

Parasha & Herzl

The longevity of Abraham's foreign policy doctrine

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Something remarkable occurs in Parashat Lech Lecha that tends to be overlooked by biblical interpreters: Abraham plants the seeds for the Israeli nation's foreign policy.

Abraham establishes bilateral relationships with Egypt to the south and Ghar to the west, he forms treaties with constituents in Canaan, and defines relationship with no fewer than nine kingdoms to the east and north. Those Abrahamic arrangements will have a long-lasting impact throughout the biblical narrative and for centuries thereafter.

Indeed, over 3,500 years later, when Theodor Herzl plants the seeds for the renewed Jewish state's foreign policy, one can see similarities to Abraham's approach. Both launched their interactions with regional leaders right at the top and then worked down from there. Abraham's first bilateral meeting was with the Pharaoh while one of Herzl's first meetings was with the German Kaiser.

Through accounts of both Abraham and Herzl's meetings, it is evident that both opted to anchor their foreign policy doctrine in strength-based diplomacy. This is in sharp contrast to the approach that many Jewish leaders that lived in between the two men took.

Abraham and Herzl were both astute readers of the regional interest map. They were not tempted to base their foreign policy on wishful thinking. Egypt's hostile move against Abraham – the Pharaoh taking his wife – was not dealt through appeasement, as one would expect given Abraham's weak position coming into Egypt as a refugee. Instead, Abraham engaged the situation through strength-based diplomacy. The divine crippling sanctions levied on Egypt made the Pharaoh realize that keeping Abraham's wife extracts a heavy price.

The plagues that were inflicted led Egypt to make an astonishing concession – not only to let Abraham's wife go, but also to radically enrich Abraham. Indeed, Abraham's handling of the Sarah crisis seemed to have played a role a few centuries later during Moses time. That era's Pharaoh, likely aware of the sanctions that were levied on his predecessor, was ready to let Abraham's people go rather early in the conflict. In fact, it required intervention by God – hardening Pharaoh's heart – for Pharaoh not let the people go, so the ethos can be built: “And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not hearken unto you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth My hosts, My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt, by great judgments.”

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Jewish leaders of Herzl's time sought to promote Jewish interests by showcasing the extent of Jewish misery and through appeal for mercy. They advocated humanitarian-based diplomacy, seeking philanthropic solutions along the lines of “haven't the Jews suffered enough?”

Herzl departed from this approach, and instead chose to deploy Abraham's doctrine of strength-based diplomacy. Like Abraham in Egypt, Herzl was able to identify a source of Jewish strength: wealth! He turned it from a liability (excuse for antisemitism) to an asset. He offered the Ottoman Sultan that Jewish capital will relieve the Ottoman's mounting debt in exchange for granting the Jews a charter in Palestine – an offer that got the initial endorsement of the German Kaiser.



OSCAR STRAUS, US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, discussed the relevancy of Abraham's legacy with Herzl. (Wikimedia Commons)

Abraham and Herzl both realized that the Jewish state would only exist if it were needed, not because it would be pitied. They therefore used diplomatic tools to ensure that the world recognizes their nation's contribution to humanity. Abraham leveraged his astonishing military victory in the regional war that erupted to generate two powerful assets: deterrence and respect, which in turn led regional powers to seek to ally with him: “And Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought forth bread and wine; and he was priest of God the Most High. And he blessed him, and said: ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth’”

Similarly, Herzl dismissed words of sympathy: “Above all, I recognized the emptiness and futility of efforts to combat antisemitism,” he wrote. “Declamations made in writing or in closed circles do no good whatever; they even have a comical effect.” Instead of humanitarian-based diplomacy, Herzl applied Abraham's doctrine of strength-based diplomacy: “The Jewish state will exist because it will be the necessity of the world,” he proclaimed and launched Zionism as a role-model to the world that aspires to moral and spiritual completion, and that will serve humanity.

Abraham's long-lasting foreign policy doctrine is under-analyzed by biblical interpreters, likely because such interpreters lived between the second and 19th centuries, when the Jews were in exile with no united political leadership and no foreign policy. This was the case until Herzl came along and replanted the seeds for the renewed Jewish state's diplomacy through a series of meetings with national leaders, politicians and diplomats. One of those meetings was with the ambassador of what soon would

become the Israeli nation's core ally – the United States.

While Abraham and his descendants, such as King Solomon, had strong foreign relations with various nations, those were typically based on shared interests (for example, Abraham's alliance with Sodom in the context of liberating Lot). Never had the Jewish nation had such a reliable ally whose bond is grounded in shared values and rooted in a bedrock of compatible ideologies: Americanism and Zionism.

It is only fitting that when the US-Israel relationship was seeded in that conversation Herzl had with then-US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Oscar Straus, a key topic of discussion was the relevant legacy of Abraham!

As if drawing a line from the Abrahamic revolution through the American revolution to the Zionist revolution in the making, the two discussed the American ambassador's own support to settle Jews in Aram-Naharaim as a stepping-stone to the Promised Land.

“Abraham came from Aram-Naharaim,” Herzl noted. “We can have a mystical tie here.”

Indeed, today, 120 years since that conversation, millions of Americans say that their support for the Jewish state is central to both their Americanism and their Christian faith. In political rallies and churches across the nation, the message is repeated: “God blesses those who stand with Israel.” God's words to Abraham are also often recited: “And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse.”

Indeed, Israel shares with its friends the great blessings it was graced with – technological advances, medical breakthroughs and social innovations – while those who curse Israel through boycotts, slander and obsessive condemnations are increasingly isolated, weak and frustrated.

As a testament to this reality, when the Jewish new year began, the president of the Jewish State welcomed representatives of the world's nations to his shrine in Jerusalem. Through bread and wine, ambassadors from the Vatican, numerous Muslim countries and from all over the world raised a toast to share the Israeli president's blessing for a good year – a powerful demonstration of the longevity of both Abraham's and Herzl's foreign policy legacy. ■

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