**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

Rabbi Evan Hoffman – Congregation Anshe Sholom

evanhoffman@gmail.com

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**The Canaanites’ View of Abraham**

Readers of Scripture have a developed understanding of Abraham’s life.  He left Ur Kasdim and, in fulfillment of God’s command, settled in the Land of Canaan.  He was party to a covenant with God pursuant to which his progeny would become a great nation and possessors of the Promised Land.  The Midrashic tradition depicts Abraham as a religious maverick who rejected the idolatrous worship and false beliefs of his predecessors, while “discovering” the theological truths of monotheism. Though largely unsupported by the Biblical text, according to Aggadic embellishment Abraham aggressively proselytized and, as a result, attracted a considerable number of converts to his new faith.

What did Abraham’s contemporaries think of him? Abraham never told his Canaanite neighbors about his chosen-ness. He certainly never told them about the Divine promise that his offspring would eventually come to dispossess the land’s indigenous inhabitants.  Precisely because of Abraham’s politically wise refusal to mention anything about Heavenly-ordained possession of sacred territory, he had no choice but to pay for the burial plot he needed for Sarah’s body.

In the course of negotiating with the Hittites of Hebron over the sale of the cave at Machpelah, Abraham identified himself as a “resident alien” (Genesis 23:4). The Hittites responded by referring to him in a highly reverential manner: “Hear us, my lord: you are the elect of God נשיא אלקים among us (23:6).”  What shall we make of that phrase?

Correctly explicating the term נשיא אלקים is critical to understanding the Canaanite view of Abraham. One approach is to read אלקים in the superlative sense and not as referring to the Deity.  The Hittites were, in this view, extolling Abraham as a “mighty prince” (King James Version; Hertz).  Robert Alter, though acknowledging that the text literally means “prince of God,” suggests that it here connotes “pre-eminent dignitary” in the secular sense.  Nahum Sarna commented that the Hittites conferred upon Abraham an honorific title probably lacking any religious connotation.

The use of a Divine name as a superlative or intensifier is a recurring phenomenon in Scripture.  Upon Naphtali’s birth, Rachel said, “A fateful contest נפתולי אלקים I waged with my sister (30:8).”  Nineveh is described as “a large city of God” עיר גדולה לאלקים, though the intended meaning is “an enormously large city” (Jonah 3:3). The Psalmist describes God’s beneficence as being like the high mountains, though the literal reading is “the mountains of God” (Psalms 36:7).

Among the traditional commentators, Ramban and Bachya understood the Hittites’ remark to have secular connotation.  Ramban noted that Joseph told the royal cupbearer that he was kidnapped from the Land of the Hebrews (Genesis 40:15). That Joseph chose to identify the Land of Canaan as the Land of the Hebrews is, in Ramban’s view, strong evidence that, even in Patriarchal times, the family of Abraham exerted significant temporal authority over the region such that citizens of neighboring areas might know of it as being the Land of the Hebrews.  Bachya understood the Hittites’ words as a rejection of Abraham’s self-description.  Though Abraham considered himself an immigrant stranger who ranked low in the social hierarchy, the Hittites regarded him as an honored leader bordering on royalty.

Putting to one side any matter of religion, the fact is that, despite his status as a sojourner, Abraham had accomplished great things prior to his encounter with the Hittites of Hebron. He had: a) amassed great wealth, b) redeemed the captives of Sodom by defeating militarily the confederacy of eastern monarchs, c) established friendships with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre, leading figures in southern Canaan, and d) sealed a pact of non-aggression with the king and army chief of the Philistines. The Hittites’ recognition of Abraham as an important personage plainly was warranted from the secular perspective alone.

Other commentators understand נשיא אלקים to mean that the Hittites recognized Abraham’s lofty religious standing. Scripture occasionally uses a Divine name in ambiguous fashion.  In those cases, it can be quite unclear whether the reference is to God, to a foreign deity, or merely to a superlative.  Masekhet Soferim addresses those examples from a halakhic standpoint, declaring each one either to be holy or mundane.  Our text in Genesis 23:6 was ruled to be holy (Soferim 4:9), indicating that, according to the Minor-Tractate, the Hittites really did call Abraham a “prince of God.”  The Midrash presents a fantastic account in which all the nations of world chopped down cedars, erected a massive dais, and hailed Abraham as a king and deity (Genesis Rabbah 41). Ibn Ezra suggested that Abraham was respected for being a prophet.

Relying exclusively on what appears in the Biblical text, a reader might reasonably infer that the Hittites here recognized Abraham as an important religious figure. Abraham built multiple altars and repeatedly called out to God publicly (Genesis 12:8, 13:4). He dutifully gave a tithe from the spoils of war to the Priest of the Most High God (14:20). He employed overtly religious language in his dialogue with the king of Sodom (14:22). God told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet whose prayers should be solicited (20:7). Abraham justified his deception concerning Sarah by castigating the Philistines for lacking in “fear of the Lord” (20:11).

Whether the Canaanites respected Abraham as a powerful chieftain, a warlord, a wealthy herdsman, or a holy man depends upon how one parses the Scriptural language.  One could, however, question whether an accurate assessment of their attitudes is any event either relevant or instructive (to us as Jews but also to other, non-Jewish readers of the Bible). Is it not sufficient for us as readers of Scripture and inheritors of the faith bequeathed by Abraham almost 4,000 years ago, to know, understand, and appreciate his true character without regard to how he may have been viewed by others?

Like Abraham, who was a resident alien, stranger, and ethnic minority, the Jews of the Diaspora often have found themselves in the precarious position of being “outsiders.” Under such circumstances, perceiving accurately the attitude of the majority toward the minority is of utmost practical importance, without regard to whether that attitude is formed through estimable or prejudicial considerations.

May it be that at all times our people succeed, as did our ancient forebear, in being recognized as נשיא אלקים, mighty princes and the elect of God.