

# Abraham: A Man for all Seasons.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Abraham is revered by the major monotheistic religions. In Judaism, what he went through is constantly being re-examined to provide us with an example we should follow. *Ma'aseh Avot Siman LeBanim*. The acts of the fathers are guides for the children. This is why I am fascinated by the contradictions and inconsistencies in Abraham's life and character. He reaches the very pinnacle of interaction with God. Yet he struggles with doubt, insecurity and ambivalence.

He alone is described in the Torah as "believing in God." Though the way the word is used in the Torah is very different to its current theological usage. The Biblical Hebrew word *Emunah* is not to be translated as belief (which is usually associated with assenting to certain theological propositions). Rather it is a conviction, confidence based on trust. An emotional phenomenon rather than an abstract intellectual one. He was prepared to follow a Divine instruction to leave his homeland for a strange country with the promise that all would be good. But it did not turn out to be as good as promised. It was wracked with famine the moment he reached it. He had to leave it for the breadbasket of the Nile. He found himself at the mercy of an Egyptian tyrant. He almost sacrificed his wife for his own survival. When he returned to Canaan his family was split with jealousy and competition.

The bond with his nephew was fraught. He was magnanimous in giving Lot the choice of what land to take. But did he warn him of the moral dangers of Sodom? He was then caught up in war. And showed remarkable military decisiveness creating an alliance to defeat the four kings of the East and rescue Lot. Sara was barren. She suggested a sort of surrogacy but then Abraham had to deal with the tensions between Sara and Hagar and indeed their children. He was torn. He needed God's instructions to act. Clearly, he cared for Hagar and Ishmael. Although it seems strange that he sent them away with minimum provisions. He was, after all, a very wealthy man. Throughout all his troubles, God appears to him several times. Reaffirms His covenant twice. Once over the land, and the second time in the obligation to circumcise himself and his family. Perhaps pain is an inevitable feature of our relationship with God.

And yet we find no evidence that he remonstrated with God over his personal problems. Perhaps he understood that Divine Promises were serpentine and may take hundreds of years to materialize (as indeed God told him in a vision describing 400 years of slavery). Perhaps he did not complain because he understood that there was always good and bad. Nothing was nor is ever perfect. One has to take the rough with the smooth. After all, he did achieve success in so many other areas. His camp and followers had grown to such an extent that he could find 318 young men there to fight for him. Even so, he was inconsistent in being prepared to take money from Pharaoh but not the King of Sodom "Let no man say I enriched Abraham."

For all his passion, he was neither a recluse living behind the walls of a Ghetto nor a narrow-minded fanatic. He dealt with everyone, Canaanite, Egyptian, Philistine, regardless of their ethics or religion. He recognized in Malchizedek another great spiritual mind and even engaged to give him tithes according to one version. Other opinions are that Malchizedek gave him tithes. Which only reinforces the legitimacy of multiple and contradictory interpretations of Torah texts. He finds good and evil wherever he turns and recognizes that some people are more ethical than others. You might even like to consider him the first interreligious spokesman.

I always wondered why Abraham was able to challenge God over the destruction of Sodom and could ask God directly, whether the Master of the Universe should not be just. Yet when he believed that God had told him to sacrifice Isaac, he was unable to ask whether that was just. It seems that Abraham believed God had commanded him to carry this out as an act of devotion. It is such an awesome narrative. Much debated and explained over the years. The Torah itself says it was only a test. God never intended or wanted human sacrifice. But Abraham was willing to do anything for God. And God had to teach Abraham that there are limits to religious devotion. Some simply see this episode as a way of impressing upon us not to be like the surrounding pagans who did indeed practice child sacrifice (and still do if you take it metaphorically the way Leonard Cohen did). What is clear is the air of uncertainty, incredulity as well as the passivity of Abraham and indeed Isaac. So that commitment and doubt seem to go hand in hand without any sense of incongruity or inappropriateness. I know in some circles Abraham is painted as perfect as you get. But the text gives us a very different picture.

For many people, religion is a matter of providing security, certainties, answers and a way of belonging to a specific group of people. For others, it is a commitment and a challenge. The commitment is to a set of ideals and a view of the world that includes the spiritual. And to a calendar and a set of rules that reinforces identity, reiterates an awareness of the supernatural. All of these are tools to help us cope with life rather than giving us a straight-jacket of forced obedience. Many of us were brought up and still are, to think this way. But this narrative implies that nothing should prevent us from asking, struggling, and going through periods of uncertainty, ambivalence and even alienation.

All these features are to be found in the Biblical Abraham. It is reassuring to realize that however great a figure Abraham was, his human limitations were not glossed over. And in that, I see the greatness of Torah. "The Torah was not given to angels." Neither does it expect us to be angels either.