

## Iconoclasm, acts of loving kindness, the story of Abraham

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FOR THE GARDNER NEWS

This week's Torah portion is *Lech L'cha*. In this chapter of the Bible Abraham, father of the Jewish people is introduced.

What kind of person was Abraham? What character traits distinguished him? What qualities did he exhibit that elevated him as a leader in his community? Since Abraham is considered to have been the first Jew, which of his personality traits have been traditionally associated with the Jewish people?

The Talmud states that Abraham personified the idea of "Chesed", Hebrew for "loving kindness". His behavior as the first leader of the Hebrew nation is filled with stories about his performing acts of "loving kindness", including his argument with God over the fate of the people of Sodom and his warm, open hearted reception of strangers who visited his tent.

Abraham's tent is said to have been open on four sides to welcome visitors coming from all four directions. The Biblical narrative is filled with examples of Abraham's acts of "loving kindness" towards others.

However, that is not how Abraham is introduced in the Torah. The first thing said about Abraham in the Bible is "*Lech L'cha*"—that he is commanded by God to leave his ancestral home and his family and settle in a new land that God will lead him to, and if he does that, he and his descendants will be blessed.

Abraham is also called the patriarch of "monotheism", the belief in the "Oneness of God". He is venerated as an ancestor of Christians and Muslims as well as of Jews. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the three monotheistic Western religions are often referred to as the three "Abrahamic" faiths.

There is a well known story about Abraham in the Midrash, a rabbinic commentary on the Torah. In this story, Abraham experiences a conscious awakening within himself that God is One, that the One God created the earth and has power over everything in it, that the One God has no form or substance, and that all forms of polytheism (known in the Bible as "idol worship") are false beliefs.

As Abraham's first act of "God-consciousness", he smashes and destroys all the idols in his father's house to prove that they have no real power or influence over anything. This makes Abraham an "iconoclast"—a person who challenges and breaks with traditional beliefs. The definition of the word "iconoclasm" is taken directly from this story.

"Icons" are "idols" and the smashing to pieces of the idols symbolized the discrediting and rejection of ideas that have no substance or basis in fact. If this story is accepted as accurate, Abraham might also have been spoken of as rebellious and maybe even disrespectful of his family and their traditions.

How can Abraham's "iconoclasm" be reconciled with the trait the Talmud says he is distinguished by—"loving kindness"?

The answer can be found in looking deeper into the meaning of the first words in the Torah that introduce Abraham. There, it says that God came to Abraham and told him "*Lech L'cha—Take yourself away from your land, from the place where you were born, and from your father's home and go to the land that I will show you. There I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you, I will make you strong, and you, too will become a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you and in you all of the families of the earth will be blessed.*"

Rabbinic tradition teaches that there are no extra words or phrases in the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham received a three-part command from God with the words "*Lech L'cha*" ("*Take Yourself Away*"). The command of "*Lech L'cha*" was given to him so he could grow and develop into a leader, receive God's blessing, and institute a way of life in which his descendants would be forever blessed. God said, "*Lech L'cha*" ("*Take Yourself Away*"):

"*From your land*": Abraham came from Mesopotamia, which God did not consider an appropriate place for Abraham to live or to raise

his descendants.

"*From Your Place of Birth*": Abraham needed to take himself away from Ur Kasdim, the city where he was born so as not to be influenced by the values of those who lived around him.

"*From Your Father's House*": Even Abraham's family was considered to be a negative influence on him and God commanded him to take himself away from them.

Jewish tradition explains that Mesopotamia was not only a poly-

monotheism.

Later, in monotheistic Christian Europe, only the Jewish community refused to abandon its historic faith and embrace Christianity, and for its refusal to do what was popular, the Jewish community suffered. However Judaism, as the first monotheistic religion in the Western world, laid the ground work for both Christianity and Islam to eradicate polytheism and replace it with a type of religious faith centered on belief in the Oneness of God. As the ancestor of Christians and Muslims, the Jewish community today plays a prominent role in dialogue among the descendants of Abraham. Jews, Christians, and Muslims who

engage in dialogue develop relationships that are strong and mutually supportive.

The projects developed by these interfaith coalitions often become collective communal acts of *chesed* ("loving kindness")—acts that bring about good and that generate positive spirit within the world. That is the link between iconoclasm and *chesed*—a cause and effect relationship between independent thinking and acts of "loving kindness". These are the blessings that have come down from God through the generations that have descended from the patriarch Abraham.

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### JEWISH PERSPECTIVE



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theistic culture but a land of tremendous power and influence in the Mediterranean Region.

To prepare Abraham to be the leader of a monotheistic community, God told him that needed to take himself away from all places where he and his community would be influenced by polytheism, idol worship. He needed to remove himself completely from it, even to the extent of separating himself from his family, so that he could nurture and cultivate his relationship with God and teach others about the new idea of monotheism. He could only do it in a place that was far removed from the dominant and popular polytheistic culture.

Throughout the Bible, the Hebrew people were called to task by God for their rejection of monotheism in favor of polytheism. God's call to Abraham to "take himself away" was only the beginning of his journey towards spiritual fulfillment.

Iconoclasm, broadly defined, is a form of independent critical thinking. Those who challenge tradition and break with it are people who think for themselves, who do not follow the crowd, even at the risk of being unpopular. Independent thinkers are few in number.

The pressure to conform to what has popular appeal is a condition endemic to every society. The choice to act contrary to convention always has consequences. Those who do the unpopular thing are often disliked, marginalized, and even shunned.

Abraham was counseled by God to take a risk, to do that which was unpopular. God also told Abraham that his courage to make an unpopular choice would be rewarded and result in blessings—for himself, for his descendants, and for the world itself. But God made it clear that Abraham had to make that choice himself—"*Lech L'cha*" ("*Take Yourself Away...*").

To receive God's blessing, Abraham needed to be courageous and make his own "free will" choice. The choice to be independent, to think for himself, would mark Abraham's every act as the leader of the Jewish people. The same courage would later empower him to acts of *chesed* (loving kindness), such as that shown in his effort to argue with God over the fate of the people of Sodom. There, Abraham bargained with God for the lives of all of the people who lived in Sodom if only one righteous person would be found living in the city.

There has been considerable research done on those who, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, put their lives at risk to hide and rescue the victims of Nazi hate.

All research points to the courage to think and act independently as the trait that distinguished all rescuers and protectors. Putting one's own life at risk to save that of another is the ultimate act of *chesed* ("loving kindness"). This is the link between iconoclasm and *chesed*.

If any personality trait has been historically associated with the Jewish people, it is independent thinking and non-conformity. Anti-Jewish prejudices developed over many centuries because Jews historically did not conform to popular demands. In the Classical Pagan world, Jews stood up to polytheism and were the first to embrace