
BEYOND DISPUTE

DEBATES THAT SHAPE JEWISH LIFE

UNIT 2

IS JUDAISM PARTICULARIST OR UNIVERSALIST? GIVING TZEDAKAH IN A GLOBAL ERA

Rabbi Jan R. Uhrbach

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I. THE DEBATE: WHAT IS THE GREATEST PRINCIPLE IN THE TORAH?

1. Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12 (see also Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:3)

Halakhic Midrash to Leviticus, composed in Babylonia (c. 250–350 CE).

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Rabbi Akiva says: This is the great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai says: “This is the record of Adam’s line...”—this is an even greater principle.

”וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ” — רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר:
זֶה כָּלֵל גָּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה.
בֶּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר: ”זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם” — זֶה כָּלֵל גָּדוֹל מִזֶּה.

2. Genesis 1:27, 5:1-2

²⁷ And God created human beings in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

(כז) וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא
אֹתָם:

¹ This is the record of Adam’s line: When God created human beings, He made them in the likeness of God; ² male and female He created them. And when they were created, He blessed them and called them Adam [that is, “human”].

(א) זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדוֹת אָדָם בְּיוֹם בָּרָא
אֱלֹהִים אָדָם בְּדְמוּת אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֹתוֹ:
(ב) זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָאם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם וַיִּקְרָא
אֶת שְׁמֵם אָדָם בְּיוֹם הַבְּרָאָה:

3. Leviticus 19:18, 34

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

(יח) לֹא תִקֵּם וְלֹא תִטּוֹר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ
לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה'.

³⁴ The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

(לד) כְּאֶזְרָח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אֶתְכֶם
וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לוֹ כָּמוֹךָ כִּי גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

II. THE DILEMMA IN PRACTICE: ALLOCATING RESOURCES

4. Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 251:3

The most authoritative medieval code of Jewish law, by Rabbi Joseph Karo (Iberia, Ottoman Empire, and Israel, 1488–1575); includes glosses by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Poland, 1520–1572) noting where Ashkenazic and Sephardic customs and interpretations differ.

One who gives to grown children, to whom one is not obligated to provide sustenance...and similarly one

הַנוֹתֵן לְבָנָיו וּבָנוֹתָיו הַגְּדוּלִּים, שְׂאִינוֹ
חַיֵּב בְּמִזְוֹנוּתֵיהֶם...וְכֵן הַנוֹתֵן מִתְּנוּת

who gives to a needy parent, this is in the category of tzedakah. And not only that, but one must put them before others. And even one who is neither one's child nor one's parent, but a [less close] relative, one must put them before others [i.e., non-relatives]....The poor of one's house take precedence over the poor of one's city, and the poor of one's own city take precedence over the poor of another city.

Gloss: Long-term residents are called "the poor of the city," and they take precedence over other people who come there from other places. And residents of Israel come before residents of the Diaspora. Gloss:

Supporting oneself takes precedence over everyone else, and one is not obligated to give tzedakah until one can support oneself. After that, supporting one's parents takes precedence, if they are poor, and they take precedence over supporting one's children. After that, one's children, and they take precedence over one's siblings, and they take precedence over other relatives, and relatives take precedence over neighbors, and neighbors over the people of one's city, and the people of one's city over the people of another city....

לְאָבִיו וְהֵם צְרִיכִים לָהֶם, הֲרֵי זֶה בְּכָל־
צִדְקָה. וְלֹא עוֹד אֶלָּא שְׁצָרִיד לְהַקְדִּימוֹ
לְאַחֲרִים. וְאֶפְלוּ אִינוּ בְּנוֹ וְלֹא אָבִיו,
אֶלָּא קְרוֹבוֹ, צָרִיד לְהַקְדִּימוֹ לְכָל
אָדָם....וְעֲנִי בֵיתוֹ קוֹדֵמִין לְעֲנִי עִירוֹ,
וְעֲנִי עִירוֹ קוֹדֵמִין לְעֲנִי עִיר אַחֶרֶת.
הִגָּה: וְהַקְבֻּעִים בְּעִיר קְרוֹיִים עֲנִי
הָעִיר, וְהֵם קוֹדֵמִין לְעֲנִי אֲחֵרִים
הַבָּאִים לְשֵׁם מִמְּקוֹמוֹת אֲחֵרִים. וְיוֹשְׁבֵי
אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹדֵמִין לְיוֹשְׁבֵי חוּצָה
לְאֶרֶץ. הִגָּה: פְּרֻנְסָת עַצְמוֹ קוֹדֵמֶת לְכָל
אָדָם, וְאִינוּ חַיֵּב לְתֵת צִדְקָה עַד שִׁיִּהְיֶה
לוֹ פְּרֻנְסָתוֹ, וְאַחֵר כִּךְ יִקְדִּים פְּרֻנְסָת
אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ, אִם הֵם עֲנִיִּים, וְהֵם
קוֹדֵמִים לְפְרֻנְסָת בְּנָיו. וְאַחֵר כִּךְ בְּנָיו,
וְהֵם קוֹדֵמִים לְאָחִיו, וְהֵם קוֹדֵמִים
לְשָׂאֵר קְרוֹבִים, וְהַקְרֹבִים קוֹדֵמִים
לְשִׁכְנָיו, וְשִׁכְנָיו לְאַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ, וְאַנְשֵׁי
עִירוֹ לְעִיר אַחֶרֶת....

5. Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 61a

The central body of Rabbinic law, dialectic, and lore, comprised of the Mishnah and the Gemara—the latter being an exposition and elaboration of the former. Two separate Talmudic compilations exist: the Babylonian Talmud (c. 500 CE) and the Jerusalem Talmud (also known as the Talmud of the Land of Israel, c. 400 CE).

Poor gentiles are not prevented from gathering gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and crops in the corner of the field, in the interests of peace. Our Rabbis taught: We sustain poor gentiles along with the poor of Israel, and visit sick gentiles along with the sick of Israel, and bury the dead of the gentiles with the dead of Israel, in the interests of peace.

אֵין מִמְּחִין בַּיָּד עֲנִי נְכָרִים בְּלֶקֶט
בְּשִׂכְחָה וּבִפְאָה, מִפְּנֵי דְרָכֵי שְׁלוֹם.
ת"ר: מִפְּרֻנְסִים עֲנִי נְכָרִים עִם עֲנִי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּמִבְּקָרִין חוֹלֵי נְכָרִים עִם חוֹלֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּקוֹבְרִין מֵתֵי נְכָרִים עִם מֵתֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִפְּנֵי דְרָכֵי שְׁלוֹם.

6. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Melakhim 10:12

Also known as Rambam (acronym for “Rabbi Moses ben Maimon”); halakhic codifier (Mishneh Torah), philosopher (Guide of the Perplexed), and communal leader (Spain and Egypt, 1135–1204).

Even with respect to gentiles, the Sages commanded us to visit their sick, and to bury their dead with the dead of Israel, and to sustain their poor with the poor of Israel, in the interests of peace, as it is written: “The Lord is good to all; and His compassion [rests] on all He has made” (Psalms 145:9). And it is written, “[The Torah’s] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17).

אֲפִילוּ הַעֲכוּ”ם צִוּוּ חֻכְמִים לְבַקֵּר
חֻלֵּיהֶם, וּלְקַבֹּר מֵתֵיהֶם עִם מֵתֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּלְפָרֹגֶם עִנְיֵיהֶם בְּכָלֵל עִנְיֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִפְּנֵי דְרָכֵי שְׁלוֹם, הֲרִי
נֹאמַר: “טוֹב ה’ לְכָל, וְרַחֲמָיו עַל כָּל
מַעֲשָׂיו”, וְנֹאמַר “דְּרָכֶיהָ דְרָכֵי נֵעִם,
וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם”.

7. Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 7a

Once, Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair was on his way to redeem captives and came to the river Ginnai. “O Ginnai,” said he, “Split your waters for me, that I may pass through you.” The river refused, saying, “You are trying to do the will of your Maker; but I, too, am trying to do the will of my Maker. You may or may not accomplish your purpose. I am sure of accomplishing mine.” He said, “If you will not split, I will decree that no waters ever pass through you again.” It thereupon split for him. There was also present a certain man who was carrying wheat for Passover, and Rabbi Pinhas once again addressed the river: “Split for this man, too, for he is engaged in a mitzvah.” It thereupon split for him too. There was also an Arab who had joined them [on the journey], and so Rabbi Pinhas once again addressed the river: “Split for this one, too, that he may not say, ‘Is this how they treat a fellow traveler?’” It thereupon split for him too. Rav Yosef said: How great is this man! Greater than Moses and the sixty myriads of Israel! For the latter, [the waters parted] but once, while for the former, thrice! But perhaps in this instance too it only split once? Rather, say: As *great as* Moses and the sixty myriads of Israel!

רַבִּי פִּנְחָס בֶּן יָאִיר הָוָה קֹאזִיל לְפָדְיוֹן
שְׁבוּיִין, פָּגַע בֵּיהּ בְּגִינָאֵי נְהָרָא. אָמַר
לֵיהּ: גִּינָאֵי, חֲלוּק לִי מִימָךְ וְאֶעְבֹּר
בָּךְ. אָמַר לֵיהּ: אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת
רְצוֹן קוֹנֵךְ וְאֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן
קוֹנֵי. אַתָּה סָפֵק עוֹשֶׂה סָפֵק אִי אַתָּה
עוֹשֶׂה, אֲנִי וְדָאֵי עוֹשֶׂה. אָמַר לֵיהּ: אִם
אִי אַתָּה חוֹלֵק, גּוֹזְרֵנִי עֲלֶיךָ שְׁלֵא
יַעֲבִרוּ בְּךָ מַיִם לְעוֹלָם. חֲלַק לֵיהּ. הָוָה
הָהוּא גָבְרָא דְהָוָה דְּאִרִּי חִיטִּי
לְפִיסָחָא, אָמַר לֵיהּ: חֲלוּק לֵיהּ נָמִי
לְהָאִי, דְּבִמְצוּהָ עָסִיק. חֲלַק לֵיהּ. הָוָה
הָהוּא טִייעָא דְלוֹנָה בְּהַדִּיחוּ, אָמַר
לֵיהּ: חֲלוּק לֵיהּ נָמִי לְהָאִי, דְּלֹא לִימָא
כֶּךָ עוֹשִׂים לְבָנֵי לוֹנָה? חֲלַק לֵיהּ. אָמַר
רַב יוֹסֵף: כַּמָּה נָפִישׁ גָּבְרָא מַמְשָׁה
וְשִׁתִּין רַבּוֹן, דְּאִילוּ הָתָם חַד זִימְנָא,
וְהָכָא תִּלְתָּא זִימְנִין. וְדִלְמָא הָכָא נָמִי
חַדָּא זִימְנָא אֶלָּא כַּמְשָׁה וְשִׁתִּין רַבּוֹן.

8. From Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2012).

American social psychologist, Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business, and author.

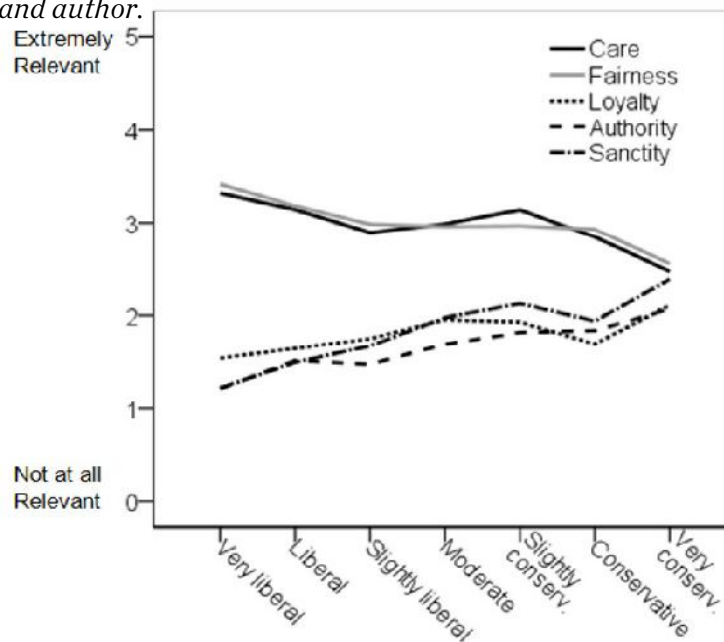


Figure 8.1. *The first evidence for Moral Foundations Theory*

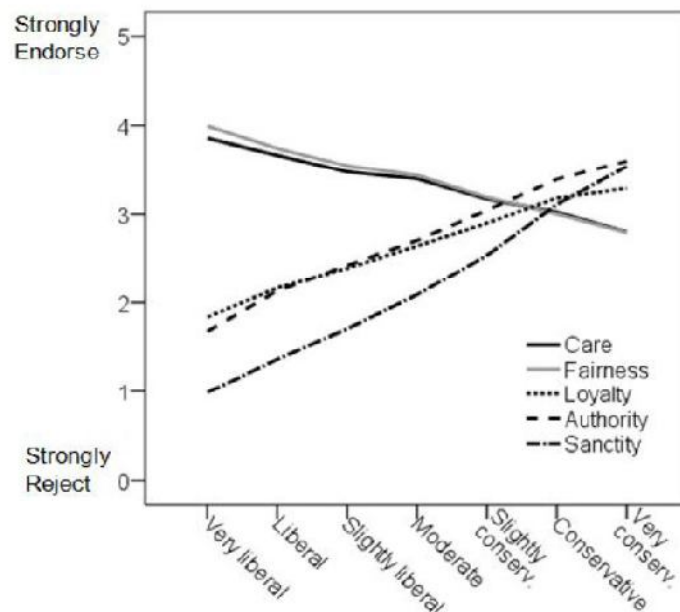


Figure 8.2. *Scores on the MFQ, from 132,000 subjects, in 2011. Data from YourMorals.org.*

9. Father Abraham: Founder of Particularism and Universal Ancestor—Three Modern Voices

A. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, “Parshat Vayishlach,” *In the Desert a Vision: Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook on the Torah Portion of the Week*¹

Halakhist and kabbalist; first Ashkenazi chief rabbi in pre-state Israel; considered one of the fathers of religious Zionism (Israel, 1865–1935).

Bar Kappara taught: Whoever calls Abraham, “Abram,” transgresses a positive commandment, as it says, “Your name will be Abraham” (Gen. 17:5). Rabbi Eliezer says: He transgresses a negative commandment, as it says, “No longer will your name be called Abram” (Gen. 17:5)...Perhaps the same should apply to one who calls Jacob, “Jacob?” There it is different, for the text itself later reinstated it [the name Jacob], as it says, “God said to Israel in visions of the night: ‘Jacob, Jacob’” (Gen. 46:2) (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 13a).

It is worthwhile to ponder the difference between these two Patriarchs. Such gravity was attached to the change of Abraham’s name, that one who refers to him by his original name, Abram, transgresses both a positive and negative command. The name of Jacob, on the other hand, though similarly altered, remains as a residuum. One would have thought just the opposite. Abraham’s name was changed but once, whereas Jacob’s was altered twice, once by the angel, and a second time by God. If anything, the change of Jacob’s name should have been irreversible.

In order to properly understand the significance of these shifts of nomenclature, we must first understand the essential roles these two Patriarchs played in Jewish history. The Rabbis opened a window: “‘Abram is Abraham.’ In the beginning, he was a leader of Aram, and at the end, he was a leader of the whole world” (Berakhot 13a, quoting I Chron. 1:27). But for the moment, this explication only adds to our confusion. To be father of a nation, of Aram, though not as grandiose as global leadership, is not bad! To bring up to someone who is a player on the world scene, that he was once at the forefront of national affairs, is not an insult. On the other hand, to throw up to an Israel that he was once a Jacob, a *Yaakov*, which insinuates subterfuge and deceit, is a clear affront. Certainly, the ruling should have been reversed. Leniency is indicated in the case of calling Abraham by his erstwhile name, Abram; the stiffer judgment should have been reserved for one who slurs Israel by calling him “Jacob.”

The statement of the Rabbis concerning Abraham contains a universalist message; it condemns in the harshest terms possible the evil of nationalism. There is a certain convention that has become accepted by practically the entire human race, and that is the right of every nation to aggrandize itself at the expense of other nations. Even supposedly righteous rulers are guilty of having shed blood to bring enhanced material prosperity to their nation, without so much as a thought to the havoc wreaked on surrounding nations. Even though human decency dictates that the individual not pursue success through the destruction of fellow humans, on the national level—so according to conventional wisdom—there is free license to achieve success, come what

¹ Trans. Bezalel Naor (Spring Valley, NY: Orot, 2000), 43–48.

may. Even those who shun military exploits are incapable of desiring the success of other nations to the same degree they seek their own nation's advancement. The most righteous of individuals would find strange the thought that all human beings be given the same advantage, seeing as one God created us in His image. This chauvinist thinking is so ingrained in human nature, that even the great champions of justice defend this notion by saying that the scientific and material development of the world requires that nations compete against one another.

Now one might receive the mistaken impression that the Torah endorses this attitude, whereby we should assign a greater value to our own people's good than to the welfare of others. After all, the Torah commands the Children of Israel to conquer the land from the indigenous nations. But this is clearly unacceptable! How could God, Whose mercy extends to all His creations, oppress His own handiwork?! How could the Most High command that we remove from our hearts the well-being of the entire human race for our own selfish good?! Therefore, at the time the covenant was first established with our ancestor Abraham, a divine protest was lodged: The very thought of nationalism is despicable to God, for He equates all mankind. The goal is to seek the true success of all God's creations. True justice means that one views with equal concern the advancement of the entire human race.

Where then does the notion of the "Chosen People" enter? The Jews were elected to work at uplifting the entire human race; to bring humanity to the goal the Almighty expects of it. Israel were set aside as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). A kingdom of priests ministers to the other nations in order to morally perfect them. So the separation from the nations is itself the greatest unification, in order to benefit the human race. However, if Israel will desert the good, which is the holy Torah, then its nationhood and its territorialism are an abomination before God. It is inconceivable that for the sake of a people's natural self-love, other nations should be displaced. All are God's handiwork. Israel must know that no permission was granted to displace a nation for the sake of national self-aggrandizement. There is one form of justice, whether it be on the individual or collective level. Therefore, several times over, the Torah links the giving of the land to the observance of Torah. Without the *raison d'être* of Torah, the setting apart of one nation, would be considered an injustice.

War? A war could be waged only if divine will had ordained that it was necessary for *tikkun olam*, for setting the world right. Halakhically, a *milchemet ha-reshut* (optional war) could be authorized only by the king acting in consonance with the *Urim ve-Thummim* (oracle) and the Sanhedrin.

This is the import of God's directive to our ancestor, "No longer shall your name be called Abram" (Gen. 17:5), which, as the Rabbis say, signifies leadership of the single nation of Aram. I have raised you beyond this norm of nationalism, which is but a convention, not true justice. Your heart should not be devoted exclusively to the benefit of Aram, but rather seek the peace of all God's creations. "Your name shall be Abraham, father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5). Your role is as father of all nations, of the entire human race. Seek out the well-being of all.

"One who calls Abraham, 'Abram,' transgresses." By doing so, one causes Israel to regress to a state of nationalism. One makes a statement that Israel's existence can be founded on

nationalism. Nationalism, which is no more than a collective form of egoism, is a transgression. Israel's election is just, only if its basis is true universalism. Israel is to be "a father of a multitude of nations."

Abraham represents a combination of two tendencies, universalism and separatism, but even his being separated from the world is in order to positively influence the world. His son Isaac again combines these two tendencies: uniting with the world, and retreating from it to preserve an ideal of *kedusha* (holiness). By the third generation, these two tendencies had grown apart; each of Isaac's two sons inherited a different facet of his personality. In Esau, the aspect of worldliness was pronounced, but he was defiled by the world. In his twin brother Jacob, particularism was more pronounced. His allegiance was to preserving the ideal of *kedusha* (holiness); the goal of universalism will emerge on its own when the time is ripe. Esau was "a hunter, an outdoorsman," which is another way of saying, a man of the world; "Jacob, a simple man, a homebody," a man who cultivates his own innate spirituality in the hope that thereby the world will benefit.

If Esau would have utilized his worldliness with the proper intention, he could have attained true greatness. To share with the world the light of Abraham is indeed a great thing. It was for this reason that Father Isaac was so fond of Esau. Isaac thought that through Esau the promise of Abraham would be fulfilled; through Esau's dealings with mankind, the world would be ennobled. Unfortunately, in the process of going out to the world, Esau lost the blessing, the gift of Abraham. Jacob's so-called "usurping" of Esau's birthright came out of his desire to acquire the worldliness of his elder brother. To be sure, Jacob's union with the world would not be immediate as was Esau's. The world is not ripe yet. Jacob must bide his time. There is much work to be done to prepare the world for the goal of unity.

B. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch (Volume 1: Genesis)*²

Founder of neo-Orthodoxy, embodying the concept of "torah im derekh eretz"—that is, halakhic Judaism and full participation in the modern world (Germany, 1808–1888).

This is the first time in which we see Abraham standing before God really as an actual *navi* (prophet) [to whom God reveals secrets]....This degree Abraham had only reached as a result of the *Mila* (circumcision). Let us consider the circumstances in which God made this revelation to Abraham and ascertain its connection with them.

God wished to reveal to him the downfall and ruin of the richest, most luxurious cities of the land which was to be the future country of the nation which was promised to him. God definitely says: because Abraham was to be the ancestor of such a nation. Personally, for his own sake, Abraham would not have required this revelation of the cause for the impending deplorable downfall of the prosperous smiling province of towns. He himself was already in the sharpest contrast to the Sodomite character and the Sodomite views on life. The scene itself in which the revelation found him proves how little the revelation was required for him himself....But, so that in the future none of his descendants in that same luxurious land should grow luxuriantly to the same frame of

² (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, Ltd, 1976); commentary to Genesis 18:1.

mind, but that the Abrahamitic frame of mind should remain the unlosable inheritance of the Abrahamitic children and children's children, that, in the future, luxury and plenty do not bury and destroy the God-serving universal benevolence of the spirit of Abraham, in short, that the People of Abraham remain forever in such contrast to the Sodomite principles of life as their ancestor showed so gloriously, for that, the *downfall of Sodom, and Abraham sitting before his tent*, are placed in one picture in the minds of his descendants.

How this inheritance of Judaism and its bearers, the Jews, have been falsely and maliciously charged with its very opposite! How these “circumcised ones” are supposed to imagine themselves the favored “only ones” of their God. How just this segregating sign is supposed to strip them of all cosmopolitan feelings and thoughts for mankind in general, and to constrict the God of all human souls to the exclusive God of their corner of the world, and to the national God of their race!...

Abraham's one worry was (so those old rabbis, those true sons of Abraham, teach—and this drove him out into the burning sun), that now, after his circumcision, people might draw away from him. They teach this, to impress on his sons by Abraham's example, the dictum, “to receive wanderers hospitably is greater than to stand before the Presence of God.” And what kind of wanderers! Uncircumcised idolaters—for no others could Abraham expect—Abraham hurries away from before God to practice on them the duty of brotherly love! And how does he practice it! Nobody could rush more eagerly to obtain a prospective prize than here Abraham does to seize the opportunity, as the first circumcised Jew, to show himself a man to his brother man. Wife and child, the whole household he hustles into activity, has everything prepared afresh—as if otherwise there was nothing in his tent wherewith to offer refreshment to three wanderers—to wait on the first guests who present themselves to him as the first circumcised one! All this shows his joy at the removal of his worry that he might now be isolated....

The picture comes immediately following the *Mila* (circumcision). *The Abraham-ites flourishing in the circumcision-isolation are to be the most humane mortals*. They form the most definite contrast to the world in general but nevertheless they are always to be found ready for all general humane purposes. For fostering such humaneness they are set apart, and as the herald of this spirit Abraham, above all, proved himself as the “spiritual father and the inspirer of soaring to the heights” of the masses of humanity....

C. Leon R. Kass, MD, PhD, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*³

Addie Clark Harding Professor Emeritus of Social Thought, University of Chicago; engaged with ethical and philosophical issues raised by biomedical advance, and with broader moral and cultural issues (United States, b. 1939).

The adventures of Abraham soon turn explicitly political, and not surprisingly. For the covenant marked by circumcision is a nation-making event, establishing a clear separation of Abraham and his people from the rest of humankind. At the same time as it imposes special obligations, this

³ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 316–318.

designation as chosen nation also threatens to arouse in Abraham's clan two deep-seated human passions (especially dangerous when felt in excess), self-love (or the love of one's own) and pride or vanity—passions that lead men to ignore or mistreat their neighbors. Yet precisely because God's covenant with Abraham is ultimately for the sake of bringing the blessings of righteousness and holiness to all human beings, his privileged relationship with the Lord must not lead Abraham (or his clan) to xenophobia, undue "homophilia," or injustice. In his next adventure (immediately following his acceptance of the covenant of circumcision), Abraham is tested in this regard, as the Lord appears to him in the guise of three stranger-travelers who station themselves outside his tent, waiting, as it were, to discover how he will treat them....

The story has a wondrous and puzzling beginning. Three visitors suddenly and mysteriously appear outside Abraham's tent. Abraham quite clearly sees the strangers as "three men." Yet according to the first sentence, which functions as the title to the tale (and the entire chapter), the story tells what happened when the Lord appeared to Abraham. The text's deliberate ambiguity regarding the nature of the visitors brings the easygoing reader to attention. He apparently needs to be told that the appearance of what seems to be merely human beings is—also and at the same time—identical to the appearance of the Lord. The deliberate conflation of the divine with the human also anticipates the story's main questions: Will Abraham be able to see for himself what the reader has had to be told? Will Abraham be able to discern the presence of the Lord in the person of these strangers? Will he be able to recognize the divine within the human, and especially within those who are not his own?....

Abraham, who in Egypt had experienced what it feels like to be a stranger in a strange land, passes his (first post-covenant) test with flying colors, treating the stranger-guests with extraordinary hospitality and magnanimity. Becoming a member of the chosen tribe does not require indifference to the needs and concerns of outsiders. On the contrary, as Abraham shows so graciously, the willingness to walk before God becomes the ground of treating all human beings with the respect and justice that the new covenant with the seed of Abraham was instituted to promote.

Hospitality toward strangers recognizes the importance of moderating, even while preserving, the distinction between the same and the other, between one's own and the alien. It may seem strange to suggest that exclusive and sectarian communities, if they are to be decent and just, depend radically on acknowledging the existence and dignity of the broader human community, most of which they exclude. Yet if a community is to carry God's new way (and especially as a light unto the nations), the otherwise arbitrary and largely conventional division of mankind into heterogeneous sects or associations must pay homage to the non-arbitrary and natural sameness of the human species and its dignified place in the created order.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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