



BEREISHIT

Lech Lecha

Abraham Today: Would He Recognize Us?

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ABRAHAM TODAY: WOULD HE RECOGNIZE US?

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.

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 G-d 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.

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 G-d 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

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.

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. You May Know the Psalm: I Know the Shepherd (Story)

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 G-d 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 Beersheba, and there he called on the name of G-d, 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 G-d’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 G-d of the Universe. Thank, praise and bless Him who spoke and the world came into being.’”⁴

³ Genesis 21:33.

⁴ Talmud *Sotah* 10b.

12. Correcting with Love

The axiom is that only if you love your fellow human beings can you bring them to love G-d. 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.

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. G-d 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 G-d'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.

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