

Lecture 1: Abraham's Role in History

Shalom, and greetings.

In the year 1948 after the creation of the world, a child was born in a small cave at the foot of the Ararat Mountains named Abram (later to be expanded to Abraham). When he was born, the servants of King Nimrod (the son of Kush, from the dynasty of Ham, who conquered the ancient world and murdered many of his own brothers) rushed to tell the king the news that a son had been born in the dynasty of Shem, the "Keepers of the Secrets," who would destroy Nimrod's kingdom...

Thus begins the fascinating story of Abraham, the Hebrew. This is a remarkable story of a journey which began more than 3,800 years ago. It continues with Abraham's son, Isaac, and from there to Jacob and his twelve sons, who formed the basis for a very unique nation. Not only did they survive for the entire span of world history (as opposed to Sumerians, Babylonians, ancient Egyptians, and Romans, among others), they also kept strict guard over the dynasty and the secrets that were handed down from one generation to the next – until this very day, the era of the establishment of the State of Israel and the return of the Bible to its original meaning as a basis for public discussion throughout the world.

What are these "secrets?" What did Abraham want, which caused so many others to pursue him and his offspring, during the many generations since the time he was born?

In order to understand the answers to these questions, I want to go all the way back, to the beginning, to understand the PATH that Abraham, the Hebrew, followed in order to enhance the recognition of the Creator by the people of the world, who worshipped idols,.

Our tradition tells us that Abraham would give food to everybody who came to visit him at his home. Yes, that was what he did – he invited guests to come and join him at the table. He gave out real food, not "food for thought" or philosophy. Then, when the guest would say that he wants to thank Abraham for his kindness, he would explain to the guest that he should really thank the Creator.

And what if the guest refused? Let's say, for example, that he was an atheist or an idol worshipper. Then, Abraham would demand an exaggerated price for the food. And he would explain that the guest can have everything without paying, but only if he would thank the Creator for it all...

That is how Abraham convinced the other people that the world has an active Creator.

The above story, which comes from the Midrash, seems at first glance to be a bit strange. Abraham is not involved in philosophic disputes – rather, he gives away food in order to get the people to listen about the good of the Creator!? That's his whole technique? Is it really that simple?

I want to explain to you that this story really has a very deep meaning.

Let's say that I convince you by logical arguments, in a purely philosophical dispute, that there is a God in heaven. What have I really accomplished? Nothing! Why is this so? It is because such a proof only shows that I can, through mental exercises, build up a logical structure in my brain that corresponds to the understanding that God exists.

Descartes brought many proofs that God exists, and all that this proves is that he was able to convince himself...

But when I eat something, my status clearly demonstrates that I am a physical creature. I go through a total experience, and it helps me understand that my existence depends on external factors. By eating, I show that my existence depends on receiving something from the outside. It puts me in a status of having been created. And if I was created, it stands to reason that there must be a Creator. And that explains why Abraham would give his guests food.

Thus, we can see that anybody who refuses to eat is something of an apostate... Such a person has a feeling that he or she is a deity, and therefore he can refuse to eat...

This clarifies many events that took place throughout history. When Jethro, the priest of Midian, from the children of Abraham, invites Moses who has fled to Midian to share bread with him (Exodus 2,20), this stems from the recognition that the link to God comes through eating. It helps Moses prepare for his future meetings with the Children of Israel. And in the next stage, after Moses has taken the Jews out of Egypt, when Jethro brings Moses his wife and children and comes to visit the Children of Israel in the desert, Aaron and all the elders of Israel come to eat bread... before God (Exodus 17,12)! Once again we encounter food as an element through which a person has an experience that is fundamental and existential – showing that he depends on factors that are external to his own being!

But we are still left with the most important question of all – in which God do you believe?

Why is this question important? Very simple – we know from the earliest days of human history, from the time that Cain and Abel were born, that hate came into the world. What was the reason? One reason that is given in Jewish tradition (the tradition of the "Keepers of the Secrets") is that the dispute was about religion. Yes, you heard right. Each brother said, "My god is more righteous and stronger than yours..." Does this sound like a good reason to argue? Or does it sound strange?

Doesn't it sound a bit removed from our modern world? Like it belongs in the times of ancient history? If that is what you think, what can you say about the religious fanaticism of ISIS?

The Patriarch Abraham began to speak about God, a deity who loves His creatures, one who is the God of all His creatures, who created the world and loves everything in it. At the same time, he also spoke of the mystic truth that one out of three reasons for war in the world is faith in God, but it was not yet known that the long history of humanity would include endless struggles between Christianity and Islam or other religions on the subjects of truth and faith. At the time, this was a secret. Today when we look back at history, we can see that this is really what happened. And that is why it is important to know which God we believe in! Does He insist that all the people in the world must be exactly the same? Does He demand that anybody who rejects Him must be killed in the most horrible way?

Absolutely not!

And now we can talk about another secret that was taught by Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, more than 3,800 years ago. There is only one God in our world. And this leads to a conclusion that there is only one valid religion in the world!

Wait, let me elaborate on that point.

This means that there are no special Divine laws meant for different specific groups of people in our world. The Creator of the Universe speaks and acts as the God of all humanity, and He takes on responsibility for each and every nation. This can also be seen in the words of the prophets, as they appear in the Bible. And, just as Abraham took on himself the task of teaching all the people of his generation about this one unique God and the fact that He loves all of His creatures, so Abraham's children took on the task of bringing these glad tidings to all of humanity, throughout all history.

That is, we are talking about a universal path, which includes all of humanity. However, at the same time this is a religion which maintains Jewish individualism by giving additional tasks that are meant only for the Jews as part of their activities for the benefit of all humanity.

In other words: We are all obligated to observe the Seven Mitzvot of Bnei Noach. Abraham too was a descendent of Noach. He was born in the tenth generation after Noach, as listed from father to son in the Torah. But Abraham accepted additional tasks which are not required of the other nations of the world. And later, at the momentous events that took place at Mount Sinai, the nation of Israel accepted a number of additional mitzvot. We are proud to have been involved in a direct conversation with God and to have brought the word of God to all of humanity, but we must always remember that the rest of the world are not at a "lower level" even though they are not obligated by the additional tasks that Israel accepted.

What is the essence of the Seven Mitzvot? We will talk about this in the next lesson of this series. But first I want to delve a bit deeper into the "second" secret mentioned above – that there is only one God who created the world.

The world can be viewed as a triangle, with the Creator at a vertex at the top and two different people at the other two vertexes. The two created people compete with each other, since each one tries selfishly to obtain all the abundance that the Creator can give him.

The truth is that each person should receive all the good that the Creator has given to His world, and this fact has become common knowledge in many places. The way for everybody to achieve all of the abundance is to recognize that the other creature standing nearby is also a creation of the same Creator that made him!!

Love that is shown by one person to the one standing next to him at the base of the triangle is an expression of the love for the Creator, since we have been taught that all of humanity was created in the image of the Almighty (see Genesis 1,27). Every encounter we have with "another" can be seen as an encounter with the "shadow" of the Creator (note that "tzel," shadow, in part of the word "tzelem," image).

Every hour of every day we are tested by looking at how we relate to other people. We might have contact with a bus driver, a mailman, a bank clerk, a neighbor, or even a relative. In every meeting with another person we encounter the essence of the Creator that is within him or her. It is true that we are not always aware of this openly. And that is why our lives are long enough for us to learn exactly how to act in a proper way. We will talk about this in future discussions.

Let us return to Abraham and his role. He revealed to the world the secret of maintaining our link to the Creator, who loves us all and provides abundance for us – the entire world. All that is needed is for us to live in peace with our neighbor, to give the "other" a place such as the one we want for ourselves, to help each other in a fruitful partnership. We must never have a relationship like that of Cain and Abel, who began to argue about their positions in the world just as soon as it became apparent that they were there to share with each other.

What practical steps can we take to make sure that this happens? What actions must we take (what mitzvot should we perform) in order to inject this understanding into our daily lives?

More on this in our next lecture.

Shalom, and greetings from the Land of Israel.



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