

Being Abraham's Child

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Text and the City | Lech Lecha 2015

“Suddenly, from Ur Kasdim
the Father of Multitudes
Shined forth like a star
to illuminate the darkness.
You deferred Your anger
When you surveyed his deeds.”

יְהוָה אֵבֶר הַמִּזְרָח כְּכֹכֵב
צָרַח מֵאוּר כַּסְדִּים לְהַאִיר בְּהַשְׁקָה
כַּעֲסָה הַפְרָת בְּשׂוֹרֵף פְּעֵלוֹ

-- Poem for Yom Kippur Avodah service, 7th Century ("אתה כוננת")

As the children of Abraham continue to find themselves killing each other this week, from his birth place in Ur Kasdim, through his chosen home Beer Sheva and all the way to his final rest place in Hevron; as droves of his children are forced leave their homeland, making their way to Europe in tents and encountering his other children in their steady homes; I'm asking myself what it means to be a child of Abraham in our generation.

Many Abrahams

Tell me who your
Abraham is and I'll tell
you what kind of Jew
you are. Or Christian,
or Muslim...

Is your Abraham the
knight of faith, who
binds rationality and
morality on the altar of
God's love? Is your
Abraham (and Sarah!)
the generous host of a
tent open to all four
corners of the world, or
the aged traveler who
has taken upon himself
to wash the feet of all
weary travelers?

Perhaps your Abraham
is Maimonides' Socratic
philosopher, seeking

the truth until he finds the One God? Or is he the moral prophetic voice who was chosen in order to "teach his children... paths of justice and compassion"? Is your Abraham the blinded visionary, manipulated by competing loves to wives, God and children? Or is Abraham the meticulous Halakhic man, who intuited Jewish law long before the Torah was given at Sinai?

Like Alexander the Great's empire, Abraham's legacy is too great to be inherited by any one person or position. It is forever divvied up into competing lands. God's name for him has proven true: Abraham is not just Av-Ram (Great Father), but Av-RaHam - אב המון - גויים – the father of a multitude of nations. Indeed, in his personality and lore he himself is multitudes. The gift of the Hebrew vowel, ה"א, in his name is the gift of multitude (new word?). Perhaps we all are multitudes, we simply haven't been given as many tests (opportunities) as Grandpe Abe to allow our multitudes to shine.

In Me'a Shearim one can buy children's books about Abraham according to your Ultra Orthodox sect. In one Abraham is dressed as a Lithuanian yeshiva student, in another he dons the garb of a devout Hassid. In the PJ Library version he looks somewhat suburban (somewhat less popular in Me'a Shearim). One can scoff at the anachronisms of Abraham's portrayal, but I believe being Jewish means telling about myself a story that begins with Abraham, and that portrays my life values and dilemmas as illuminated by Abraham and Sarah's lives (and, like real family, without covering their blemishes either). Retelling our parent's stories as a way of uncovering our own.

The great thing about Abraham's story is, it has no clear beginning. No one knows what caused God to appear to him one day and command: *Lech Lecha*, "go forth", or "go to yourself" as the Zohar reads literally. Is this proof that God's grace is random, falling on a person without prior warning, as Paul described it. Or is there a backstory that the Torah leaves out, leaving us to imagine, retell, fabricate – and through the work of midrash to weave ourselves into the fabric of Torah.

Human Darkness

Thank God, the Torah does not begin with Abraham. Our story begins with the birth of the world, and of humanity, and while this week we begin zooming in to the narrow story of Abraham's family, a Jewish posture in the world must always be rooted in the larger human story. The sad news is the early chapters of Genesis reveal humanity in our bleakest vulnerability and violence.

In this reading, I'll be following a 7th century Hebrew poem, called "You Established," אתה כוננת. The poem, which is included at the bottom, is repeated today in the Sephardic Avodah service for Yom Kippur.

*You established the world
from the beginning
You founded the earth
and formed creatures. [...]
But they broke the yoke
and said to God "Go Away!"
Then You took away your hand*

and they withered instantly like grass.

From Adam to Cain, from Nimrod to Noah's generation, humanity breaks away from God and his word, breaking the yoke and yelling: "Go away!" I used to read this as a moralistic tale telling me that I as a Son of Adam am weak and insubordinate – and must therefore bend my will to my teacher and whatever book of religious law she was making me feel guilty for not keeping. But hidden among the lines of the narrative is an opposite reading of the story. Yes, human beings ARE prone to violence and insubordination, but God was complicit here. When they yelled "Go away!", he indeed left them. *"You took away your hand / and they withered instantly like grass."*

For ten generation, from Adam to Noah, the soil is damned and infertile. *Après deluge* God declares: *"I will never curse the soil again on humankind's account; since what the human heart forms is evil from its youth."* The soil is freed from paying the price for Humanity's mistakes (until the industrial revolution, I guess) and Noah becomes the "first man of the soil". Grapes grow for the first time since Eden, but God does not return to humanity. Like a parent livid with his children's behavior, God decides to stop tearing the house down on their account, but never calls them again. No one really expects human beings to behave otherwise, so what good would consequences have. "Go away, you say? Fine!" And so for another ten generation, a god-less world. It could have remained that way forever, until –

*Suddenly, from Ur Kasdim / The Father of multitudes
Shined forth like a star/ to illuminate in the darkness.*

What did Avraham do that was so sudden, so illuminating? How was this star born, and what light did he bring forth? The Torah never tells us. We're left to our own midrashic devices – smashing idols, philosophizing in the marketplace, generously hosting, fervently believing, building a powerful couplehood with Sarah despite barrenness, or perhaps going on the journey even before being called to do so.

Whatever it is, it got God to pay attention. *You deferred Your anger when you surveyed his deeds.* We don't know if Avraham was even trying to get God's attention. I'd like to believe he was just doing it in order to illuminate the darkness he found himself living in. That's how stars usually begin to glow. Whatever it was, it soothed God's anger. It allowed God to believe in human beings once again.

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Here then is a vision for Abrahamic religion: shaping people and communities that inspire God to believe in human beings anew. How far we are from this vision. Being a child of Avraham is acting in a way that gets God to believe in us again. Being Avraham's child is acting in a way that gets human beings to believe in themselves again. Not waiting for God's cues, or anyone else's for that matter. Simply taking action and alleviating the darkness, the dryness. From Ur Kasdim to Beer Sheva, from Jerusalem to California.

Shabbat Shalom,
Mishael

You established the world from the beginning
You founded the earth and formed creatures.

אתה כווננת עולם מראש
יסדת תבל ובריות יצרת

When you surveyed the world of chaos and confusion
You banished gloom and put light in its place.

בשורה עולם תהו ובהו
גרשת אפל והצבת נגה

You formed from the earth a lump of soil in Your image
And commanded him concerning the tree of life

גלם תבניתך מן האדמה יצרת
ועל עץ הדעת אותו הפקדת

He forsook Your word and he was forsaken from Eden
But You did not destroy him for the sake of the work of Your hands.

דברך זנח ונזנח מעדן
ולא כליתו למען יגיע פסיד

You increased his fruit and blessed his seed
And let them flourish in Your goodness and live in quiet.

הגדלת פריו וברכת זרעו
והפרייתם בטובה והושבתם שקט

**But they broke the yoke
and said to God "Go Away!"
Then You took away your hand
and they withered instantly like grass.**

ויפרקו על ניאמרו לאל סור
ממנו
והסירוהו יד כרגע כחציר
אמללו

You remembered your covenant
With the one who was blameless in his generation (Noah)
And as a reward You made him a remanant forever.

זכרת ברית לתמים בדורו
ובזכותו שמת לעולם שארית

You made a permanent covenant of the rainbow for his sake
And in Your love for his fragrant offering You blessed his children.

חק ברית קשת למענו כרת
ובאהבת נחחו בניו ברכת

Suddenly, from Ur Kasdim
The Father of multitudes
Shined forth like a star
to illuminate in the darkness.

טעו בעשרם ובנו מגדל
ויאמרו נבקיע הרקיע להלחם
בו

You deferred Your anger
When you surveyed his deeds.
And when he was old
You looked into his heart.

יחיד אב המון פתאם פכוכב
נרח מאור פשדים להאיר
בהשד

פעסד הפרת בשורה פעלו
ולעת שבתו לבבו חקרת

(אתה כווננת, "You Established" Poem for Yom Kippur Avodah service, 7th Century,
translation Swartz and Yahalom edition, pg 70)

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