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Abraham: Our Patriarch of Loving-kindness

The first patriarch mentioned in the *Torah* is Abraham. Jewish people refer to Abraham as *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham our father. Of the three patriarchs, known as the *avot* in Hebrew, only Abraham's name contains the word *av*, father. Abraham was the quintessential patriarch, the foundation upon which the entire nation of Israel was built.

It's important to note that in the Jewish tradition only three men — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — are considered the *avot*. The term *avot* refers not only to our biological lineage with our forefathers, but also to our spiritual inheritance that has passed down to us. It is through the patriarchs that monotheism (the worship of the one true God) and morality (what today we call Judeo-Christian values) were ushered into the world, and it all began with Abraham.

When we first meet Abraham (Genesis 11:26), his name is *Avram*, Abram. Later in Genesis 17, God told Abram that his name would be changed forever: “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham . . .” The significance of this seemingly minor name change can only be appreciated in the original Hebrew.

At first, Abraham was the spiritual father, the *av*, of his hometown, Aram. The name Avram is a conjunction of the words *av* and *Aram*. When God entered into covenant with Abraham, He changed Abraham's name, signifying Abraham's new role as a global leader. With that change in name, Abraham became “a father of many nations,” or in Hebrew, *Av hamon goyim*. The name Avraham is a combination of Abraham's previous role with his new one as the spiritual leader of many nations.

Perhaps no person in history revolutionized our world more than Abraham did.

In Genesis 14:13, Abraham was called “Abram the Hebrew,” Avram Ha'ivri, which translates literally as “Abraham, the one who is on the other side.” This makes sense when you consider that the entire world stood on one side theologically, and Abraham stood alone on the other. He introduced the radical idea of monotheism into a world dominated by paganism.

Abraham also laid the foundation for the nation of Israel, and for that matter, for the Christian faith as well. Christians also claim Abraham as father of their faith. We see this in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). The Jewish-trained and educated apostle Paul wrote in the Book of Galatians, “So also Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:6-7).

Abraham, indeed, is father to us all.

While much has been written about Abraham's incredible faith and obedience, in Judaism, the character trait most associated with Abraham is *chesed*, loving-kindness. In fact, Abraham was considered so kind that, according to the Jewish sages, the angel of *chesed* once came before God and said, “As long as Abraham is in the world, there is nothing for me to do.” Abraham's loving-kindness was likened to the kindness that only angels could bestow.

In this month's *Limmud*, we will study the life of our father Abraham and lessons we can learn from him, particularly those related to this concept of *chesed*.

“No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.”

— Genesis 17:5



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A Seeker of Truth

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”

— Genesis 12:1

One of the first things we learn about Abraham is that God spoke to him, an experience reserved for very few. In Genesis 12, God told Abraham to leave everything behind and travel to an unknown land. Abraham immediately followed God’s directive: *“He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan...”* (Genesis 12:5). Abraham uprooted his family and his followers, trusting God and walking in obedience.

To appreciate how radical Abraham’s response was to God’s command, we need to understand a bit more about Abraham’s upbringing. Abraham was born into a pagan family. We read in Joshua 24:2, “. . . Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods.” But God took Abraham from there and brought him to Canaan. So what made Abraham different? Why did God choose this particular man?

According to stories passed along in the Jewish oral tradition, which Jesus certainly would have known, Abraham had discovered the one true God long before their encounter in Genesis 12:1. Jews believe when Abraham was young, like many of the people of his time, he worshiped the sun as god. It made sense; the sun was the source of warmth, light, and energy for people, animals, and vegetation.

However, Abraham noticed that when the sun went down, the moon came up. He reasoned that the moon had to be greater than the sun if it replaced the sun every day. The moon had its own qualities as the only light in the night sky, and its own influence on nature. For some time, Abraham worshiped the moon. Still, that didn’t seem right either since the sun would banish the moon in the morning.

Eventually, Abraham concluded that there had to be a power above the sun and moon that controlled them both. Just as a wheel cannot turn without someone who turns it, he understood that the cycles and systems of the world could not function without a force behind them. Abraham understood that the force behind creation and every creature was God.

We see this same principle echoed throughout the Scriptures in both the Jewish and Christian Bibles. In Psalm 19, David wrote, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge”* (vv.1-2). In the Christian Bible, the apostle Paul wrote, *“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his external power and divine nature — have been clearly seen ...”* (Romans 1:20).

Therefore, Abraham believed in one God and that all creation emanated from the same source. This led him to embrace the characteristic that he became most known for in the Jewish tradition — the characteristic of *chesed*, loving-kindness. Believing that everything and everyone came from one God led Abraham to understand that all people were connected and should live in harmony with each other. Abraham embraced the truth expressed in Genesis 1:27, *“So God created mankind in his own image,”* which is repeated in Genesis 5:1, and reaffirmed for Christians in Colossians 3:9-10.

We see this fundamental belief acted upon repeatedly throughout Abraham’s life. When Abraham and his nephew’s flocks and herds grew too big for both to sustain, Abraham gave Lot first choice of the land (Genesis 13:8-9). When God told Abraham of his plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham interceded on the behalf of any righteous living in those wicked cities (Genesis 18). We see Abraham’s kindness and fairness in his dealings even with those outside his family (see Genesis 14:17-24; 21:22-34; 23:3-16).

Abraham’s belief that each person was indwelt with the holiness of God was in stark contrast to the values of his society. Since the people believed in many gods, they saw themselves as distinct and separate from each other. There was no commonality that they shared with each other. According to this worldview, if the gods fought each other then surely it made sense for their followers to do likewise.

For Abraham, loving others was a form of loving God and a reflection of the God he obeyed and trusted. Showing loving-kindness to others was not only a service to God, but also a way of sharing the truth about God with others. Abraham believed that spreading loving-kindness could change the trajectory of the world. And indeed, it did.

think about it...

1. **“Abraham the Hebrew” refers to one who chose a different way of life than the rest of society.** In what ways are you like Abraham the Hebrew? In what areas of your life would you like to act more like Abraham?
2. **Why do you think God places so much emphasis on hospitality in the Bible,** rewarding those who are hospitable and punishing those who are not? What value do you feel our society places on hospitality?

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A Servant of God and Man

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. — Genesis 18:1-2

In Genesis 17, God had initiated a covenant with Abraham: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you...’” (v.1-2). God established a partnership in which Abraham would bring God’s truth to the world.

It was Abraham’s loving-kindness toward other people – his attribute of *chesed* – that made him the perfect person for God’s great mission. Only a person who cared deeply for all people could be suitable as a messenger of God.

Perhaps the greatest display of Abraham’s kindness toward others is in Genesis 18. Scripture tells us that Abraham “. . . was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men . . . he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.”

According to Jewish tradition, this instance occurred right after Abraham was circumcised. Yet Abraham wasn’t lying in bed recovering; he was sitting at the entrance of his tent actively looking for travelers to whom he could bestow kindness. When he spotted three men, he didn’t call out to them or even walk toward them; he ran toward them and bowed before the travelers, showing them great respect.

Next, Abraham humbly and gently asked for permission to serve the three men; “If I have found favor in your eyes... Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet... Let me get you something to eat...” (vv. 3-5). Once the men agreed to allow Abraham to bring them water and food, Abraham prepared what in those days would have been considered a lavish and expensive feast. He instructed Sarah to quickly bake bread out of “the finest flour” (v.6) and Abraham “ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf” (v.7).

After the meal was prepared (as quickly as possible so as not to tarry the travelers more than necessary), Abraham personally served the meal although he had plenty of servants who could have done so for him. For most people, this kind of hospitality would have been reserved for a very important guest or extremely beloved family member. However, for Abraham, everyone - even a nomadic traveler – was to be considered important and like family.

Abraham’s kindness became the standard for hospitality that was widely practiced throughout the Jewish Bible and commended in the Christian Bible. Witness Laban’s kindness toward Eliezer (Genesis 24:29-31) and Jacob (Genesis 29:13) when they came to him as strangers. Rahab was greatly rewarded for the kindness and hospitality

she showed to the spies Joshua sent to scout out Jericho (Joshua 6:25). In the Christian Bible, we find Rahab listed as part of Jesus’ genealogy (Matthew 1:5), and she is commended for her actions in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25. Hospitality and sharing meals with others was a hallmark of the early church, and hospitality was commanded as a hallmark of the faithful (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; and 3 John 1:8).

On the other hand, declining to offer hospitality was considered a breach of conduct and the standard set by Abraham. For example, Jethro rebuked his daughters because they did not invite Moses into their house (Exodus 2:18-20). Gideon punished the elders of Sukkoth and Peniel for their failure to offer hospitality (Judges 8), and Nabal’s failure to offer hospitality and food to David’s men nearly set off a war (1 Samuel 25). Moreover, the nations of Ammon and Moab are eternally prohibited from joining the nation of Israel because of their failure to provide the Israelites with bread and water when they came out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 23:3-4).

By treating every human being with extreme kindness, Abraham demonstrated that all people are worthy of respect and that all people are connected through God. Abraham was a living example of God’s love and deep concern for the foreigner, the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). In a world of darkness, fear, competition, and strife, Abraham shined a light inspiring love, kindness, and human connection.

apply it...

- 1. SEEK OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHESED.** Just as Abraham ran toward opportunities to be hospitable, we need to actively seek out ways we can assist others throughout the day. (Genesis 18:1-2; Matthew 25:35-36)
- 2. PRACTICE EXTREME HOSPITALITY.** A powerful way to express God’s love and our love for His children is to treat every person who walks through the doors of our home with great honor and generosity. (Genesis 18:3-6; Luke 7:44-46)
- 3. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.** When we love our neighbor as ourselves, we attest to the fact that there is one Father of us all. (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-39)
- 4. FIND GODLINESS IN EVERY PERSON.** No matter how difficult or unpleasant a person might seem, he or she was created in the image of God. Look for the godliness in each person you meet. (Genesis 1:27; Colossians 3:9-10)



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A Champion of Compassion

Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”

— Genesis 18:23

When God determined that he would destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He asked, *“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”* (Genesis 18:17). But God decided to tell Abraham about the impending doom, saying *“For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just”* (18:19). As God’s partner in creating a moral and just world, it was necessary for God to let Abraham know what was happening.

Abraham responded to the information by immediately interceding on behalf of the condemned city. He asked God, *“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?”* A long and detailed bargaining process ensued where Abraham negotiated with God to spare the city for 50 people, then 45, then 40, and so on, until he asked for God’s mercy if there were only 10 righteous people in Sodom. And God agreed. If there were 10 righteous people, He would spare the city. However, even 10 good people in a city of thousands were not to be found, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed in a firestorm of sulfur (Genesis 19:24-25).

Abraham’s reaction upon hearing God’s intent to destroy these cities was complete empathy and compassion. This is quite surprising considering that Sodom represented the exact opposite of Abraham’s values and ideas. Abraham encouraged compassion and modeled generosity in his own home. As we read in the Book of Ezekiel, *“Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy”* (Ezekiel 16:49). Rather than showing compassion toward others, as Abraham modeled, the people of Sodom turned their backs upon the needy.

Abraham’s response becomes even more remarkable when we consider how other biblical people responded. For example, when God told Noah that He planned to destroy the world with a flood, *“Noah did everything just as God commanded him”* (Genesis 6:22). Noah didn’t disobey God, but he failed to pray for the rest of the world or attempt to encourage people to repent.

When God told Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that they would be destroyed if they did not repent, Jonah tried desperately to escape his task. Ultimately, the city of Nineveh did repent, and Jonah was quite unhappy about it: *“to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry”* (Jonah 4:1). Jonah was angry because he felt that people as wicked as those in Nineveh did not deserve the opportunity to repent and be saved. Jonah thought that these people

who stood against everything that he believed in should be punished, not forgiven. However, God felt differently.

Abraham felt differently about the sinners in his generation as well. In spite of the wickedness of Sodom, Abraham tried to save the people. Abraham was able to love and care for all people – even those with whom he severely disagreed and those who were prone to sin. Abraham’s love for others was greater than their shortcomings. In an act of *chesed* he prayed for the wicked city of Sodom with all his heart.

Our God is a God of compassion. As the psalmist wrote, *“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love”* (Psalm 103:8). So, too, the prophet Micah proclaimed, *“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? . . . You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea”* (Micah 7:18-19). In the Christian Bible, we see numerous times when Jesus acted out of his compassion for the people. (See Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34).

So, too, is the man who God chose to be the father of our faiths. As Abraham prayed on behalf of Sodom, he taught the world that sinners also deserve kindness. Just as we would not shut out our own child, we cannot give up on any child of God. Abraham worked toward the ultimate perfection of the world – when all people will be united and all people will serve the one true God.

think about it...

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- 3. How might you integrate more *chesed*, acts of loving-kindness, into your life at home, at work, and in your community?**
- 4. Knowing that all people are part of the human family, how might we shift a culture of competition and opposition into one of collaboration and encouragement? What one step might you take today to begin that change?**
- 5. How can we pray for others outside our family today as Abraham did for the people of Sodom? Make a list of people or groups who you might pray for regularly.**