

LESSONS FROM ABRAHAM

MODERN-DAY ZEALOTRY IS EASY. THROW A FEW ROCKS. SCREAM A FEW OBSCENITIES. PUSH A BUTTON AND CAUSE MURDER AND MAYHEM. THE ZEALOTRY OF AVRAHAM AVINU WAS ABOUT SHOWING LOVE FOR G-D BY SHOWING LOVE FOR HIS CREATIONS BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

AT A PRESS CONFERENCE LAST YEAR, Jay Carney, the press secretary for the president of the United States, in the context of pushing President Barack Obama's controversial new jobs' Bill, said: "I believe the phrase from the Bible is: 'The Lord helps those who help themselves.'"¹

There is only one small problem with this statement: nowhere in the Bible – neither ours nor theirs – does it say such a thing. And, there is another, slightly bigger problem. The Torah actually teaches us just the opposite: G-d helps

those who help others. When we do good to others, we merit good for ourselves; when we show compassion and mercy to others, G-d shows compassion and mercy to us.²

In Parshas Lech Lecha, we are introduced to the first of our patriarchs, Avraham Avinu. Avraham was a fascinating and complex person. Through his own reasoning, he was able to determine that there could be only one G-d, and dedicated his life teaching this idea to everyone he encountered.

Avraham was also the original relig-

ious zealot, who, the Torah informs us, wasted no time in doing Hashem's bidding.³ He was willing: (1) to risk his life (to literally be thrown into a fiery furnace) because of his belief in G-d; (2) to leave his home, his land, and his people, and to essentially become a nomad at the age of 75; (3) to circumcise himself at the age of 99; and (4) to sacrifice his son, Yitzchak, in whom he had invested everything so that his legacy would continue. Zealot? Without a doubt!

So how would we expect Avraham to behave towards idolaters? After all, Avraham

and his family were the only worshippers of Hashem in a world filled entirely of idol worshippers. Imagine for a moment a religious zealot in just such a situation. How would such a person behave?

The midrash⁴ tells us that Avraham's own father, Terach, was an idolater. In fact, Terach actually made and sold idols. Terach once went away and he left Avraham to watch his idol shop. A man who wanted to buy an idol came into the shop. Avraham asked the man his age, to which the man replied, "I'm fifty." Avraham said to the man: "You're fifty years old and you would worship an object that was made just yesterday?" Realising the truth of Avraham's words, the man became ashamed of what he wanted to do and he left the shop.

A woman came into the shop with a plate full of food and asked Avraham to offer it to the idols. Avraham took a stick, broke all of the idols, and then put the stick in the hands of the largest one. When Terach returned, he demanded to know what Avraham had done. Avraham told his father how the woman had come into the shop with a plate of food and asked that he offer it to the idols. Avraham said that one of the idols

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claimed, "I must eat first," while another claimed, "I must eat first," at which point the largest idol took the stick and broke the others! His father cried out: "Why are you playing with me? Can idols think?" To which Avraham replied, "Are you listening to what you are saying?" Avraham tried desperately to illustrate to his father the logical inconsistency that existed between the reality that his father knew to be true and the way his father actually chose to live his life.

Avraham could have just destroyed all of the idols as soon as he was left alone in his father's shop. Isn't that what we would expect from a zealot? Instead, he destroyed the idols not just for the sake of destroying them – not just to be destructive – but for use as the very means by which he could teach a greater lesson: the futility of worshipping them in the first place.

Now Avraham may have been willing (and even obligated) to destroy those idols, but we see that with other property that belonged to idol-worshippers, he was exceptionally careful. In fact, Rashi explains⁵ that the dispute that takes place in Parshas Lech Lecha between the shepherds of Avraham and the shepherds of his nephew Lot resulted from the refusal of Lot's shepherds to muzzle their sheep so as to prevent them from grazing on land that did not belong to them. It did not matter to Avraham to whom the land belonged – and the Torah clearly states that it belonged to idolaters⁶ – if it did not belong to him, then for his >

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*-- Manuela & Roberto Della Rocca,
Parents of Italian Exchange Student 2011/2012*



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animals to eat from it was nothing less than stealing.

Avraham did not just love mankind in a theoretical way, as is often the case with many zealots – he actually loved every man. He didn't view people who lived differently from him with disdain, or hatred, or revulsion. He didn't wish ill of them, or that they be visited with harsh judgment, or even destruction, from Hashem. He only wanted what was best for them: that they recognise their Creator and abandon their worship of false gods.

Just as he zealously served Hashem, when it came to Hashem's creations, Avraham zealously served them as well. We see this clearly in one particular episode described in the Torah: Hashem commands Avraham to circumcise himself⁷ and, in spite of his own discomfort following his circumcision, we are told that Avraham sat in the doorway of his tent watching the horizon for potential guests.⁸ His concern for others and their needs took priority even over his own physical comfort! While Avraham was sitting there, Hashem came to pay him a *bikur cholim* visit,⁹ and at that very same moment Avraham happened to see three strangers on the horizon. What did Avraham do? He actually interrupted his conversation with G-d! He was speaking to the Creator of the Universe and he excused himself so that he could go and offer hospitality to some strangers –

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idolaters no less – who just happened to be walking near his tent. Avraham hoped for and sought out guests and then, when he finally saw an opportunity, he literally ran out to greet them.

And then what did Avraham do? He personally served them, as well as instructed everyone in his household regarding providing hospitality for his guests. Avraham informed his guests that he would fetch them a morsel, and subsequently prepared for them a feast fit for a king, including baking fresh bread and, according to the Talmud, even slaughtering three calves!¹⁰ Why did he need a calf for each of his guests? The Talmud explains the reason: so that Avraham could offer each of them a tongue! Avraham gave his guests from

the very best that he had, including the finest delicacies.

By serving G-d's creations, Avraham understood that he was actually serving G-d Himself! And just as when a person serves G-d, he must offer G-d his very best, as is evident from the story of Cain and Abel, so too, when a person serves G-d's creations, he must also give to them his very best!

Our sages¹¹ teach that as long as the Temple existed, the altar that stood there atoned for the Jewish people; but now, in its absence, a person's own table atones for him through the hospitality that he shows to guests.¹² Just by doing something as ordinary as having guests in our home, we can make right the things in our lives that we have done wrong.

For the efforts that Avraham expended regarding these three guests, the Talmud teaches¹³ that G-d repaid him in kind for all that he had done. Those actions that Avraham performed personally for his guests were repaid to him by Hashem Himself, and those that Avraham delegated to others to perform, Hashem, in turn, repaid to Avraham through intermediaries.

Doing good to others, showing them compassion and mercy, this was the hallmark of Avraham Avinu. So much so, that our great sage the Rambam actually states¹⁴ that if we come across a Jew who is cruel and lacking compassion, we can actually be suspect of his Jewish lineage and question if he is really even Jewish!

Avraham and Sarah changed the world simply by caring about other people and opening their home to them. And what does the Torah tell us: “Hashem blessed Avraham with everything.”¹⁵ G-d helps those who help others. We are the children of Avraham and Sarah and each of us has the power to do the very same thing. ■

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1. “Oh, Lord – W.H. fact-checks W.H.” Matt Negrin 11/02/11 4:47 PM http://www.politico.com/politico44/permlink/1111/oh_lord_f5028e26-955c-48c3-9038-bab764ba97b4.html. 2. See Mishna Torah (Matanos Aniym 10:2). 3. See Bereishis 21:14; 22:3. 4. Midrash Rabbah Bereishis 38. 5. Rashi commenting on Bereishis 13:7; Midrash Rabbah Bereishis 41. 6. Bereishis 13:7. 7. Bereishis 17:10. 8. Bereishis 18:1. 9. Rashi commenting on Bereishis 18:1. 10. Bava Metzia 86b. 11. R. Yochanan and R. Eleazar. 12. Brachos 55a. 13. Bava Metzia 86b. 14. Mishna Torah (Matanos Aniym 10:2). 15. Bereishis 24:1