

Abraham

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every time I read the Biblical narratives about Abraham (and it's that time of the year in the synagogue) I am reminded of the differences between his day and ours—and I usually think the comparison favours his. I often come across people who claim that Abraham was rather primitive, specifically in the way he treated his women. But the fact is that, taking his life as a whole, he was a remarkably universal, tolerant human being, well worth emulating. However particular, or even exclusive, the Bible may seem to some, Abraham is a startling example of how one can transcend one's specific concerns and priorities.

There's one issue that troubles me because it is now, perhaps with reason, a really prevalent mantra in the Jewish world that I encounter. So many of us believe that the whole world hates us, "It is an accepted fact that Esau hates Jacob." The late Lord Jakobovits often referred to anti-Semitism as "Hating Jews more than is absolutely necessary."

It's not as though we have no good reason. After all, Hitler did actually nearly succeed while the rest of the world looked on and didn't seem to care, except when their own interests were at stake or if they were individual mavericks like Raoul Wallenberg. President Roosevelt didn't want to be seen being too pro Jewish and nice President Truman's wife wouldn't invite local Jews to come into their home.

Still today, anti-Semitism is flourishing (even leaving anti-Israelism out of this). It is not pleasant to be assaulted on the media almost daily by images of articulate enemies and thousands of yahoos who would like to see us killed, disappear, or prevent us from demanding our rights. Hardly a day goes by anywhere where walls of synagogues or schools or graveyards are not daubed with symbols and words of hatred against us. So it's hardly surprising if we have just a weeny teeny little "chippele" on our shoulders. Even if there are some non-Jews who are favorably disposed to us, it's rather like as kid coming home from school where he's been bullied and abused and his mother says, "There, there, darling; at least I love you."

So I guess with our history of three thousand years of persecution two things are amazing. One is that we have survived and we are actually flourishing (despite the losses and the dropouts). The second is that we are not even more screwed up than we are. Frankly, when I look around at the messed up millions of barbarians who share this same planet we inhabit, I reckon we're not too bad after all.

But the fact is that for good reason we are primarily concerned with our own survival. Does this excuse our apparent lack of concern for others beyond our ghetto walls?

To return to our father Abraham, look at Genesis Chapters 18-22. He certainly had grounds for paranoia. He couldn't even hold his own family together, let alone cope with the Hittites the Canaanites and all the other "ites" of his

day. He had to contend with famine and attempts to take his wife away from him, and he got involved in other people's fights. At every turn he was faced with dissension within and without. Yet, for all of this, he was able to put his own worries aside and beg God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, made up of people he didn't particularly like or approve of. His immense humanity, his concern for everyone, overrides his own preoccupation with survival.

Whereas the prophet Jonah refuses to go on a mission to non-Jews who may then turn on his own people (and gets a firm rebuke from God for his lack of universalism), Abraham, on the other hand, unreservedly and unhesitatingly argues for alien peoples, even his enemies. Not only but by way of contrast, when God tells him to sacrifice his own son Isaac, he does not try to argue at all.

You might say this simply reflects his commitment to God's command as directed to himself and thought he was a special and specific case. But that would make my point even more forcefully that we need to fight the battle of humanity in general, even when we continue to fully accept the impositions and restrictions of our own particular traditions. This, I believe, is the message that the Biblical narrative wants to emphasize. Of course, we must fight for our own survival. But at the same time we need to see ourselves as part of Creation, part of Adam's world, Abraham's world, not just Moses'. There is a well-known Talmudic phrase that says, "What our forefathers did is an example for us to follow."

Interesting that when our current religious leadership wishes to defend its territory, it tends to focus on the need for survival and preserving our integrity, as against and often to the exclusion of the more universal values that may appear to conflict. That does not appear to have been the Abrahamic way.

It's also interesting that when the current antireligious lobby looks for points to score against Biblical Judaism, they always select those commands that are directed at a very specific group, such as the Canaanite tribes or specific pagan horrors and ignore the wider humanism of the text and those commands that transcend differences. They will refer to political and social exigencies of three thousand years ago and disregard the broader ethical obligations. So the needs to extricate oneself from Egyptian oppression by whatever means, was balanced by the Biblical command not to hate Egyptians.

Whichever way one regards the Biblical texts and whoever or however one thinks they came about, it was precisely what was included that fascinates and sometimes confuses me. But from amongst the mixed and complex messages, certain voices simply shout out at one for their primacy. Abraham's voice is one of them.

In truth, I believe self-interest and universal concern are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We must have both within our psyches, struggling creatively for our future.