unpalatable conclusions for many a reader, his *textual observations* need not be controversial. After all, his striking *X* is, ultimately, a useful and pithy articulation of the many (many!) interpretive challenges of Gen. 14.

Take, for example, the sheer length of Gen. 14's introduction, as contrasted with the general economy with which Genesis tells the other stories of Abraham. In Gen. 14, the Torah provides the geopolitical context and backstory over eleven verses. Compare this with the main drama alone of the Binding of Isaac, which is told in a mere thirteen verses (Gen. 22:1-13), and the detail on offer in Gen. 14 is indeed uncharacteristic. In fact, Malbim is astonished by the lengthy introduction to this story, commenting on this verse that "there is no need to tell of all these [matters] in the divine Torah!"[3]

But it's not only the amount of detail on offer, but also the style in which it is offered. Netziv, for example, notes one particularly unusual inconsistency in this narrative: though Chedorla'omer is explicitly described as the chief of the four kings (Gen. 14:4), he is the third in the list of kings in the alliance (ibid. 14:1).[4]

And the reason behind this is simple yet startling, given the Torah's typical mode of narration. It's because the Torah introduces the four kings in not their hierarchy but -— of all things — alphabetical order: "Now, when King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorla'omer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goi'im" (ibid.).[5] And the Torah continues this highly stylized manner in v. 2: we are introduced first to Bera of Sodom, then Birsha of Gomorrah, then Shinab of Admah, and finally Shemeber of Zeboi'im — with the fifth king's name unknown and thus unidentified.

Contrast this detailed, poetic list of kings with what is found just two chapters earlier. In Gen. 12, the Torah describes the ruler of the era's defining superpower, the mighty and powerful Egypt, solely by his title, "Pharaoh," without a second thought for

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[1] E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Doubleday, NY: 1964), 99.

[2] Ibid., 105.

[3] Malbim to Genesis 14:1, s.v. "*She'eilot*."

[4] Ha'ameik Davar to Genesis 14:1, s.v. "Amrafel."

[5] It should be noted for the purpose of clarity that the translation into English no longer preserves the alphabetization.

any further personal details. Yet, it is only around twenty verses later that the Torah is giving the reader not only every name (save one), but cities as well — all listed in a neat, alphabetical format.

Between the Torah's sudden narrative-specific obsession with detail, abandonment of any attempt at being concise, and novel approach for character introductions — not to mention that this is a story about a man unintentionally caught amidst a battle between ancient, powerful nations — a close reader of Gen. 14 would be forgiven for thinking that things appear more Tolkien than Torah.

II.

The interpretive problems of Gen. 14, however, only compound when looking beyond its opening few verses. After the chapter spends almost half of its verses setting the scene in a story that is ostensibly about Abraham, his role — when he *finally* appears in verse 12 — is, at first, entirely passive. The verse exists to simply state how Abraham gets caught up in this war betweendifferent nations. It is Lot's capture in Sodom by the invaders that plunges Abraham into the war. In other words, between the lengthy geopolitical introduction and the prompt that drives Abraham into the war, it is clear that Gen. 14 isn't really a story *about* Abraham as much as a story that *happens to involve* Abraham.

Still, more problems endure. Because, even when Abraham does appear — even when, after twelve verses (!), Gen. 14 becomes an Abrahamic narrative actually involving Abraham — he is described in a remarkable way. The verse relates that a fugitive from the battle brings the news of Lot's capture "to Abram the Hebrew" (ibid. 14:13). But, as Nahum M. Sarna notes, this term *ivri,* "a Hebrew," while found approximately thirty times throughout the Hebrew Bible, is exclusively used as an "ethnic term."[6] That is, it is precisely when Tanakh wishes to characterize an Israelite's *foreignness* to another nation that the term "Hebrew" is invoked.

Thus, the Joseph story — one defined by Joseph's alienation while stranded in a foreign land — is replete with examples. Potiphar's wife, for example, describes Joseph to her fellow Egyptians as "a Hebrew" (Gen. 39:14), while Joseph himself uses the term to describe his land when speaking before Pharaoh: "I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews" (Gen. 40:15). Similarly, the beginning of Exodus uses the term to contrast the enslaved Israelites with the Egyptians (for example, Ex. 1:15 and 2:11). And while use of the term within the Hebrew Bible dwindles, it is still found in the very way in which Jonah declares his identity to the sailors: "I am a Hebrew" (Jonah 1:9).

To put all of this another way, the characterization of Abraham as "a Hebrew" implies something incredibly perplexing: that the story's intended audience is unfamiliar, not only with Abraham, but his story and nation — he is a foreigner to them — hence the description of him as "a Hebrew."

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[6] Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (JPS, Philadelphia: 1989), 377–378. I should stress that this observation is restricted to the term *ivri* alone, as opposed to when it is combined with another term, such as in *eved ivri,* "Hebrew slave."

But this description of Abraham is not the only thing that implies that the reader is reading a different type of Abraham story than usual. The Abraham portrayed in Gen. 14 seems to be an entirely *different* Abraham, personality- and proclivity-wise, when compared to all the other stories about him in the Torah. After all, "Gen. 14 Abraham," as it were, is someone who gathers a small band of allies and transforms them into an army capable of routing and plundering a coalition of foreign armies, driving them from the land and saving Lot (Gen. 14:14-16).

Indeed, as Jonathan Grossman points out, the Hebrew Bible's typical portrayal of Abraham as "a man of spirit, a prophet, a moralist who promotes justice, an excellent host, and above all as one who merits an everlasting covenant with God… is seemingly incompatible with the diplomatic strategist who divides his troops and leads them in a dangerous nighttime rescue operation."[7]

Combine all the above with the startling fact that, unlike so many of the narratives of Genesis until now, God is absent as an active participant in the story. Though He is repeatedly invoked as a deity by both Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20, 22), these invocations only amplify His absence from the story until this point, and thus the uncharacteristic nature of the entire narrative.

The broad thrust of everything until now can be summed up in one simple statement: Gen. 14 seems fundamentally different from all the other Abrahamic narratives and, indeed, from all the other narratives in Tanakh.

Or, to simplify it even further into one single (heretical) character: *X.*

III.

To begin to make sense of everything in Gen. 14, then, it must be re-read with the acceptance that it is not the typical biblical story. And even though this mentality brings clarity, even more problems must first emerge. Indeed, these further problems emerge from the story's opening two words: *Va-yehi bi-mei,* "It was in the days of."

Usually, these two words introduce the reader to a known and specific historical moment or era in which the narrative takes place, often paired with the introduction of a major personality of that era and thus the story. The clearest example of this is the opening to the Book of Esther, "It was in the days of Ahasuerus," which then continues and explains that this is the same Ahasuerus who ruled a vast kingdom (Est. 1:1). In other words, the Book of Esther begins at the height of the Persian Empire, and its story takes place in the heart of the royal court itself with Ahasuerus a main character.

The Book of Ruth begins in a similar vein, setting its historical context within the Book of Judges — "It was in the days when the Judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1) — while the Book of Jeremiah uses the same phrase to quickly establish that Jeremiah's career spanned different monarchical reigns (Jer. 1:3).

[7] Jonathan Grossman, *Abraham: The Story of a Journey* (Maggid Books, Jerusalem: 2023), 44.

Gen. 14, too, begins by informing the reader that this story takes place in the era of the four kings: Amraphel, Arioch, Chedorla'omer, and Tidal — only here its purpose is confusing. In contrast to Esther's Ahasuerus, Ruth's Judges, and Jeremiah's Jeho'iakim and Zedekiah, the names and eras of these four kings are unknown to a reader of Tanakh beyond the story, and many of their cities are broadly unfamiliar. By beginning with *va-yehi bi-mei,* it suggests that the intended audience is assumed to be familiar with these kings and their era.

Then, the lengthy, eleven-verse introduction provides the reader with a seemingly unnecessary history lesson: that the five kings had been conquered by Chedorla'omer and his allies twelve years prior but had joined forces to rebel against him in the thirteenth year (Gen. 14:1-2, 4). They waited another year, however, until Chedorla'omer and his allies had succeeded in a different campaign — against the Rephaim, Zuzim, Eimim, and Horites (ibid. 14:5-6) — and had also subdued the Amalekites and Amorites to boot (ibid. 14:7). The five rebel kings then met Chedorla'omer and his forces at the Valley of Siddim (ibid. 14:3, 8-9), only to be swiftly defeated, so much so that the five kings hid or fled (ibid. 14:10). With Sodom and Gomorrah plundered (ibid. 14:11), Lot is captured, and thus Abraham enters the fray.

But this lengthy (by biblical standards, yet brief by historical standards) introduction, while uncharacteristic, may not be as unnecessary as it first seems, as it informs the reader of several pieces of important information regarding Chedorla'omer's might.

After establishing his original conquest of the five kings, the text proceeds to describe a different campaign of Chedorla'omer – one in which he defeated some of the Hebrew Bible's mightiest nations. This is testified to by Moses, who describes the Rephaim and Eimim (whom he identifies as the same nation known by two different names) as being "great and numerous," similar in height and power to the tribe of giants, the Anakites (Deut. 2:10-11).

And not only is Chedorla'omer capable of defeating these nations, but also the Amalekites and Amorites — with v. 7 making it sound like this happened almost in passing ("on their way back"). And yet, despite having already fought two battles, Chedorla'omer makes quick work of the five kings' rebellion.

All these details serve one, crucial narrative point. After devoting eleven verses to establishing Chedorla'omer's power, they now magnify the military might of Abraham. Because, despite assembling a mere 318 men to his side (Gen. 14:14), he is able to do what neither the five kings could do (twice), nor the mighty Rephaim, Zuzim, Eimim,

and Horites could do, nor what the fierce Amalekites and Amorites could do: defeat Chedorla'omer and his allies — and do so in one evening (ibid. 14:15).

However, significantly, this story showcasing

Abraham's military might is told in a unique style. It is not told from the perspective of Abraham, nor from the typical biblical narrator's perspective, but is told, instead, from a different perspective entirely.

It is a story told from the perspective of someone for whom Chedorla'omer was a known figure of a known era, seen by the story's use of the key phrase "It was in the days of." It is a story told from the perspective of someone for whom Abraham was "a Hebrew," a foreigner, an outsider. It is a story told from a perspective where the role of God is either unknown or unnoticed.

And this alternative, alien perspective also explains many of Gen. 14's perplexing stylistic choices. The careful alphabetical arrangement of the various names, which reads less like a biblical story and more as a roll call, is not uncharacteristic if it is a familiar form for a *different* style, if it is what Grossman describes as "a technical list of participants taken from a military record."[8] Likewise, the lengthy and excessive detail provided by way of introduction is not uncharacteristic if it is a familiar form for a different style.

Two possible explanations emerge. One, argued by Grossman, is that the Torah intentionally writes

Gen. 14 in the alternative style of an ancient military chronicle from a foreign army to underscore Abraham's military might. The other adopts, and adapts, Speiser's *X*. The Torah consciously borrows an ancient account of the war and Abraham's involvement and translated it into the Abrahamic narratives.

And, as strange an idea as this may seem, it makes more sense when considering the subject: Abraham's military might. It is far more compelling for the Torah to use someone else's testimony of Abraham's strength and power — someone for whom Abraham was an outsider, "a Hebrew."

IV.

Though this perspective offers a solution to the interpretative problems of the narrative — they mainly emerge from either the aping of the military style or the "borrowed" nature of the story — a simple question remains: Why? What purpose is served by such a strange story being included among the Abrahamic narratives?

It is important to recognize that not only is the Hebrew Bible generally economical in its words, but it is also economical in the stories it chooses to tell. The narratives of Abraham are, ultimately, a selection of vignettes from his life. They only begin when he is seventy-five (Gen. 12:4), contain several temporal gaps within (for example, Gen. 16, which concludes with Abraham aged eighty-six, while Gen. 17 begins with Abraham aged ninety-nine),

and announce his death long before he died (Gen. 25:8, Rashi to Gen. 25:30, s.v. "*min ha-adom ha-adom*").

[8] Grossman, 49.

Tanakh offers no complete biography of Abraham. Any story of Abraham , then, must serve a wider theological goal.

One answer, suggested by Grossman, is that this narrative highlights why Abraham is fit to gain the Land of Canaan. When all the other kings fled or hid from Chedorla'omer, only Abraham was capable of defeating him, only Abraham resisted and successfully repelled him. This is a story that reveals Abraham as the chief military power of the region — a point reinforced by not only the celebration of the king of Sodom, but also by the visit of a previously unmentioned king, Melchizedek, who had come to visit this new power in the land (Gen. 14:17-18).[9]

Another answer, also from Grossman, is that Gen. 14 is a story that reinforces Abraham's rejection of Sodom. Despite having the opportunity and legitimacy to embrace Sodom, Abraham turns, instead, to Melchizedek, a fellow worshiper of God.[10]

I, however, would like to suggest an alternative answer, one rooted in Gen. 14's unique testimony to Abraham's military might — might that not only gives him the power to repel a powerful coalition of armies, but to draw the other kings of the land to seek allyship with him.

In a 2020 article for *The Lehrhaus,* Tzvi Sinensky closely examined the biblical word *gevurah,* and thus challenged the term's typical meaning that connotes strength, power, and,by extension, raw masculinity.[11]

Crucially, for the purposes of this article, is Sinensky's assessment of two competing narratives often told regarding Judaism's perspective of strength and power. One narrative takes biblical heroes such as Samson, Saul, and David, and sees their physical prowess as worthy of emulation — culminating in secular Zionism's adoration of the Hanukkah story and "the Maccabees as warrior-heroes" restoring "the classical biblical paradigm of the soldier."

The other narrative is one in which the talmudic rabbis pivoted Judaism away from glorifying physical power towards moral power: strength and conquest were reimagined; "the hero no longer defeats his enemies on the battlefield, but "conquers his evil inclination" (*Avot* 4:1) and pursues victory in the study hall."

Sinensky assesses these competing narratives succinctly: "Of course, both narratives are facile," with the rest of his article redefining the term *gevurah* to prove that, in truth, "physical strength is neither inherently glorified nor vilified in the Torah." Invoking the Hanukkah story — given that the article was published at Hanukkah time — Sinensky insists that the "most important part of the Hanukkah story is not the fact that the Hasmoneans

[9] Grossman, 54-58.

[10] Grossman, 61-68.

[11] https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/masculinity-and-the-hanukkah-hero-toward-a-new-interpretation-of-biblical-gevurah/.

were warriors," but that their military prowess "was used toward a positive end."

Ultimately, might and power are to be used in the service of those in need — evidenced, as Sinensky details, by God's own displays of *gevurah* being acts that help those less fortunate.

V.

Without Gen. 14, the figure of Abraham would contribute nothing to the complexity of Sinensky's discussion. Because, without Gen. 14, a very specific portrait of Abraham emerges. First and foremost, he is defined by his desire to escape difficult situations. He thus leaves Israel upon arrival due to a famine (Gen. 12:10), — a decision Nahmanides describes as "a great sin" in his comments on the verse[12] — prefers to divvy up his land rather than confront Lot and his shepherds (13:8-9) in an action instantly rejected by God (13:14-15),[13] and mistreats Hagar rather than reckon with the complexities of his tribal-familial dynamic (16:5-6, 21:10-14).[14]

Furthermore, Abraham displays a penchant for subterfuge in the face of violent confrontation. In contrast to the militarily mighty man capable of repelling a powerful alliance, Abraham twice prefers to mask Sarah's identity — first in Egypt (12:11-13) and then in Gerar (20:1-2), with the latter being revealed as a diplomatic faux pas (ibid. 12:4-11). And though Abraham's fears are real — "if the Egyptians see you and think 'she is his wife,' they will kill me" (12:12) — they are in sharp contrast to his actions in Gen. 14.

Finally — and noted by Grossman, as quoted earlier — Abraham is primarily portrayed as a man of moral virtue. He prays on behalf of the wicked people of Sodom (Gen. 18:23-33)[15] and is an exemplar of hospitality and kindness (18:2-8).

Without Gen. 14, Abraham is *the* paragon of certain moral virtues such as hospitality, kindness, and sensitivity, rather than physical conquest. But the inclusion of Gen. 14 complicates this depiction. Because for all that Abraham is everything mentioned above, Gen. 14 reveals him to also be a

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[12] Ramban to Gen. 12:10, s.v. "*va-yehi ra'av ba-aretz*."

[13] This is an episode of the Abraham story I hope to address at another time.

[14] This is an episode I have addressed previously on *The Lehrhaus*. See Mark Glass, "Avraham's Test of Loyalty," *The Lehrhaus*, Oct. 25, 2018, https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/avrahams-test-of-loyalty/.

[15] An episode I have addressed previously on *The Lehrhaus*. See Mark Glass, "Lot's Wife Was Never Salt (And Why That Highlights the Greatness of Abraham)", *The Lehrhaus*, Nov. 4, 2020, https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/lots-wife-was-never-salt-and-why-that-highlights-the-greatness-of-abraham/.

mighty, powerful leader capable of near-single-handedly repelling other mighty forces — in a story attested to by other nations and "borrowed" by the Torah. And his power is so great that all the other nations around him seek his friendship and recognize his dominance.

Gen. 14 thus positions Abraham as the human apotheosis of *gevurah*: he is someone who possesses tremendous physical prowess (even at an advanced age) — yet is not defined by it. Only when called on to defend his land and to redeem captives, does he respond in full force. His preference, however, is to display other moral qualities. In doing so, the Torah offers a perspective that, neither the rejection of strength or military might, nor any ambivalence towards it, but a recognition of it as a reluctant virtue.

Abraham the Hebrew thus provides a blueprint for his descendants. They must use their military strength to defend their land and redeem their families held in captivity — all the while desiring the opportunity to return to norms of hospitality and kindness.