



BEREISHIT

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NY Terror Attack: Islam and Infidels

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NEW YORK TERROR ATTACK: HOW TO TREAT INFIDELS

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

ABSTRACT

The latest tragic terrorist attack in New York City, killing 8 and injuring 11, brings back to the fore the simmering forces haunting the world for the last few decades: Muslim extremism and the dangers of distorted religious passions

As soon as we heard that the attacker, Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, was shouting Allahu Akbar, everyone knew what those chilling words mean: Yet another fanatic murdering innocent people in the name of his god; wreaking destruction against what these extremists call “infidels” and the “decadent West.”

This latest atrocity, among the many past ones, reignites the fears many of us have of religion and Islam in particular. It sparks the debate: What should our attitude be to this obscene religiosity and what should be done? What does Judaism tell us about relating to people of other faiths – the so-called “infidels”?

Eerily, these issues are rooted in this week’s Torah portion, where we read the saga of Abraham, Ishmael – the ancestor of the Arab/Muslim world – and Isaac, a story which reflects the ongoing events of our times.

In some ways one can say that Abraham got us into this mess in the first place. 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 Abraham 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 G-d?
- How can we change our destiny?
- Does G-d 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?

The story of Abraham provides us with clarity and direction as we face the troubling issues of our times.

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?

1. Terror in New York

Our hearts and prayers go out to all the victims and their families of this week's tragic terrorist attack in New York City, which killed 8 and injured 11. May they be consoled and may the injured be completely healed.

This latest atrocity brings back to the fore the simmering forces haunting the world for the last few decades: Muslim extremism and the dangers of distorted religious passions

As soon as we heard that the attacker, Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, was shouting Allahu Akbar, everyone knew what those chilling words mean: Yet another fanatic murdering innocent people in the name of his god; wreaking destruction against what these extremists call "infidels" and the "decadent West."

This latest flagrant brutality, among the many past ones, reignites the fears many of us have of religion and Islam in particular. It sparks the debate: What should our attitude be to this obscene religiosity and what should be done? Many are alarmed by the growing Muslim population and influence, wary of Muslim radicalism, with its violent stance toward the West, which 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 how to treat people who some consider as so-called "infidels"?

2. This Week's Parsha: The Roots of Today's Events

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- Does G-d share in our suffering, or does He remain aloof, beyond it all?
- How can we go on the offensive against terrorism?

¹ Genesis 17:5.

- What is the best antidote to fear?

We will discover that the story of Abraham on this week's Torah portion provides us with clarity and direction as we face the troubling issues of our times.

Here are some of the many insights that we might glean from it:

- Faith in G-d extends to loving other people, regardless of their background and similarity to you. Indeed, when three strangers interrupted Abraham's visit with G-d, 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 G-d.
- Faith is absolute, but that does not preclude diversity – different people, different nations, serving G-d each in their own way. Abraham taught faith and love, but he also taught that we all must serve G-d 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 G-d: "Shall the world's judge not do justice?!"

Let us go into a bit more detail.

3. 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]."²

To which the Midrash adds:

Why was he called Ishmael [meaning "G-d will listen"]? Because there will come a time when G-d will listen to the cry of the Nation [of Israel] bemoaning the deeds of the descendants of Ishmael ... And [G-d will do as the Book of Psalms³ promises:] "G-d will hear and answer."⁴

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

² Genesis 21:11

³ Psalms 55:20.

⁴ Midrash Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer ch. 32. Yalkut Mechiri Psalms 177.

4. 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.”⁵ 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 boy⁶ – mocked his brother, and Sarah insisted that Abraham send the elder boy away.

Abraham was very troubled by the prospect of casting out his first-born son, but G-d told him to not be distressed: “Do everything that Sarah tells you.”⁷ G-d 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 G-d's rescue of them in a time of need. The Torah concludes: “G-d 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.”⁸

5. 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 lessons that we learn from it:

Abraham, the man of absolute faith, passed on his passionate faith and commitment to G-d 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-

⁵ Genesis 16:2.

⁶ Genesis 16:12

⁷ Genesis 21:12.

⁸ Genesis 21:20-21.

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?

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

6. Love All of G-d's Creations

Abraham taught his children to love others at all times.

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

“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?”⁹

G-d tells Abraham: “If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire place for their sake.” Abraham continues to negotiate: what if there are 45 innocent people. G-d agrees not to destroy them for the sake of the 45. What about, 40, 30, 20, 10? In each case G-d 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 G-d to destroy them, but even when G-d Himself *wants* to destroy them, Abraham defends them and demands of G-d: “Shall the world's judge not do justice?!”

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

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

⁹ Genesis 18:23-26.

7. Inspire Others

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

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

Faith in G-d is faith in the human race created in the Divine Image.

Faith in G-d 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 G-d to preserve all your fellow human beings.

8. 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 G-d appeared to Abraham as he is healing from his circumcision¹⁰, and in middle of their chat, something very strange happens: 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 G-d to greet and welcome these men as guests in his home.

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

The Talmud deduces from this that “welcoming guests is greater than welcoming G-d,” because Abraham turned away from G-d to greet his guests.¹¹

¹⁰ We derive from this the mitzvah of visiting the sick, *bikur cholim*.

¹¹ *Talmud, Shabbat* 127a.

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 G-d 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 G-d! And He is making a rare, first-time appearance!

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

So welcoming guests is welcoming G-d in a greater way than welcoming G-d directly.

The lesson is clear:

Faith in G-d 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 G-d.

Had Abraham remained with G-d and ignored the strangers, one could argue that it would have been due not to Abraham’s respect for G-d, but to a “religious selfishness.” He was embracing G-d in a selfish way – only for himself. By greeting the guests he greeted G-d in a more powerful way – through greeting G-d’s own beloved creations.

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

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.

9. 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 G-dly and not in a destructive way.

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

G-d 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 G-d 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 G-d, 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 arrogance¹². 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 G-d each in their own way. Abraham taught faith and love, but he also taught that we all must serve G-d in our unique way, and that we should inspire others to do so with compassion.

10. 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?

11. 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 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.
- Be proactive. And teach your children to do the same. Being passionately proactive is the best antidote to fear and the best way to meet any challenge.

¹² See Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh ch. 2.

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