



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BEREISHIT > Vayeira

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 23, 2010  
Vayeira

**Two Sermons**

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# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

*"Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart"*

Bereishit > Vayeira > What Should be Our Attitude to  
Islam Today: Lessons from Abraham

October 23, 2010

## ABSTRACT

It is hard to make sense of the conflicts raging the world over – not the least of it in our own back yard – but one thing is clear: we are engaged in a formidable confrontation with the Muslim world.

And who got us into this mess in the first place? Abraham. Had Abraham not taken his famous trek to Israel some 3800 years ago, the entire landscape of the Middle East might look very different today.

And if he got us into this, perhaps he can get us out. So let us today revisit Abraham, "the father of many nations," for some wise counsel and answers to such provocative questions as:

- How does "religious selfishness" harm religion?
- Why is greeting guests greater than greeting God?
- How can we change our destiny?
- Does God share in our suffering, or does He remain aloof, beyond it all?
- How can we go on the offensive against terrorism?
- What is the best antidote to fear?

## WHAT SHOULD BE OUR ATTITUDE TO ISLAM TODAY? LESSONS FROM ABRAHAM

### 1. Middle East Jokes

- The news is just in. Contrary to what you may have heard, both sides of the Middle East conflict are, at last, on the road to peace. The bad news is the Israelis think the road goes through the West Bank, and the Palestinians think it goes right through downtown Jerusalem.
- You laugh. But there is actual agreement as to what will happen. Israel will stop attacking the Arabs. And the Arabs will not necessarily stop attacking Israel.
- Ever optimistic, the State Department announced, “What we’re seeing here are the birth pangs of a new Middle East.” Unfortunately, the first contraction took out a city block.
- For one, Egypt now says it can’t recognize Israel any longer. Well, of course, they can’t recognize Israel if people keep blowing it up.
- This morning the UN weighed in on the issue. The UN came out and condemned Israel ... which was a big relief because, all day long, the Jews were asking, “What do the anti-Semites think?”

We laugh about it because otherwise we’d cry – the situation in the Middle East, and the world over for that matter, is a terrible mess.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:5.

## 2. It's Abraham's Fault

No matter how we try to analyze world events over the past ten years, it is hard to make sense of the chaos. The shambles that is Iraq. The threat of Iran. The never-ending conflict in Afghanistan. The uncertainty that is the only constant in Israel. And, last but not least, the underlying sense of siege that pervades America.

It is hard to make sense of it all, but one thing is clear – we are engaged in a formidable confrontation with the Muslim world.

And who got us into this mess in the first place? Abraham.

Had Abraham not taken his famous trek to Israel some 3800 years ago, the entire landscape of the Middle East might look very different today. Let us not forget that Abraham is the father of all the nations involved in this conflict. He is the father of Ishmael – and through him the progenitor of the Arab/Muslim people. He is the father of Isaac – and through him and Isaac's son Esau, the progenitor of the Western/Christian world. And, of course, as the father of Isaac and grandfather of Jacob, he is the progenitor of the Jews.

And if he got us into this, perhaps he can get us out. So let us today revisit Abraham, “the father of many nations,”<sup>1</sup> for some wise counsel. If nothing else, to spend some time with Abraham is to be moved and inspired. He is a man of profound courage, fierce independence and a model for a deeply personal relationship with God. In every part of his life's story, in every choice he made and every action he took, we find much to learn from and powerful contemporary applications.

## 3. Visiting with God

At the outset of this week's Torah reading, God appears to Abraham as he is healing from his circumcision.<sup>2</sup> This is the first time in history that

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<sup>2</sup> We derive from this the mitzvah of visiting the sick, *bikkur cholim*.

God makes such an appearance, so you can imagine that it is quite a momentous occasion.

For the record, God's appearance – as all such references in the Torah – should not be understood in anthropomorphic terms. Divine revelation is an experience from within. God is the essence of reality, and as such God exists within us all and for that matter within everything. "God appeared"<sup>3</sup> means that this essence expressed itself in such a way that Abraham experienced it just as we would experience someone appearing before us.

But something very strange happens during this Divine "visit." Abraham lifts his eyes and sees three strangers. They appear to him as nomads traveling in the desert. What does Abraham do? He turns away from God to greet and welcome these men as guests in his home. The Talmud deduces from this that "welcoming guests is greater than welcoming God," because Abraham turned away from God to greet his guests.<sup>4</sup>

Beautiful lesson. But the question is this: How did Abraham know this was the right thing to do? How did he know he had the right – the *chutzpah* even – to turn away from God and greet people?

Even if an ordinary mortal were to come visit you when you were ill, it would be quite rude to turn away from your visitor to chat with other guests! But here the "visitor" is God! And He is making a rare, first-time appearance!

A very puzzling set of circumstances, which lead us to ask: How can greeting human (or even angelic) guests be greater than greeting God?

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 18:1.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a.

## 4. To Love God Means To Love His Creatures

Clearly, Abraham understood something deeper. What he understood was that ignoring wandering strangers is, in effect, ignoring God in the deepest way. Because if you love God then you must love what God loves, namely His creatures.

So welcoming guests is welcoming God in a greater way than welcoming God directly.

Had Abraham ignored the nomads, one could argue that it would have been due not to Abraham's respect for God, but to a "religious selfishness."

A story that aptly illustrates this point is told about two Torah scholars<sup>5</sup> – a father and a son – who were absorbed in their studies. Suddenly, a baby (the son's child who was sleeping in the next room) fell out of its crib and starting wailing loudly. The son was concentrating so hard, he did not hear it. The father heard and went to tend to the baby. When he returned, he said to his son, "If you don't hear the desperate crying of a child, what value is there in your Torah study? Torah study is meant to refine you, to teach you how to help another person, to hear the cry of one in need!"

Any religious or spiritual experience has to always make us more sensitive – not less – to other people.

To be so immersed in a religious experience that we ignore the cry of a child, or the call of someone for help, or the needs of weary travelers, is "religious selfishness." And in no way does it bring us any closer to God.

Abraham got that. Abraham got God. And as a result God rewarded him in a special way, by taking him into His confidence.

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<sup>5</sup> The two were Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the author of the *Tanya*), and his son who would later be known as the Rebbe Dov Ber.

## 5. God's Personal Deliberations

This is what the Torah tells us next, as God prepares to destroy the twin sin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah:

God said: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do? Abraham is to become a great and mighty nation and through him shall be blessed all the nations of the world. For I have given him special attention because he charges his children and his household [to follow] after him, in preserving the way of God through kindness and justice..."<sup>6</sup>

This is a strange passage indeed. God seems not to know what to do. Should He tell Abraham about His plan to destroy the twin sin-cities? Should He hide it? Would that be right considering His relationship with Abraham?

Rarely do we find God speaking in such *vulnerable* terms. God sounds almost apologetic in this passage, as He wonders whether He might hide from Abraham His plan to destroy the twin sin-cities.

But more than that, what is the Torah's point in telling us about God's personal deliberations (especially since He eventually does reveal His plan of destruction)? And what is the substance of God's doubt? Why should He *not* share His plan with Abraham?

I suggest that here the Torah wants to teach us something profound about how our relationship with God works – that it is a true partnership.

Seemingly, God feels that He *must* destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. But by revealing His plan to Abraham, God is acknowledging that He may not be able to carry out that plan. Therefore, God ponders if He should hide what He plans to do. But then again, how can He hide it, if Abraham is to educate the world to how this partnership works?

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:18-19.

It is clear from this passage – and from how the story turns out when Abraham indeed challenges God’s decision – that Abraham has the power to alter and even halt these events.

## 6. Partnership with God

At this point in time – following the fall of Adam and Eve, the great flood, and the destruction of the Tower of Babel – God’s partnership with humanity has coalesced in Abraham. He alone recognizes the One God; he alone gets God.

And from their interaction we learn that yes, God has a very personal relationship – an actual partnership – with the human race. Yes, God has bound Himself to us in some mysterious, inexplicable way. We can change the Divine plan. We can change the course of destiny.

This is the power of prayer: We pray that God change what He has set in motion. A person may be lying ill, and we pray that God heal him or her. Isn’t that *chutzpah*? Shouldn’t faith dictate that we passively accept God’s plan, whether we like it or not?

No, that is not faith. Faith is not passive and childish. It is the belief in God and, as such, the partnership between God and the human race.

When we see pain, we must cry out. Not because we are weak, but because we are dynamic partners with God in the drama of life. We must pray and do everything possible to remedy the situation. We must say *Yehi rotzon* – “May it be Your will ... that x, y and z happen.” And when we say these words, we must believe that we have the power to elicit a new will in God, which will annul a previous harsh decree. Faith, of course, also includes the acceptance of God’s final decree, even after we have tried all we can, and God decides otherwise.



## 7. God's Relationship to Us

We get further clues about how God relates to us in what happens next: And God said: "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so very grave. I will descend and see if they have done everything implied by the outcry that is coming before Me..."

The question is obvious: Why does an omnipresent God have to "descend" to see whether Sodom has sinned? Which leads us to the next question: Does God exist within our pain and suffering, or does He remain aloof, beyond it all?

Here is the complex answer in brief:

Although God is inherently transcendent of all human experience, He chooses to "descend" and engage Himself with existence as we know it. He chooses to relate to and "enter within" our human experience.<sup>7</sup>

But a tension remains. This is the tension between "two" realities – 1) the perspective from above (*daas elyon*), seeing things from the transcendent dimension, and 2) the perspective from below (*daas tachton*), seeing things from the inside out. Resolving this tension – integrating both perspectives – is the story of life.

This helps us understand God's dilemma – should He hide His plan from Abraham? From the perspective above, perhaps Abraham does not need to be privy to God's plan. But then God chooses not to hide it from him, to reveal it, and to engage Abraham in a Divine/human dialogue. And Abraham responds by questioning God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

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<sup>7</sup> As Kabbalah explains, God does so by means of the spiritual spheres (*sefirot*) and the spiritual worlds of the cosmic order.

## 8. Challenge of Our Troubled Times

Abraham's challenge is repeated in our troubled times. Indeed, this is the challenge of any painful time or experience. I suggest that any troubling situation is meant to provoke a dialogue with God about our partnership. This is our right, indeed our responsibility – not to remain silent, but to engage with God in the process.

We owe Abraham many tributes, not least among them the tribute of providing us with language to speak to God. If we ever have to do so, we don't need to create our own words – all we need do is to use the words of Abraham:

“Will You actually wipe out the innocent together with the guilty? Suppose there are fifty innocent people in the city. Would You still destroy it, and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty good people inside of it? ... Shall the Judge of the world not act justly?”<sup>8</sup>

Note that to this argument God acquiesces. He says: “If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire place for their sake.” Indeed, he agrees to spare the place for as little as ten good people.

Abraham's example – in speaking up and persuading God – gives us strength and fortitude during difficult times. It teaches us that we need not be passive bystanders waiting for something bad to happen. We can be proactive.

But what can and must we do in these particular times?

I suggest that we remember our partnership with God and – imitating Abraham – we call upon it. If we have faith that we are God's partners in refining and improving our world, there is no challenge that we cannot meet. Indeed, faith is the most powerful resource we can access especially when our own security is threatened.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 18:23-26.

## 9. Kabbalistic Insight

The great 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist, the Ari, predicted that, as we approach the Messianic Era, we will witness a conflict between the forces of Ishmael and the Muslim world arrayed against Esau and the Christian/Western world. This conflict, he said, will be the outward manifestation of the necessary refinement of two spiritual forces known as *netzach* (or “endurance/determination”) and *hod* (or “humility/acknowledgment”) – each of which has a good and evil expression.<sup>9</sup>

What does that mean in practical terms?

*Netzach* (which literally means “victory”) is the sheer determination to forge ahead despite the unknowns and doubts. That energy comes from a deep-rooted belief in who you are and what you need to accomplish. *Netzach* means embracing what you believe in and not allowing anything to stop you from getting it.

*Hod* is the supra-rational acknowledgment of that which is beyond you. It is recognizing how small you are, which allows you to realize how large you can become. And that makes humility so formidable.

Today, we are being terrorized with a negative *netzach* and *hod* – a demonic, irrational force that is ready to kill innocent people in the name of its distorted faith. We experience it as a fierce onslaught on our freedoms. The only long term way to counter this force is with positive *netzach* and *hod* – an equal if not stronger passionate embrace of our inner values.

This is in addition, of course, to the obvious need to defend ourselves, and to uproot any form of terrorism and those that support it. But a defensive stance is not enough. We must go on the offensive. Long term, the only solution for the refinement of *netzach* and *hod* is to transform that energy into a passionate spiritual revolution.

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<sup>9</sup> Explained at length in the hassidic discourse titled *Kol Dodi* – 5668 (5709).

This is the revolution that Abraham started. Following his lead, we cannot fail.

## 10. Call to Action

How to go about it? I suggest the following:

- Study the story of Abraham to learn by his example.
- Talk to God – there is nothing more powerful than prayer and it can change your destiny.
- Make a new commitment to a *mitzvah* (good deed), even if you are not in the mood of it, but you just know it is right.
- Instead of being paralyzed, go out there and do something good. Initiate something – like a gathering in your home. Invite friends and do some inspirational reading together.
- Find a cause and dedicate yourself to it with absolute passion and commitment.
- Take time each day to shut out all the outside static, and focus inward to acknowledge God's blessings in your life.
- Teach your children to do all of the above.

Lastly, remember that the best way to teach your children to not be afraid is to show that *you* are not afraid. The best way to show that is by being *proactive*. Take your emotions and channel them outward instead of allowing them to implode inward. Being passionately proactive is the best antidote to fear and the best way to meet any challenge.



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### ABSTRACT

Recent events have caused us to view people of other religions – particularly Muslims – with fear and suspicion. Many are alarmed by the growing Muslim population and influence in Europe as well as in the US, as demonstrated by the latest controversy surrounding the mosque near “ground zero” in downtown Manhattan. Some say that we have just cause and should only be more wary – Muslim radicalism, with its violent stance toward the West, threatens the foundations of our civilization. Others warn that this kind of fear-mongering is a slippery slope which is likely to harm civil liberties of us all.

Where should we as Jews weigh in? What does Judaism tell us about relating to people of other faiths – the so-called “infidels”?

The saga of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac reflects the ongoing events of our times, and continues to provide us with clarity and direction as we face the troubling issues of our times. Interestingly, their story is also read on the first day of Rosh Hashana. This clearly demonstrates the centrality of its lessons and their modern day implications. Here are some of the many insights that we might glean from it:

- Faith in God extends to loving other people, regardless of their background and similarity to you. Indeed, when three strangers interrupted Abraham’s visit with God, he ran to greet them, though they appeared at first glance to be pagans, infidels! Yet, he welcomed them knowing that welcoming strangers was the best way of welcoming God.

- Faith is absolute, but that does not preclude diversity – different people, different nations, serving God each in their own way. Abraham taught faith and love, but he also taught that we all must serve God in our unique way, and that we should inspire others to do so *with compassion*.

- Abraham was not naïve. He knew that Sodom was a city of cruel and corrupt people. A city of infidels. Yet, Abraham defended them and demanded of God: “Shall the world’s judge not do justice?!”

When wondering how to treat “infidels” – Abraham is the address to visit. Imagine what the world would be like if all the children of Abraham simply followed his guidelines for life and co-existence?

## HOW TO TREAT INFIDELS

### 1. Liberty vs. Security

What do you do, asks John Farmer in the *New York Times*,<sup>1</sup>

when you see a young man in hardware store buying a large quantity of acetone, or in a beauty supply store buying large quantity of hydrogen peroxide, both components in explosives? Should you report it to law enforcement officials? No crime has been committed, and nothing indicates that it’s going to be, but should not such suspicious behavior be evaluated? If not, you might find out too late ... after innocent people have died.

The U.S. Justice Department – of this liberal administration which is strongly dedicated to protecting everyone’s civil rights – has decided

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<sup>1</sup> “How to Spot a Terrorist,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2010.

that it is time to be proactive. It has launched a nationwide project called “Suspicious Activity Reporting Initiative” in order to collect and analyze reports of such occurrences, so as to detect dangerous patterns.

Janet Napolitano, the Secretary for Homeland Security, says that “homeland security begins with hometown security.” And hometown security begins with local observations of suspicious activity. This is especially important now, adds the FBI, because “Al Qaeda has been looking to recruit Americans or Westerners” as they are able to fly under the nation’s security radar.

By the way, have you heard that Al Qaeda may now be operating without their infamous leader? Yes, the CIA has just announced that a un-manned drone rocket *may* have killed Osama Bin Ladin way up in the mountains. Note the emphasis on the word “may” ... What they’re saying is that he’s still alive and they have no idea where he is.

One thing they should have learned by now is that bombing doesn’t work. They’ve flown over 2,800 sorties, dropped 15 tones of war-heads and done done \$39 dollars in damage. But the US of A is a compassionate nation ... when this is all over, we’re going to put all the rocks and the dirt back.

Anyway, Al Qaeda continues to be a formidable threat. And so...

The government has come to the conclusion that more needs to be done, especially after the events of the last twelve months:

- The shootings at Ford Hood, Texas by Major Nidal Malik Hasan
- The attempted bombing of a jetliner on Christmas day by Umar Farouk Abdbul-Muttalab
- The attempted bombing of Times Square by Faisal Shahzad
- The New York subway plot by Najibullah Zazi

Now, all these attacks or attempted attacks were planned and executed by Muslims. And I venture to say that when people begin to report sus-

picious activity in earnest they will not have Timothy McVeigh in mind – they will be describing the behavior of Middle Eastern types.

And let's not forget that many Jews have that Middle Eastern look and have been known to engage in suspicious activity. Remember the young man who caused an emergency landing of US Airways flight because he put on *tefillin* – you know, those straps and boxes that look like cables or bomb components?

So how do we Jews feel about it?

Do we side with the civil libertarians who fear that viewing others – and especially Muslims – with suspicion will lead us to revisit the McCarthy Era of the early 1950s. (That was a shameful period in our history when many suspected Communists were blacklisted – quite a few of them Jews – and when anyone who ever explored the ideals of Communism was taught to be a spy or a traitor.)

Or, do we weigh in with the other side which says that not watching our backs is naïve beyond belief and right down stupid.

As Jews, what stance are we meant to adopt in this clash of civilizations which has come to rest at our doorstep?

As always, the Torah points the way – in this instance, in the form of an example set by Abraham nearly four millennia ago. When wondering how to treat those of other faiths – the so-called infidels – he is the address to visit.

## 2. Call Me Ishmael

As we know, the progenitor of the Arab/Muslim world was the first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael. And about him we read:

“Abraham was very troubled over his son [Ishmael].”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21:11.



To which the Midrash adds:

Why was he called Ishmael [meaning “God will listen”]? Because there will come a time when God will listen to the cry of the Nation [of Israel] bemoaning the deeds of the descendants of Ishmael ... And [God will do as the Book of Psalms<sup>3</sup> promises:] “God will hear and answer.”<sup>4</sup>

Why was Abraham troubled over his son? Was it because of what the Midrash foresaw?

### 3. Family Saga

The saga of Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac reflects the ongoing events of our times, and continues to provide us with clarity and direction as we face the troubling issues of our times.

As we might recall from last week’s Torah reading, Ishmael was the product of the union between Abraham and Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden to his wife Sarah. The union was Sarah’s idea – an early form of a kind of surrogate parenthood. Sarah had said to Abraham: “Come to my servant, and hopefully, I will have sons through her.”<sup>5</sup> But, though a son was born (the aforementioned Ishmael), the idea backfired, with Hagar lording over Sarah and rubbing salt in the wound of the barren woman.

And then a miracle happened. Sarah became pregnant on her own, and Isaac was born. His name – from the Hebrew word for “laughter” – expressed the joy that Sarah felt.

But her joy was short lived. The household was plunged into acrimony as Ishmael – described as a wild boy<sup>6</sup> – mocked his brother, and Sarah insisted that Abraham send the elder boy away.

<sup>3</sup> Psalms 55:20.

<sup>4</sup> *Midrash Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 32. *Yalkut Mechiri Psalms* 177.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 16:2.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 16:12.

Abraham was very troubled by the prospect of casting out his first-born son, but God told him to not be distressed: "Do everything that Sarah tells you."<sup>7</sup>

God also promised that no harm would come to Ishmael, and that "I will make him into a nation for he is your son."

The Torah relates Ishmael and Hagar's exile, and God's rescue of them in a time of need. The Torah concludes: "God was with the boy. He grew and lived in the desert, where he became an expert archer. He settled in the Paran Desert and his mother found him a wife from Egypt."<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Contemporary Lessons

Interestingly, this story – in its entirety – is read on the first day of Rosh Hashana. This clearly demonstrates the centrality of its lessons and their modern day implications. I would strongly suggest that we all read it very closely. Here are some of the many insights that we might glean from it:

Abraham, the man of absolute faith, passed on his passionate faith and commitment to God to both of his sons, Ishmael and Isaac – the forefathers of the Arab/Muslim world and the Jewish nation.

Furthermore, the evolution of religion and all its manifestations and distortions can be traced back to Abraham's passionate faith and what he taught his children, and what they did or did not do with these teachings.

The greatest challenge facing religion is how to co-exist with people of other faiths without compromising yourself or others. How do you balance your own absolute beliefs with compassion for those that may not share them? Do you destroy those that have no faith or are of another faith? Do you tolerate them?

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 21:12.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 21:20-21.

What did Abraham teach his children – both Ishmael and Isaac and their descendants – and faith and co-existence?

## 5. Love All of God's Creations

I suggest that Abraham taught his children to love others at all times. And this is my evidence:

We read in this week's Torah portion that God informs Abraham He plans to destroy the twin sin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. What does Abraham do? He beseeches God not to destroy them lest innocent people be killed together with the guilty.

God tells Abraham that, if he can find 50 innocent people inside, He will spare the entire city. Abraham continues to negotiate: what if there are 45 innocent people. God agrees not to destroy them for the sake of the 45. What about, 40, 30, 20, 10? In each case God agrees not to destroy them for the sake of the few innocent. Abraham gets it down to 10 people. And then realizing that there are no innocent people in Sodom, Abraham finally relents.

Abraham was not naïve. He knew that Sodom was a city of cruel and corrupt people. A city of infidels. Yet, not only does Abraham, the man of faith, not go and destroy these people, *or* ask God to destroy them, but even when God Himself *wants* to destroy them, Abraham defends them and demands of God: "Shall the world's judge not do justice?!"

Why did Abraham not take an approach that those that defy God need to be destroyed? After all, Abraham was not complacent about God. He paid a heavy price for his faith and beliefs. He dedicated his life to it and was ready to die for God. Why did he take upon himself the cause of saving Sodom and Gomorrah?

Because Abraham's faith was not about himself, it was about God. All people are God's children and Abraham could not tolerate the death of any of God's creatures. When you love God, you love what your beloved loves, and God loves His creations.

## 6. Inspire Others

So, by his example, Abraham taught his children to love all of God's creations. He also taught them to educate others and to inspire them to follow God's law.

Abraham was committed to God, and this commitment meant that he was committed to God's children – to educate and inspire them to follow God's law. And when someone was corrupt, Abraham taught him with compassion how to repair his ways.

Faith in God is faith in the human race created in the Divine Image.

Faith in God is about repair and transformation, not about destruction.

True, the end result was that Sodom and Gomorrah had no redeeming features and were so corrupt that they essentially destroyed themselves. Nevertheless, the Torah documents in protracted detail, Abraham's attempt to save them. Why would the Torah tell us of this attempt if it was futile?

The answer is: To teach us the nature of true faith – as modeled by Abraham. True faith means you do not passively accept destruction even of the evildoers. True faith dictates that you pray and pray, that you beseech and implore God to preserve all your fellow human beings.

## 7. Welcome Strangers

Abraham's message of faith and love is demonstrated in another incident, at the beginning of this week's Torah portion.

There we read that God appeared to Abraham, and in middle of their chat, Abraham suddenly saw three strangers approaching. And he ran to greet them.

Was that rude or what? God comes to visit, and Abraham does not hesitate to turn away from Him to greet some wanderers?

The lesson is clear:

Faith in God extends to loving other people, regardless of their background and similarity to you. Indeed, these three strangers appeared at first glance to be pagans, infidels! Yet, he greeted them knowing that welcoming strangers was the best way of welcoming God.

Had Abraham remained with God and ignored the strangers, he would have embraced God in a selfish way – only for himself. By greeting the guests he greeted God in a more powerful way – through greeting God’s own beloved creations.

In a cold room you can warm yourself by donning a fur coat, which warms you but no one else. Or you can light a furnace, and then warm everyone in the room. Faith is not about you alone, it is about everyone around you as well.

## 8. Temper Your Passion

Abraham was the epitome of love and faith.

Precisely because faith is so passionate and potent a force, it can be very destructive when not driven – and tempered – by love.

Ishmael, his son, was “wild” – that is, he inherited the wild and powerful passion of faith. And that’s exactly why, of all people, Ishmael was in such critical need of humility and suspension of self – to ensure that his passion was channeled in a Godly and not in a destructive way.

Secure faith in God does not require you to destroy anyone that does not believe as you do. Secure faith in God is the absolute dedication to inspire.

God did not tell Abraham to destroy his son Ishmael. On the contrary, He promised him that he will be a great nation. Indeed, Ishmael’s journeys are documented in the Torah – how God was with him, protected him and blessed him.

However, this happened only after Abraham listened to his wife Sarah and sent Ishmael away from their home. Ishmael would become a great nation under God, but only when he clearly recognized his boundaries.

Love is distorted when there are no boundaries. Love requires discipline – and only then is it true love, for only then does it foster humility instead of arrogance.<sup>9</sup>

Sending Ishmael away from Isaac's home was Abraham's ultimate act of love, and one that would allow Ishmael to become a great nation.

Faith is absolute, but that does not preclude diversity – different people, different nations, serving God each in their own way. Abraham taught faith and love, but he also taught that we all must serve God in our unique way, and that we should inspire others to do so with compassion.

## 9. Kabbalistic Insight

In a way, the need to separate between Isaac and Ishmael reflects the struggle between two approaches to faith and co-existence, as explained by Kabbalah.

Kabbalah (and Hassidic literature derived from it) teaches that Ishmael represents wild passion (*chesed*), while Isaac represents its opposite, strict discipline (*gevurah*). The discipline is necessary to balance and channel the passion.

Each of us – both the Jews and Muslims – would do well to ask ourselves today: How would our forefather Abraham react to our attitudes and beliefs? Would he be proud of our behavior?

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<sup>9</sup> See Tanya, *Iggeret HaKodesh* ch. 2.

## 10. Call to Action

So when faced with the troubling questions brought up by today's realities, what can you do? I suggest the following:

- Examine your attitudes to people of different faith – where do they need adjusting?
- Ask yourself – would Abraham be applaud or question your attitudes and actions?
- Reach out to people with different backgrounds than your own, and have a discussion about faith.
- Emulate Abraham by inviting guests to your home.
- Review whether your faith helps you to inspire others or to criticize others.