

*"God Keeps God's Promises - Depending"*

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What does it mean when God makes a promise? What does it mean in the context of the Torah, and what might it mean in real life?

My friend and marching partner, Reverend Lee Trollinger of the White Plains Calvary Baptist Church, called me this week to discuss that very question. He has been invited to speak tomorrow to our neighbor congregation, Temple Israel Center. He chose to discuss the par'shat hashavua, Chayei Sarah, in which God delivers on two major promises to Abraham, depending on how you define "delivers."

Am I correct, he asked me, that the two covenantal divine promises to Abraham are land and progeny? There's a third, I responded. Protection. As in "may God bless you and protect you."

Very well, he said. But am I right to assert that in the scriptural selection before us, God comes through? Can we say, then, that God keeps God's promises?

Reverend Trollinger clarified. In the first instance, Abraham must negotiate to purchase a burial plot for Sarah, who has just died. Because he does so successfully, he comes into possession of a field that will be the starting point of his descendants' claim to the Land of Canaan, the Land of Israel.

In the second instance, Abraham is able to negotiate for a wife for Isaac, thus allowing Isaac to have offspring and continue the promised line.

Promised land, and promised line. Both are divinely promised, and both come to pass.

Well, I told him, yes and no. Yes, in that God promises both land and line, and yes in that Abraham receives both. But in both cases, God offers nothing in the way of miracles, apparitions, or materializations.

In the case of the land, Abraham has been in Canaan for decades, and he still owns not one inch of real estate. In order to bury Sarah, he must *handel* quickly with the Hittites, ultimately paying a gouged price for the field and its cave. Nowhere does God swoop down, whisper in Ephron the Hittite's ear, and magically effect the sale. It's all on Abraham. And this, in the immediate aftermath of losing his life-long spouse.

As for the case of his progeny, Abraham can feel old age overtaking him as he observes his thirty-seven-year-old single son, devoid of marital prospects and badly in need of wardship. He undertakes the bold move of assigning his servant Eliezer to make a five-hundred-plus mile trip to negotiate for a suitable wife for Isaac. There's that word again: negotiate. It suggests major effort, major expense, and major compromise.

Reverend Trollinger and I agreed: Abraham ends up with a plot of land to call his own, and he ends up being able to bequeath it to Isaac and those who will follow. And he ends up exhausted and out a good deal of money.

And yet where is God in this story, after God has been so present and vocal in the chapters leading up to this parashah?

Reverend Trollinger picked up on the immense distance the servant had to travel. He compared it with the hundreds of miles Dr. King and company walked – *literally* walked – to achieve civil rights and voting rights for his kin from a country that had promised both in parchment but failed to deliver in reality. Those were miles that Rev. Trollinger himself had trekked in commemorations of those marches, and, sadly, in recent demonstrations to demand that both courts and legislatures stop eviscerating those laws in our own time.

We agreed that in the case of Dr. King and the faithful who joined him, God neither transported the marchers nor delivered the legislation. God, we might say, was present in the minds and the breath of the marchers. God was the motivation. God was the inspiration. God was the guardian and blesser. But the faithful had to act on their own. God would not even force the faithful to do that. It was, as it were, entirely up to them.

By now, Reverend Trollinger had revised his summary statement. “God keeps God’s promises – *depending.*” Depending on whether the one promised takes God up on the deal. Depending on whether the one promised is willing to make the first move. And depending on whether the one promised is willing to endure hardship, insult, setback, exploitation, and indignity. All on the way to a *possible* victory.

As our text says, *v’Avraham zaken, ba b’yamim, va’ado-nai beirach et Avraham bakol.* Abraham reached old age and knew that God had blessed him with everything. But the “everything” was comprised not of what God had delivered, but of what Abraham himself would need to struggle to achieve. What God had given him was the extraordinary faith to act first, and to endure the loneliness that accompanied that struggle. Perhaps that was God’s real promise all along.