

From the Rabbi's Desk

June 2021

Friends,

In I Kings 21, we read a story about King Ahab and his coveting of the vineyard of Naboth. Ahab lives in Samaria, which is the present day Northern West Bank. Ahab approaches Naboth and asks for him to give Ahab his vineyard. Ahab wanted the vineyard for a vegetable garden. He promises Naboth a better vineyard in exchange or, if he preferred, offered to pay Naboth for the land. Naboth refuses the exchange of land, and the money. Naboth says, "Lord forbid that I should give away the estate of my fathers." The vineyard was an inheritance from his ancestors.

Ahab returned to his palace sulking and refusing to eat. His wife, Jezebel, saw him distraught and asked why he was so upset. He told her about Naboth and his unwillingness to trade the vineyard or accept money for it. However, note that Ahab reversed the order of offers he made to Naboth and left out that the fact that the vineyard is Naboth's ancestral land altogether. Ahab made it seem as if Naboth just refused to sell for no good reason.

Jezebel told Ahab to get up and act like a king. Where he couldn't get the job done, she pledges to get the vineyard for Ahab. She enlists the elite of the Northern Kingdom by sending them letters in the king's name. She called for a fast and a gathering where two scoundrels were paid to witness against Naboth. The accused him of blasphemy. Naboth was taken out of the city and stoned to death for supposedly cursing God and king. Now that Naboth was out of the way, Jezebel encouraged Ahab to go down and take possession of the vineyard. Enter our prophet Elijah. Elijah was told by God to meet Ahab in the vineyard and give him a message, "Where dogs licked Naboth's blood, they will lick your blood too."

In I Kings 22, Elijah's prophecy played out. I'll let you read that dramatic account for yourself. I will only say here that Ahab surrounded himself repeatedly with advisors that were all too willing to tell him what only what he wanted to hear and acquired for him all that he wanted, regardless of the moral implications. Naboth, on the other hand, felt the inherent importance of the land of his ancestors. No amount of money would have been enough, nor would any land have been sufficient in trade. Had Ahab acted as a righteous king, he would have heard Naboth's reasons for not selling, perhaps found some other suitable land, or simply planted his garden within the walls of his own palace. But where kings dwell, often corruption seeps in.

As I am writing this article, tension and violence has erupted once again in Israel. At the heart of this tension is land, who possesses it in the present, and who has a historical claim. In the biblical story King Ahab didn't have the power to claim Naboth's vineyard for his own. He could not, even as king, force Naboth to sell. It was because of this reality that Jezebel resorted to deception and murder. In the present, East Jerusalem and the West Bank, are all too often the backdrop for legalized and illegal land grabs. Yet, to equate the current Israeli-Palestinian issue to a real estate transactions gone bad would be to grossly minimize and trivialize over 50 years of occupation and the lives lost on both sides. Israel has every right to defend itself. Palestinians have every right to demand autonomy and self determination. It is clear that there will be no suitable resolution without trusted mediators leading the Israelis and Palestinians toward a solution. I pray that the United States can rebuild the relationships necessary to be a trusted mediator and lead Israel and the Palestinians to a two state solution and a lasting peace.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Marc