



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Lech Lecha

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 16, 2010

Lech Lecha

Two Sermons

1) Self Discovery, Page 1

2) Abraham Today, Page 13



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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Bereishit > Lech Lecha > Self Discovery

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ABSTRACT

We all have experienced the frustration of an aborted plan, an unfulfilled dream or an unrealized aspiration. What is the single most important factor in fulfilling our goals and aspirations? Usually we hear that the key is to keep the end in mind – define the *destination* and make sure to direct all effort in that direction. But how often do we set our sights and embark on the journey, only to end up going nowhere? In truth the secret to all true movement and growth is not looking ahead, but freeing ourselves from our pasts that keep us trapped and impede our forward progress.

In this week’s Torah reading, we read about the first journey ever taken – which is really the journey of each one of our lives. God tells Abraham: “Go to yourself, away from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”¹

This is very strange because when you tell someone to travel, you specify the destination in detail, but you don’t describe over and over again the point of departure. After all, the traveler knows where he/she is leaving from. Yet, when God instructs Abraham, He focuses entirely on the place to leave, and with three – seemingly redundant – descriptions: from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house.” But when it comes to the destination, God vaguely says “go to the land that I will show you.”

In these words, God is giving Abraham and us the guaranteed formula and method to succeed in our journeys and achieve our goals: “Go on a journey of self-discovery. Leave behind anything that might hold you back. And then I will

¹ Genesis 12:1.

show you the landscape of your divine soul – the true you.”
To fulfill our objectives each of us must leave three different
comfort zones that trap us from growing.

THE ART OF SELF DISCOVERY: HOW TO ACHIEVE OUR GOALS

1. Introduction

This week’s Torah reading is the primer for self-discovery, containing the secret to achieve our highest goals. It begins with the words *Lech lecha*, “Go to yourself...” But how are we to know where we are going if we don’t know who we are, where we came from, why we are here, and where we are headed.

As children we have all asked this question, “Where did I come from?” Right? It is such a frequently-asked question that it has become great fodder for jokes. Like:

When a little boy asked his parents, “Where did I come from?” they knew the moment had arrived. They were well prepared. They took him into the living room, got out the encyclopedia and several other books, and explained all they thought he should know about attraction, affection, love, and reproduction. Then they both sat back and smiled contentedly.

“Does that answer your question?” the father asked.

“Not really,” the boy said. “Ben said he came from Detroit. I want to know where I came from.”

Jokes aside, the most creative answer I’ve heard a parent give to that question was related by actor Kirk Douglas in his autobiography *Ragman’s Son*. When little Kirk – whose real name was Issur Danielovitch Demsky – asked his mother, Bryna, she spun a story that told him he was someone truly special. This is how he tells it:

I arrived on this earth in a beautiful gold box delicately carved with fruits and flowers and suspended from heaven by thin silver strands. My mother was in the kitchen baking bread one sunny winter morning, when she thought she saw something outside. She rubbed the frost from a spot on the window, peered, and saw a beautiful gold box shimmering in the snow ... She rushed into the yard, opened the gold box ... and there I was. A beautiful baby boy! Naked and happy and smiling. She picked me up, very carefully, and holding me close to her bosom to keep me warm, brought me into the house.

And that's how I was born. I know it's true, because my mother told me so.

When I first heard this story, my concern was for the gold box.

-“But Ma, what about the box? What happened to it?”

-“I don't know, when I looked out the window again, it was gone.”

-“But Ma, why didn't you grab the box and keep it?”

-“Son, when I found you, I was so happy that I couldn't think about anything else.”

I was disappointed that my mother had let the beautiful gold box disappear. But I was also very happy, because I was more important to my mother than even a beautiful gold box with silver strings attached to it, going all the way to heaven. From then on, I always knew that I would be somebody.

That's how Kirk Douglas begins the story of his life which included many triumphs but also many missteps before - late in life - he began his journey of self-discovery that led him to reconnect with his Jewish roots. And as he tells it in the sequel, *Climbing the Mountain*, the map was always in the Torah.

2. The Story of Our Lives

The sequence of the Torah contains the drama of our lives.

Act One is ... the beginning. Life commences with the statement that God created all of existence. In other words, the universe is not here by accident; it has purpose and design. And man's mission is to tend God's home. But the first human beings lose sight of their mission. They eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The world then goes into a free fall, generation after generation wandering farther away from its calling. Finally, humanity spirals into a society dominated by corruption and greed.

Act Two ... God sends a flood to cleanse the corrupt world and allow for global renewal.

Act Three ... the process of rebuilding begins first feebly with Noah, then with Abraham, who manages to reverse the fall that took place in the Garden of Eden. He searches and, little-by-little, discovers his mission and that of all people of the earth. He then commits his life and the life of his family to forever embrace this mission, and never let go.

In so doing, he profoundly alters history. And the world has not been the same since.

3. What Did Abraham Discover?

What did Abraham discover? What tools did he acquire? How was he able to find and then maintain his mission in life?

Studying Abraham's life can glean invaluable lessons to help us face the struggles of our own lives today.

So let's begin:

In this week's Torah reading, God tells Abraham: "Go to yourself, away

from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."²

Very strange command. When you offer someone directions, the most important thing is to clearly describe the destination. You must specify the destination so the traveler knows *where to go*. "Go to this and this country, this and this city, this and this street, this and this address." The point of departure is not vital, because the traveler knows where he or she is leaving from, but needs to be informed where to go.

Yet, when God instructs Abraham, He focuses entirely on the place to leave, and with three – seemingly redundant – descriptions: from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house." But when it comes to the destination, God vaguely says "go to the land that I will show you."

Is Abraham supposed to go east, west, north or south, and then to which country and which city? But the directions are, in fact, quite precise when you understand the intention behind them.

In these words, God is giving Abraham and us the guaranteed formula and method to succeed in our journeys and achieve our goals: "Go on a journey of self-discovery. Leave behind anything that might hold you back. And then I will show you the landscape of your divine soul – the true you."

If you want to discover your higher self, this is the map. But you cannot begin the journey if you are not prepared to leave behind the mind-set that is tying you down. The mind-set called subjectivity.

4. Subjectivity and Bias

Subjectivity is the most blinding influence in our lives. Specifically, three subjective forces in each of our lives cloud our vision and, as a result, our ability to seek out, recognize and embrace our true calling.

² Genesis 12:1.

- “Your land” implies social conformity and peer pressure, which affect our standards and mind-sets
- “Your birthplace” implies our inherent bias and self-love, which distorts our views and judgments
- “Your father’s house” implies parental attitudes, which shape and influence our lives

Subjectivity is not a negative thing *per se*. It is the driving force that compels us to protect ourselves and our loved ones, to excel and to demonstrate our personal strengths. But subjectivity can adversely affect us when we don’t acknowledge its existence – when it becomes bias – and we allow it to blind our judgment.

One night a fellow comes home and sees his neighbor looking for his keys out in the yard. “Let me help you find them,” says the friendly neighbor. “Where do you recall losing them?” The man points to a spot 50 yards away. “So why are you searching for the keys *here*, when you dropped them *there*?!” The man replies: “Because here is where the light is shining.”

Our natural bias often has us looking everywhere except at the root of the real problem.

Bias blinds our judgment says the Book of Deuteronomy: “[It] blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the speech of the just.”³

Why are they called “wise” and “just” if mere bias can blind their eyes and distort their tongues? Because that is precisely the power of bias – it blinds everyone, even the eyes of the wise. This distortion can become so grotesque, that the wisdom can end up being used to justify a subjective, unjust cause. Unfortunately, examples of this abound.

All growth comes from an awareness of one’s own subjectivity and the willingness – really, the courage – to climb higher and see a broader

³Deuteronomy 16:19.

horizon. Being stubbornly locked in one's own subjective views, just to "feel good" or "feel right" or out of pride, basically cuts off any possible movement.

5. Sources of Subjectivity

Now, as I said, the Torah identifies three primary sources of our own subjectivity. Let's look at them more closely:

"A person is naturally close to himself," the Talmud states,⁴ meaning, that by nature we are born with certain self-love that blinds us to some extent to our own shortcomings. We see flaws in others more acutely than we see our own, even if they are worse. It's much easier to give someone else advice than to follow it yourself.

This inherent subjectivity can cause us to be self-righteous, protective and unwilling to acknowledge mistakes. Personal subjectivity also includes, of course, the particular shape of our inherent personalities.

Second, we naturally assume the subjective attitudes of our parents, for good or for bad. Even if we jettison them later, they shape us in our early impressionable years. And they do become etched in our psyches. I mean, by the time you are old enough to start thinking on your own, you have already been shaped and hardened by your parents, and most of the big decisions (like what type of education you should have, what if any religion, what exposure) have already been made for you, again for good or for bad.

And finally, social mores constantly pressure us to conform. Human nature is such that we want to be accepted and respected by our peers. But what if the standards of our peers are petty and superficial? Then that becomes a force that shapes and informs us. Every society has its subjective standards that are always affecting us. In our contemporary society, the mass media and the world-wide-web streaming images at us

⁴Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 9b.

24/7 is a potent force contributing many facets that shape our self-image.

Add together all these three subjective forces, and you can just imagine the distortions that you may have in your own self-perception. Can you know who you really are in face of all these shaping influences?! Perhaps the person you think you are is a product of your parents and society? Throw into this combination your own inherent subjectivity, and you have a real confused mess.

6. Who Are you Really?

A Jew ends up sleeping in the same train compartment as a general of the Russian czar's army. He tells the conductor to wake him up at 4 a.m. so he can get off at his stop. He is awakened at the proper time, yet in the dark he mistakenly puts on the general's clothes instead of his own.

When he gets home, his wife asks him if everything is all right. He looks in the mirror and answers, "It seems like the conductor woke up the general instead of me."

How can you distinguish between who you *really* are and who you think you are based on all these subjective forces?

That's why God's first commandment to Abraham and to each of us is: "Go to yourself, away from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

"Go to yourself" to discover the real you. But this is only possible when you leave the subjective influences of your personal bias, and that of your parents and society. Only then can you go "to the land that I will show *you*" - your true self.

7. Breaking Out

Think about the first time you left the comfort of your home and went to school or summer camp. Although it was initially disconcerting, that is where you experienced your first real accomplishments.

As long as you stay in the shadow of the powerful influences in your life you can never know your true self, and inevitably you can never truly excel.

To find our true calling life – our unique mission – we first need to know how to free ourselves from the shackles of our present state. Why?

Because our mission is ingrained inside the very fiber of our being. We need not travel elsewhere to find ourselves and our calling. It's right there inside. But in order for it to emerge we need to strip away the subjective layers that don't allow our true self and our true mission to emerge.

Michelangelo was once asked how he sculpts those beautiful cherubs. He replied: "I saw the angels trapped in the marble. So I carved and set them free."

Imagine a flower growing in a weed-choked garden. Do you not need to cut away the weeds to let it truly bloom?

By no means does this imply that all the subjective influences in our lives are like "weeds." Many of these influences may be powerful forces for good that have helped and continue to help shape our characters. Additionally, as I mentioned at the outset, subjectivity is also very much part of our unique individuality and self-preservation.

However, these subjective forces can become like "weeds" when left unchecked, and more importantly, when they control our lives and decisions. They become impediments when they blind us from seeing "outside of the box" and seduce us to remain in our "comfort zone."

After getting married, the great Hassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, was living in poverty with his new wife. His wealthy in-laws wrote to him suggesting that if the new couple came to live in them, all their needs would be provided, and the young Rabbi could freely and comfortably pursue his studies and spiritual travels. He replied: “The most comfortable place for a child is in its mother’s womb, where all is provided for and the child is protected from the elements. Why then does the child leave the womb upon birth? Because there’s one problem: the place [inside the womb] has become too small...”

8. Stages of Life

Life has many stages. In the early stages of life we depend exclusively on the protection and nurturing of family and home. Even later in life it is healthy and necessary to maintain the love and the connection. Family, friends and society are a powerful source of support. But then comes the stage of *Lech lecha*, the need to go to yourself, to find yourself – when you must go out of the “womb,” cut the “umbilical cord” and discover and actualize your true self and your mission – and fly with it.

This does not just happen when we are young. We all go through many journeys of self-discovery in our lives. Most are fine-tuning adjustments to our course, but some are more dramatic.

We have all met or heard of people who drastically switched careers in mid-stream. A lawyer who became a best-selling author. John Grisham. A rabbi who became a famous comedian. Jackie Mason. They heard a call – go to yourself – and found they could fulfill their life’s mission better in another way. No wonder they excelled.

9. Call to Action

In summary: The secret to all growth – the power to moving forward in life – means not as much defining the destination (though that is important) as it means leaving our pasts behind.

This is the single most important factor in fulfilling our goals and aspirations, though usually we hear that the key is to keep the end in mind – define your destination and make sure to direct all your effort in that direction. But how often do we set our sights and embark on the journey, only to end up going nowhere? How often have we experienced the frustration of an aborted plan, an unfulfilled dream or an unrealized aspiration?

In truth, the secret to all true movement and growth – and the message of *Lech lecha* – is not so much looking ahead, but looking at the here and now, and freeing ourselves from the subjective forces of our upbringing that keep us trapped and impede our forward progress.

The message of *Lech lecha* is that the divine mission upon which humanity embarked in the beginning of Genesis – the mission that was renewed after the flood by Noah – is accessible to us all if we free ourselves from the subjective narrowness of our initial perspectives.

How do we free ourselves?

By following the map of Torah.

The great gift and blessing of Torah is that it provides us with a divine blueprint how to live our lives, offering us standards by which we can measure and contrast our subjective and natural tendencies.

Most of us can't do it alone. It helps to consult a trusted mentor or friend, who can offer a more objective view on our choices.

By all means we should utilize the strengths we've gained from our home and society, but they should be springboards for our growth. So ... get ready, get set, and spring.

What is heartening about this is that you have the answers you need inside of you. Your unique mission statement is embedded within you, waiting to be released.

Making a *Lech lecha* move and moving away from the subjective forces in your life – all the things that you think are important today – is the key to discovering your true calling. It will help you look at your life in a new way – at your personality, opportunities, people and places – and know how to realize the unique mission for which you, and only you, were sent to earth in the first place.

No small feat.



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ABSTRACT

What would the man who gave us monotheism and embraced a life of virtue, justice and kindness say about religion in our times? Would he even recognize it? How would Abraham react if he entered a modern-day synagogue? How would he respond to a synagogue squabble between his great great-grandchildren?

And if he went out into the larger society and witnessed abusive situations? Would he intervene or mind his own business? Or would he break down in tears?

Whatever he would do, Abraham would certainly not retreat. He would not choose the easier path of protecting his own reputation and give up on our generation. If Abraham prayed for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, he surely would pray for us, and he would do all he possibly could to help us re-discover the path he had forged.

This is a two-part sermon imagining Abraham’s interaction with today’s world:

Part I: Would He Recognize His Children?

Part II: Would He Intervene?

It contains some extremely relevant guidelines for dealing with distressing situations we encountered often in today’s wounded world – guidelines based on the Torah’s universal values and the extraordinarily sensitive approach to dealing with the human condition epitomized by our great patriarch Abraham.

PART I: WOULD HE RECOGNIZE HIS CHILDREN?

1. Synagogue Squabbles

It might be a joke, and then again, it is probably a true story:

There was once a rabbi, who was ripping his hair out because, every time it came to saying the *Shema*, half of his congregation wanted to sit, and the other half wanted to stand, and each side would shout for the other to get with the program.

Thinking that he needed to resolve this issue somehow, the rabbi tracked down one of the original founders of the synagogue in a nursing home, and went there to determine – once and for all – what was the original custom of the founding members. He explained the problem and asked the old man:

-“Did you all stand for the *Shema*?”

-“No, that’s not the way it was.”

-“So you all sat for the *Shema*?”

-“No, that’s not the way it was.”

-“What do you mean? Just *how* was it? You have to help me out here, because they are all killing each other.”

-“*That’s* the way it was.”

Funny, but synagogue squabbles are a real and on-going problem.

2. Leaving an Impression on the Young

A colleague related to me that, while on vacation, he went into a synagogue unknown to him for the evening prayers. In middle of the service he noticed one congregant behaving rudely to another. He was about to say something, when a man standing next to him whispered: “These two guys have been fighting as long as I am here. Don’t get involved.”

“No big thing,” you may think. “People everywhere have their petty fights.” But children witness these exchanges, and if they later turn off to synagogue attendance, this may well be a reason why.

Having witnessed profound inconsistencies between people’s outward appearance (as devout individuals) and their actual behavior, having seen how a person can be obsessively committed to certain rituals and simultaneously be utterly unrefined and callous, these kids have said, “I’m going to India. Judaism is not for me.”

When religious individuals are judgmental and condescending, playing “holier than thou,” when religious individuals stoop to pettiness and greed, when religious individuals engage in divisive behavior or just plain primitive acrimony, they put a black mark on Judaism in the eyes of these children.

All these discrepancies and contradictions – between what Judaism teaches and what Jews do – have contributed to much cynicism and rejection of religious life by many young people.

3. Not a Blanket Indictment

Obviously, this must be qualified by two important facts:

The first is that this by no means is a blanket indictment of religious individuals, many of whom are gentle, sensitive souls, continuously working to refine themselves precisely due to their beliefs. Some of the most noble, cultivated and spiritual humans on earth are people of faith.

The second is that a system should never be judged by any one member or even a group of members. Religion establishes a particular standard for human virtue and justice. No person on this planet can live up to the highest standard. But the committed life is one that always *aspires* to reach upward, all the while recognizing that there are always greater horizons to conquer.

The fact that a few individuals may be hypocrites and behave in embarrassing ways does not reflect on the system as a whole, only on the reality that the system does not preclude foolish people making bad choices and behaving inappropriately or immaturely. Just like, for example, a scientist falsifying data does not reflect on all scientists and all of science.

Yet, those few (or a bit more than few) individuals who glaringly behave contrary to the religious standard do give all of religion a black eye – and one that endures.

This is why some critics choose to reject religion in face of all its abuses. But I submit that the healthier approach is not to “throw out the baby with the bathwater,” but retrace the steps and revisit the roots of healthy religion and faith, prior to the time it became distorted.

4. What Would Abraham Say?

So, in disturbing times like these, when corrupt religion and the worst side of human nature rears its ugly head, I would like to take us all on a journey back nearly four millennia – to the birth of religion.

What would the man who gave us monotheism and embraced a life of virtue, justice and kindness say about religion in our times? Would he even recognize it? How would Abraham react if he entered a modern-day synagogue? Would he be willing to join the board of trustees of one of our religious institutions? And how would he respond to a synagogue squabble between his great great-grandchildren?

Would he not break down in tears?

But the bigger question is whether he would even walk into a 21st century synagogue? Would he be comfortable there? And which one would he choose?

I think that Abraham would be quite disturbed by any house of God that has been turned into a bureaucracy. I doubt that Abraham would

be comfortable in any synagogue that did not welcome every individual equally, where every soul felt at home.

5. Praying in the Fields

Perhaps that is why some of the great sages and mystics would go out into the fields to recite certain prayers (such as those welcoming the Shabbat). They were following the example of Isaac, who “went out to meditate/pray in the field.”¹ Isaac must have learned that from someone before him – undoubtedly his father, Abraham.² Some prayer is perhaps most conducive to the fields, with no distractions from man-made structures and institutions. Even the structures where prayer services are generally held are required to have windows that allow the congregants to see beyond the structure, to heaven.

I venture that if he entered a modern house of prayer, Abraham would stand by the window.

A story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement, that he once ran out of a relatively empty synagogue, complaining that the place was too packed, leaving him no room to pray. When his students wondered what he meant, the Baal Shem Tov explained:

“The Zohar says that love and awe are like the two wings of a bird that carry our soaring prayers to heaven. In this place the prayers were recited without any feeling at all, and so were all grounded, like trapped birds with broken wings, unable to soar.”

The synagogue was so stuffed with dead prayers, there was no room for the Baal Shem Tov...

Abraham would sense the same thing. He’d be looking for the soaring prayers and the airborne spirits.

¹ Genesis 24:63.

² Commentaries reconcile this with the law stating that one should pray in a structure – see *Tosafot Berochos* 34b. *Zohar Beshalach* 60a. *Mogen Avraham Orach Chaim* 90:6.

6. A Pioneer of Non-Conformity

Abraham was a pioneer of non-conformity. As we see in this week's Torah reading, he defied his family and his entire society, rejecting their paganism and charting a new course that would change history forever. No doubt that Abraham, as the first non-conformist, would be quite dismayed at how conformist religion has become, often stifling human spirit. And he would be down-right shocked to see how the Divine path that he initiated has been corrupted.

Abraham was a global thinker with a universal vision to lead people toward personal and collective redemption. He clearly would find it odd that some Jews today have become so parochial and divisive, focusing solely on their personal interests, and often forgetting that God gave us a universal blueprint to improve the larger world.

Abraham did not seclude himself in study, prayer and Divine devotion. He opened his home to all, and he made it his life's work to not only teach his children the path of kindness and justice, but to inspire everyone he came in contact with. Why did his descendants, Abraham would surely wonder, abandon his confident and proactive attitude in favor of an approach that is so defensive and tentative?

Abraham was a passionate, revolutionary soul who changed the world around him, instead of letting the world change him. What happened, Abraham would ask, that today so many people of faith lack passion and soul? Why are there so many mechanical people, who perform mitzvahs by rote? And why is it that religious people today are so affected by contemporary society and the pursuit of money, so that the material world is shaping them instead of the other way around? And where oh where are the revolutionaries?

7. What Would Abraham Do?

Once he gave vent to his feelings of dismay, what would Abraham do?

I suggest that being Abraham, he would not retreat. He would not choose the easier path of protecting his own reputation and give up on our generation. If Abraham prayed for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, he surely would pray for us and do all he possibly could to help us free ourselves of our own lethargy.

And Abraham would certainly try to find merit in us, his grandchildren. He would see that despite all the persecutions and genocides, despite centuries of oppression, we are still standing. Though we are weak at times, inconsistent, and devoid of passion, we are still trying.

But Abraham would not suffice with finding merit in our lives. He would engage us, challenge us, rouse and empower us – he would fire us up to cease acting like victims and take control of our lives and our destinies. He would imbue us with profound confidence (or better yet: ignite the confidence that lies dormant in our souls) to go out and change the environment in which we live.

8. Abraham In You and Me

Yes, indeed, just imagine how Abraham would turn over our world! The thought alone can make one shudder... with pride.

Interesting to envision how a man who lived over 3700 years ago would react to our world and what he would do to improve our condition.

Then again, perhaps there is an Abraham here with us today. Perhaps that Abraham is inside of you and me ...

PART II: WOULD HE INTERVENE?**9. Abraham Out and About**

[And] what would Abraham do if he went out roaming in our wider society? What would Abraham do if he was sitting in a restaurant with a friend of mine witnessing the following scenario:

Eating dinner in New York City one night, my friend noticed a family at a nearby table. “How sweet,” he thought, “a nice couple taking out their three children on a beautiful night.” And then he noticed something very disturbing: The father was berating his young son, maybe 9 or 10 year old, and then suddenly gave him a resounding slap across the face. My friend tried to ignore the scene, but the obvious tension around him made that very difficult, especially when the wife and husband began to argue. With every ensuing outburst it became more and more obvious that this was not an anomaly; this was a highly dysfunctional family. It didn’t require any psychological training to see that these children were living in an abusive environment – with an angry father and a weak, helpless mother. My friend could feel the bitterness, rage and fear emanating from their table in the restaurant. He had no doubt that these innocent children were subject to an ongoing assault in their own home.

My friend did not know what to do. He felt unable to sit there just blithely chewing his steak (or whatever delicacy was on his plate), indifferent to the pain being heaped upon these vulnerable children.

Should he approach the father and speak with him? My friend was sure that the man would not welcome the gesture – a perfect stranger intervening in his personal business. But should that even matter? Should he sit by quietly while witnessing offensive behavior? Or perhaps his meddling would only provoke the man further, and his family would suffer for it later? And after all, what can one say to an abuser in few minutes that will in any way help him and his children?

Then again, my friend thought, is that a reason to just turn a blind eye fully cognizant of a crime being perpetrated? Should he be speaking to

the wife and the children? Or alert authorities to the potential risk? Would that be ethical when he had no real proof of abuse? After all, he did not know this family. He had no first-hand knowledge what their home life was like; he was just making judgments based on his instincts and observations. But what if he was right and he could prevent some damage?

What would you do? What would Abraham do?

10. To Intervene Or Not?

The same question can be asked about every form of inappropriate behavior that we may witness: What is the right thing to do – to intervene or not to intervene?

You witness a co-worker stealing money from your company? Do you ignore him, report him or confront him? You know that your neighbor is abusing his spouse. What action, if any, should you take?

The Torah lays out various guidelines as to our responsibility not to stand by silently and ignore the perpetration of a crime, as well as warning others of potential danger. We also have an obligation to reprimand a sinful person – first privately and gently, and if that does not help, publicly.

But applying these rules requires a case-by-case analysis. How, for instance, do these doctrines apply to the restaurant incident? If your intervention will not help solve, and possibly even exacerbate, the problem, do you intervene? If you are not positive that a crime has been committed, can you pass judgment? After all, there is a due process that allows people the right of innocence until proven guilty. Can you act based on your “sense” that there is a serious problem?

Here are some guidelines based on the Torah’s universal values and the extraordinarily sensitive approach to dealing with the human condition epitomized by Abraham:

11. Abraham's Loving Approach

First and foremost, Abraham showed exceptional kindness to everyone he encountered – whether they were friends or strangers, family or visitors, allies or foes. Abraham even showed compassion and prayed for the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The first thing Abraham did was open his tent on all four sides – welcoming guests from whatever geographical or ideological direction they came. The Talmud relates that after graciously feeding his guests, he would ask them kindly to bless God for their meal. Only if they refused, the Talmud adds, he would tell them to pay for the food:

[The Book of Genesis states:] “Abraham planted a tree in Beer-sheba, and there he called on the name of God, Lord of the Universe.”³ About this Resh Lakish said: “Read not ‘and he called’ but ‘and he caused to call,’ thereby teaching that our father Abraham caused the mouth of the passer-by to utter God’s name. How? After [travelers] had eaten and drunk, they would stand up to bless him, but he would say to them, ‘Did you eat my food? You ate of that which belongs to the God of the Universe. Thank, praise and bless Him who spoke and the world came into being.’”⁴

12. Correcting with Love

The axiom is that only if you love your fellow human beings can you bring them to love God. The best way to help inspire them to improve their ways is by showing love for them. Not as a gimmick or maneuver to warm them up so that you can rebuke them, but simply, with genuine, sincere love – demonstrating that you really care.

³ Genesis 21:33.

⁴ Talmud Sotah 10b.

What really lays at the heart of the resistance anyone has to hearing words of correction or rebuke? Pride, fear of being judged, shame, exposure.

And conversely, what truly motivates us to try correcting a wrongful situation? Often arrogance, judgment, a sense of superiority and one-upmanship. It may also be that we enjoy putting others down. If our words of rebuke are condescending, rest assured that they will not have an effect.

If, however, our words are coming from a heartfelt place, and we sincerely care about those we are correcting, then they may be open to hear what we have to say.

Too much criticism is showered on people with wrong or ill intentions. For some strange reason, humans often enjoy criticizing others – whether it comes from insecurity, or makes them feel better about themselves, it’s just an ugly trait that people are capable of.

The single most important prerequisite before intervening in any situation is our own selfless and loving attitude, and our genuine concern.

13. Abraham’s Way

With that in mind, here is what I think Abraham would have done had he been in the restaurant with my friend. He would have called the abusive father to the side and said:

“You have such beautiful children. Such gentle souls. God must have really loved you to bestow you with such a gift to cherish and protect. It hurts me, in the deepest possible way, to see that these children have provoked you to raise your voice to them.”

Even if the father had told him to mind his own business, Abraham would have persisted with tears in his eyes: “I know it may not be my business, but please hear what I am saying. Your children are just so, so pure, so delicate ... like you once were ...”

Would that have helped? It definitely would not have hurt. It might have opened up a hardened heart – a heart made that way years ago when its owner was himself a victim of similar abuse.

And Abraham, being Abraham, would surely have prayed, connecting with the soul of the damaged man, and drawing him out toward greater self-awareness, sensitivity and knowledge that God’s love heals all.

14. Call to Action

Let us today resolve to emulate Abraham as much as possible. Let us study his way and try to be like him. Let us open our homes to our fellows and show them loving kindness wherever and whenever possible. And let us pray for the healing of this broken and wounded world of which we are a part. Amen.