

## Abraham – A Jewish Perspective

According to the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, the one God created the world and all that is in it. God is all good and God wishes only good for His creation. Man is the crowning glory of creation and especially for man, God wants only good. However, part of the very essence of man's being is free will. Man's free will is sacrosanct, never or almost never, to be violated by God. It is God's will that man's good be achieved through man's free will and not through its subversion.

God wants man to be uplifted and elevated. God wants man to be pulled out of the abyss of depravity and vulgarity. God wants man to live here on earth in peace and justice with his fellow man. For man God wants salvation and redemption – but God will not bestow all this upon man on a silver platter. Man must work for it himself.

What God will do is to aid man to redeem himself. God will enter into a partnership with man, through which he will guide and direct human beings toward self-redemption. God prepares the blueprint for redemption; man is the engineer who puts it into effect by actualizing his potential.

This partnership is called in Hebrew *Brit*, usually translated into English as covenant. God enters into a covenant with man, and He does so through the selection of Abraham. At this august moment in human history, the seeds of the Jewish People are planted. Abraham is chosen to be a helper and companion of God through a dedicated effort of gradually enlightening the ignorant, ennobling the vulgar and coarse, revealing to man his great capability and leading him towards a great destiny.

Genesis 12:1 – 3

**1**Now the LORD said to Abram,                    “Go forth from your  
country,                    And from your relatives                    And from your  
father's house,                    To the land which I will show you;

**2**And I will make you a great nation,                    And I will bless  
you,                    And make your name great;                    And so you shall be  
a blessing;

**3**And I will bless those who bless you,                    And the one who  
curses you I will curse.                    And through you all the families of  
the earth will be blessed.”

All the peoples of the earth are to become blessed through Abraham. He is to be their teacher and role model, just as God is to be his teacher and role model.

Through Abraham, God's goodness, His grace, His message, His demands and His standards, will be brought to the world. It is God's hope and God's plan that through Abraham, all human beings will learn to partner with God to achieve *tikun olam*, which is Hebrew for making this world a better place, and making ourselves better people.

How is this to happen? By Abraham becoming a nation! He is to go forth from his birthplace and travel to the Land of Canaan, where he is to father a unique nation, and nation covenanted to God to serve as His avante garde in this world. The great nation of Abraham, later to be called the People of Israel, the Jewish People, are bound to God to help the Almighty to help all of us reach our glorious destiny. It is not Abraham as a solitary individual, but rather Abraham and his people, Abraham and his seed, his biological descendants for all generations who will become a vehicle for the bringing of blessing to all of humanity.

God's blueprint therefore, according to the Hebrew Bible, is for Abraham's children to constitute a nation that will serve as a light unto the nations, bringing to all the world a hope and a plan to lead us all towards a better world.

Genesis 17: 1a – 12a

**1**Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be perfect.

**2**"I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly."

**3**Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying,

**4**"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.

**5**"No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations....

**8**"I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

9 God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 “And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 “And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations.

So Abraham’s seed will be greatly multiplied by God. This is the great nation referred to earlier in Genesis 12. That great nation descended from the patriarch will be established in the Land of Canaan, the Land of Israel. Circumcision of all males of the nation at eight days of age will be a permanent sign of the divine covenant in their flesh. And yes, to this day, over 3000 years later, infants born to the Jewish People are ushered into the covenant through circumcision on the eight day of life. And in our generation, the Jewish People have merited to return once again to the land promised us by God, the Land of Israel.

Now to that momentous phrase, the ‘father of a multitude of nations’. Abraham is not only the biological father of the Jewish People; he is as well the potential spiritual father of the whole world. This phrase – the ‘father of a multitude of nations’, is to be understood as parallel to the phrase we saw in Genesis 12 – “Through you all the families of the world will be blessed’: The blessing will come upon them when they constitute themselves as children of Abraham by allowing him to be their father, when they learn from him and model his behavior.

And this explains why the phrase – ‘father of a multitude of nations’ is found in the context of the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish People: It is through the Jewish People that Abraham becomes the father of the multitude of nations. The Jewish People are Abraham’s representatives in the world. He can be the teacher of ethics and morality and human potential to all of humanity because he gives birth to a nation who will fulfill his mission of being an example to the world of all those wonderful behaviors and values. When the Jewish nation transmits Abraham’s values and teaches uprightness and models godliness, then all human beings are aided in their journey towards becoming spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham.

Now who was Abraham? Why was he chosen for this momentous task? Genesis chapter 18, verse 19 begins to give us an answer:

**19**“For I have chosen him, for he will command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice

Abraham was chosen because of his love and dedication to justice and righteousness. And that means that to become a son and daughter of Abraham is to emulate those values and behaviors.

But Abraham was also a man of mercy and lovingkindness. He endeavored with all his energy to save the men and women of Sodom and Gemora, even though they were sinners to the core. And he waited at the entrance of his tent for desert travelers to pass by so that he could welcome them into his humble abode. And when they arrived, he went to tremendous lengths to provide for their needs, despite the fact that they may have appeared to him as idolaters. Abraham loves people, no matter what their religion or beliefs or behavior. Abraham has faith in man. Deep faith in man.

But not only does the patriarch have faith in man, he also has unbounded faith in God. As we read in Genesis 12, God commands him to leave his homeland ... and he goes, despite having no idea what the future holds. He is promised by God that he will become a great nation, while he and his wife Sara get older and older and they remain barren. Abraham, despite the circumstances remains faithful. He hesitates and he questions, but still he remains faithful. And when the hoped for child is born and begins to grow up, and God commands him to sacrifice the boy on the altar, still Abraham remains obedient and faithful.

From a Jewish perspective, we are all, Jews, Christians and Muslims, children of Abraham. From the Jewish perspective, Jews are biological children of Abraham, whereas Christians and Muslims are grafted in as spiritual children of Abraham. The Jews are commanded to emulate the values and behaviors that guided the life of Abraham, and if not, they are wayward children. Christians and Muslims are spiritual children of Abraham, they are the multitude of nations for whom Abraham is their spiritual father, but only when they emulate the values and behaviors of Abraham. And when we all follow in the footsteps of Abraham, we bring God's truth and God's path to the world, and we become what we were meant to be, brothers and sisters, part of one family. Abraham our father brings us to God our father, the father of all of us.

But this universal family has had a rocky past. We have known fratricide again and again. For over a millennium, the children of Abraham have killed each other. The Jewish People has known terrible persecution at the hands of Christendom, and to a lesser degree, at the hands of Islam as well. It is not easy to forget. It is not easy to forgive. And to a large degree the hate and the contempt and the persecution and the bloodshed, has been religiously inspired. It has grown out of the interpretation of sacred Scripture.

In our generation has begun one of the greatest morally cleansing revolutions of all time – the re-articulation of Christian attitudes towards Judaism and the determination to put an end to the two millennia old theology of contempt towards Judaism and towards Jews (Greenberg page 36). In embarking upon this revolution Christianity has shown true godliness. Christianity has become a model of true repentance. But the task is not yet complete; it has really just begun. The religion of love must continue to uproot teachings of hate and theological contempt from its lexicon. For Jews that is a precondition for the full actualization of the brotherhood of the children of Abraham.

Genesis 25, verses 9 - 10

**9**Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, **10**the field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife.

From a very early age, the two sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, seemed to have had but little contact. They developed as distinct families, each pursuing their own histories. But when their father dies and returns his soul to his creator, they come together to intern him in his ancestral burial place. Now Ishmael is considered to be the father of Islam. Do we not have here a precedent for reconciliation between Judaism and Islam after years of distance and alienation? I believe that we do.

Genesis chapter 33, verse 4

**4**Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

The Book of Genesis describes how, after decades of estrangement, the grandsons of Abraham, Jacob and Esau, are reunited. Chapter 33 verse 4 describes how at their reunion, they embrace and weep as one. Now in rabbinic and medieval Jewish thought Esau is considered to be the symbolic progenitor of Christendom. I point out the enlightening commentary on this verse of Rabbi Naftalie Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817 – 1893. “This teaches us that at this moment Jacob was

roused to love Esau. So it will be for the future generations: at the time when the seed of Esau will rouse themselves in the spirit of purification to recognize the seed of Israel and their value, then we Jews as well will rouse ourselves to recognize Esau, for he is our brother.”

My dear friends, there is enough love in God to love all of us – Jews, Christians and Muslims. But I believe that we must all first show ourselves worthy. We do so by loving the adherents of the other religions, as we would want God to love the adherents of our own

The three religions need each other. We must see ourselves as partners, not only with God, but with each other. We must recognize, affirm and embrace, the contribution of the other two religions. Redemption, perfection, wholeness will only come when we admit that we have here three paths towards the same goal, and that each of these paths is needed by the world. In today’s world, none of us can do Abraham’s work alone.