

Abimelech, King of the Philistines, Saw Isaac Caressing His Wife Rebekah

26: 6-11

DIG: Why might this situation be more dangerous for a woman's husband than for her brother? What does this say about Isaac's character? His humanity? What kind of a man was Abimelech? How did he react? How did God react?

REFLECT: Isaac repeated his father's inappropriate behavior. As a "chip off the old block," we do the same thing. What one "sin" of your parents would you like the LORD to help you eliminate from your own life?

Now there was a famine in the Land – besides the previous famine in Abraham's time – so Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, and stayed in Gerar (26:1 and 6). ADONAI had told him to temporarily stay in Gerar for a while (26:3), but he disobeyed and stayed there for a long time (26:8). As a result, he sinned there. While in Gerar, the people simply and politely inquired about Rebekah. The text does not indicate any menace in their inquiry, but Isaac seems to feel threatened.⁴¹⁵ So, like his father, he had a private discussion with his wife and told her, "You tell them that you are my sister, not my wife." And like Sarah, Rebekah went along with the plan. There was some truth in what Avraham said because Sarah was his half-sister, but there was no truth in what Isaac said. Therefore, when the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said: "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful" (26:7), so Isaac repeated the sin of Abraham (20:1-2).

The absence of any mention of Jacob and Esau here may suggest that they were back in the Negev looking after the possessions that Isaac (Hebrew: Yitz'chak) couldn't bring to Gerar. Otherwise, the presence of two grown sons would have made it especially difficult to pass off their mother as his sister.⁴¹⁶

Evidently Isaac's tent was pitched close to Abimelech's palace. When Isaac had been there a long time Abimelech accidentally stumbled on the truth when he looked down from a window in his palace and saw Isaac caressing, or being amorous with, his wife Rebekah

(26:8). Here we have a play upon words. The Hebrew word for **caressing** and the Hebrew word for the name **Yitz'chak** come from the same root word. It is the same word used when Ishmael was **mocking Isaac (21:9)**. This phrase can be used in a negative or a positive sense. In the case of Ishmael's **mocking**, it was negative, but in the case of **Isaac's caressing**, it was positive. Literally, it means *Isaac was isaacing his wife Rebekah*. However in lying, **Isaac** was **mocking Abimelech**. More than that, **Yitz'chak** had just received the covenant promises of **the LORD**, but **his** fear made a mockery of them. Fear *mocks* faith, where faith *laughs* in the face of danger.

Like **his** predecessor before **him**, **Abimelech** was a moral man (we must remember that **Abimelech** was a title like Pharaoh and not a proper name). Understandably upset, **Abimelech** **summoned Isaac** and said: **She is really your wife! Why did you say, "She is my sister"?** **The pagan king** is here the defender of truth. Is there anything sadder than a child of **God** being rebuked by a **man** of the world? At last, **Yitz'chak** told the truth and answered: **Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her (26:9)**.

Then **Abimelech** said: **What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us (26:10)**. **Yitz'chak** had missed the point that in attempting to spare **his** own life, **he** was risking the lives of everybody else. A whole city was put in danger because one **man** wanted to escape danger.⁴¹⁷ This doesn't seem to be a very spiritual time for **Isaac**. **Gerar** is the only place **he** went and did not build an altar.

It is surprising that **Abimelech** did not take vengeance on **Isaac**, but instead he **gave orders to all the people**, "**Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall surely be put to death**" (26:11). I am sure they had protesters outside the palace the next day! This was a rather severe penalty, even for the Canaanites. For this **Abimelech** to act in this way **he** must have remembered the story of the plagues on the house of **the former king of Gerar** who encountered **Abraham** some eighty years earlier. In addition, **Isaac** was a power to be reckoned with, and to curse **him** meant to be cursed (12:3). Apparently **Abimelech's** order did the trick, because later **he** and **his** officers said: **We did not molest you but always treated you well and sent you away in peace (26:29)**.

The point here is clear; Yitz'chak made the same mistake as his father Avraham, and yet was delivered by ADONAI the God of mercy, in the same way.⁴¹⁸