A Well, Seven Ewes and a Tamarisk

By Aryeh Toren_Thorne, Torah scholar, researcher and writer

The sixth aliyah of Vayera, read on Friday 30 October 2026, is a short scene of diplomacy. A king and his general come to a man living in their land. They say something remarkable: "אֱלֹקים עִמְּךָ בְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה" (21:22), G-d is with you in all that you do. Then they ask him for an oath.

Avraham speaks up

Avraham agrees at once: "אָנֹכִי אִשָּׁבֵעַ", I will swear (21:24). But before the oath is sealed, he does something easy to miss. "וְהוֹכַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲבִימֶלֶךְ עַל אֹדוֹת בְּאֵר הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר גָּזְלוּ עַבְדֵי אֲבִימֶלֶךְ" (21:25). He rebukes the king over a well that the king's servants had seized.

Avimelech answers the way people in power often answer: I didn't know, you didn't tell me, I only heard about it today (21:26). Avraham doesn't argue the point. He gives sheep and cattle, and the two of them make a covenant (21:27). He was willing to make peace, but he wasn't willing to stay quiet about the well first.

Seven ewes as a witness

Then Avraham sets seven ewes apart. Avimelech asks what they are for. Avraham answers: "כִּי אֶת שֶׁבַע כְּבָשֹׂת תִּקַּח מִיָּדִי בַּעֲבוּר תִּהְיֶה לִי לְעֵדָה כִּי חָפַרְתִּי אֶת הַבְּאֵר הַזֹּאת" (21:30). Take these from my hand, as a witness that I dug this well.

The agreement doesn't blur the facts. Peace is made, and the record says who dug the well. The place takes its name from that moment, Be'er Sheva, "כִּי שָׁם נִשְׁבְּעוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם" (21:31), because the two of them swore there.

The tamarisk

Avimelech and Pichol go home (21:32). Avraham stays. "וַיִּטַּע אֶשֶׁל בִּבְאֵר שָׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֵל עוֹלָם" (21:33). He plants an eshel in Be'er Sheva and calls there in the name of ה', G-d of the world.

Rashi brings the debate of Rav and Shmuel in the Gemara (Sotah 10a): one says the eshel was an orchard to give fruit to guests, the other says an inn with every kind of fruit. Then Rashi explains how the name of ה' was called there: "לְאַחַר שֶׁאוֹכְלִים וְשׁוֹתִים אוֹמֵר לָהֶם בָּרְכוּ לְמִי שֶׁאֲכַלְתֶּם מִשֶּׁלּוֹ, סְבוּרִים אַתֶּם שֶׁמִּשֶּׁלִּי אֲכַלְתֶּם? מִשֶּׁל מִי שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם אֲכַלְתֶּם." After they ate and drank he would tell them: bless the One whose food you ate. Did you think you ate mine? You ate from the One who spoke and the world came to be.

The Ramban reads "אֵל עוֹלָם" as Avraham teaching people "סוֹד הַנְהָגַת הָעוֹלָם בִּכְלָלוֹ", the secret of how the whole world is run, that it is in the name of ה', Mighty in power over all. He also notes that Onkelos reads "וַיִּקְרָא" as prayer.

So right after an oath with a foreign king, sworn "בֵּאלֹקים" (21:23), Avraham does the most Jewish thing he could do. He opens his tent, feeds strangers, and tells them whose bread it is.

Keeping your voice among the nations

The last verse of the aliyah says, "(21:34) וַיָּגָר אַבְרָהָם בְּאֶרֶץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים יָמִים רַבִּים". He lived many days in the land of the Plishtim. He did not wall himself off.

That is the model this aliyah offers a Jew, and a Jewish state, dealing with the nations. Avraham speaks honestly about what was taken, as he did about the well. He signs, and he keeps a witness to the truth. Then he goes back to his own calling and says the name of ה׳ out loud in a place where the king's people can hear it.

The danger in every dealing with neighbors is not only what we give. It is that we start to sound like them, or go quiet to keep the peace. Avraham negotiated in Avimelech's language and prayed in his own. The questions for us are simple to ask and hard to live. When we deal with the world, do we still say whose well it is? And when the guests are fed, do we still tell them whose bread they ate?

The reading of Shabbat, 31 October 2026, begins "after these things." Whatever the commentators hear in those words, and they hear different things (see Papers 3 and 4), the treaty chapter ends with Avraham standing under his own tree, calling on his own G-d.

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Sources (fetched from Sefaria 30 October 2026): Genesis 21:22–34; Rashi on Genesis 21:33; Ramban on Genesis 21:33. Not checked in the original: Sotah 10a itself (quoted via Rashi); Onkelos itself (quoted via Ramban).

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