

## The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Peace Makers

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ON ROSH HASHANAH, WHEN WE CELEBRATE THE birthday of the world, or at least the birthday of humanity, we read about the birth of a place, Beersheva. A place that was born out of a promise, an oath, a *shevuah*, between two noble and powerful men, Avimelech and Avraham, men who could have taken the path of mistrust, a path that often leads to conflict, perhaps even to war.

These gentlemen had a history. A history of deception, where Avraham put Avimelech in harm's way when he lied about Sarah being his sister. A history that could have justified mistrust in a dispute over a scarce resource. A history that could have re-stimulated fear and resulted in aggression.

But that is not what happened. Avraham and Avimelech did not choose to fight over water. They chose to create partnership and establish a lasting covenant of peace. They made a choice that welled up from the deepest and highest ethical, political, and spiritual values within each of them, that came from their inner *be'erot* [wells].

And what happened when they plumbed their inner wells to inform their actions? They ended up in a place they called *sheva* [seven] to reflect a realm of perfect peace and wholeness in the world, because *sheva* represents the day of Creation completed — Shabbat — the day we taste of *olam ha-ba*, the world to come. Avraham and Avimelech came from Be'er and ended up in Sheva. Together they birthed Beersheva.

What lessons can we learn from their choice?

Let's explore the story immediately preceding this conversation, because you might think that this dispute was a minor one — a simple

conflict over one well out of many. In short, you might think that this was no big deal! But I don't think the text supports that view. In fact, I think all signs point to a potentially explosive encounter, so it is even more remarkable that it went so well.

Right before the encounter between Avimelech and Avraham, we have the story of Hagar and Ishmael, banished by Avraham at the urging of Sarah.

Where does Hagar journey? Through Beersheva.

What does she fear?

Dying of thirst.

What is revealed to her by an angel of God?

A well.

How did Hagar and Ishmael survive?

By drinking from the well.

What did Avraham accuse Avimelech of doing? Seizing the well in Beersheva. Some say that meant covering the well up, not using it. Given that understanding, is it not possible that Avraham sent Hagar and Ishmael out, directing them towards Beersheva, knowing that his men had dug a well there and that the well would keep them alive?

And, we might wonder, how did he even find out that the well had been seized by the Philistines? It seems possible that Avraham had runners who followed Hagar from a distance, to make sure that she and Ishmael reached the well safely. One of those runners could have been understood by Hagar to be an angel of God when he told her where the well was!

Why are these stories next to one another, if not to teach by their proximity that in a land where scarce water is the most precious of resources, in a land where access to water is life and death, Avraham, whose name means leader of the heights or of multitudes — a man with the Heh of Yud Heh Vav Heh breathing life through him — a man such as this would not let harm come to his family through lack of that resource, even in a messy divorce.

And what would become of the one who hid that water and almost killed his beloved Hagar and Ishmael? Surely he would be brought to task for his actions. This discussion of wells was no simple land transaction. It was a confrontation over a transgression so serious that it warranted a negotiation between heads of state.

Given that fraught history, the grace with which this negotiation is handled is amazing!

So let's see how Avraham and Avimelech handle this. A walk through the text quickly reveals the seven habits of highly effective peace makers:

*Breishit 21:22: At that time, Avimelech and Pichol, chief of his troops, said to Avraham, "God is with you in everything that you do."*

LESSON 1: HONOR THE SOURCE OF POWER OF THE OTHER — whether it be their God-construct or their highest ideals or their fundamental operating principle or even, in this day and age, their sacred cow. Speak your respect out loud first, before you do anything else, and really mean it.

*Breishit 21:23: "Therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my kin and progeny, but will deal with me and with the land in which you have sojourned as loyally as I have dealt with you." Translation: Avimelech says, "I remember you. Tell me you aren't that liar any more. Swear that you will deal faithfully with me, as I have dealt with you."*

LESSON 2: MAKE SURE THAT TRUTHFULNESS AND FAITHFULNESS ARE THE ESSENCE OF YOUR OPERATING GROUND RULES.  
and

LESSON 3: DON'T SHY AWAY FROM REMEMBERING THE PAST. When you allude to it, do so without blame. State the positive learning, not the negative history behind it. Also, lift up past positive behaviors to remind yourself and the other of the honorable foundation upon which you can draw.

*Breishit 21:24: And Avraham said, "I swear it."*

LESSON 4: PARTNERSHIP REQUIRES COMMITMENT. Don't act out of fear like you did in the past or anger like you really might want to in the moment, given what brought you to the table. In fact, implicitly or explicitly cop to your past mistake by agreeing to positive ground rules, and don't get defensive. Say yes to the high ground, even if you are furious!

*Breishit 21:25: Then Avraham rebuked Avimelech for the well of water which the servants of Avimelech had seized.*

LESSON 5: ONE WAY TO TAKE THE HIGH ROAD IS TO PERFORM A MITZVAH — and in this case, a mitzvah that HaShem had not even given yet! Right before the oft repeated teaching, *v'ahavta l'reiakha kamokha*, love your fellow as yourself, we find in Leviticus 19:17, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your brother so you don't take on his guilt. Don't take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countryman."

I would argue that this placement in Leviticus teaches us that in order to love the other as ourself, we have to create a level of interdependence where we rebuke when appropriate so that we are not the silent accomplice of the other. Your guilt is my obligation. The state of your soul is as important to me as the state of my own soul.

Avraham took that teaching one step further than many read the text. He rebuked not just a fellow Israelite, but the leader of another nation. Perhaps the one who almost killed his family.

Lesson five is big and cumulative. Here we learn that making peace is not just about making nice. We need to speak truth to power, as the Quakers say. If someone transgresses, let them know it, but only after you've honored their highest values, remembered your tricky past together, set good ground rules and made a commitment. If you have done steps one through four, then it is not only okay to go ahead and tell it like it is, it is critical to peace building. But don't go on about it! No harping, no embellishment, no drama, no projection, no escalation, no blame, no shame, no anger, no manipulation. Just be simple, direct and honest. Especially if you are angry about an unintended consequence, like Avraham might have been.

LESSON 5A: GIVE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT! Perhaps Avraham realized that Avimelech could not have known that Hagar would be sent into the wilderness and this helped him manage his anger.

Then what?!

*Breishit 21:26: And Avimelech said: "Oh! I don't know who did this thing. You didn't tell me before today and I hadn't heard about it from anyone else either."*

LESSON 6: WHEN THE TRUTH IS SPOKEN TO YOU, ANSWER HONESTLY AND WITHOUT DEFENSIVENESS. Don't be reactive and don't escalate. Look how well Avimelech took it. He basically said, "My bad! I didn't know," leaving no room for conflict.

We are getting to the climax of the story now — five and six were big, but seven will blow you away.

*Breishit 21:27: Avraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Avimelech and the two of them made a pact. Avraham took out seven ewes from the flock and set them by themselves, and Avimelech said to Avraham, "What's with these seven ewes that you set apart? Avraham replied: "Take these seven ewes from me as witnesses that I dug this well."*

LESSON 7: GIVE AWAY INCREDIBLY VALUABLE PROPERTY TO SOMEONE WHO JUST STOLE INCREDIBLY VALUABLE PROPERTY FROM YOU, TO PROVE THAT WHAT WAS STOLEN FROM YOU WAS YOURS. Or, to state it a little differently, pay for land that is already yours. But that is not all. There's another piece to this lesson. Pay for land that is already yours, for the sake of peace.

Whatever you may think of that idea, I ask you to remember: I didn't write the book. I'm just reviewing it. Still, it is worth repeating: pay for land that is already yours for the sake of peace.

Of course we can also take a more general lesson from this exchange. What did Avraham do when Avimelech admitted his mistake? He did not say, "Okay, so what will you give me to make good on what you took?" Or, "Yo! Ignorance of the law is no defense! You know that! You are coming off all high and mighty but you stole from me. That's just as bad as what I did when I lied to you about Sarah a few chapters ago."

He did not say, "Thanks for admitting it, you are a good guy, but how can I be sure you won't do it again?"

Avraham accepted the admission and gave Avimelech a gift to show

his appreciation and to prove the seriousness of his claim.

What does this teach us? When you have been wronged, keep your eye on the prize. What is important: Retribution? Punishment? Rubbing in that a wrong was done? Or appreciating honesty and correcting the wrong? Here, the well was the thing. Avraham took yes for an answer, and then, before Avimelech could get caught up in shame or feeling blamed, which could fester and lead to strained relations in the future, Avraham made sure the deal was sealed by sweetening it.

What if we all did that?

May we all greet the God in everyone we meet.

May we all awaken to the place where our words and actions come from the highest level of divinely inspired consciousness, remembering the past but not living in a compulsive repetition of it.

May we keep our eye on what is important, be clear in our goals, respect and maybe even love others enough to honor them as we gently shine a light on their missteps, take yes for an answer, and express our appreciations generously, frequently, and without fear of self diminishment.

In doing so, may we birth relationships and families and organizations and cities and nations welled from the essence of God or holiness and crafted in the image of wholeness and the peace of Shabbat.



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