

Abraham: Pioneer Religious Educator, Paradigm for Contemporary Teachers of Judaism

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Jewish educators, whether they work in day schools, synagogues, campuses, or any other of the various formats for adult education, look to role models for the inspiration necessary to continue their difficult and challenging undertakings. Lee S. Shulman has said¹ that teachers first apprentice for their future professions when they themselves are students in their earliest years, and they often model themselves after the charismatic, inspiring, and influential instructors they encountered during their own educations.² Jewish educators, therefore, when they finally find themselves standing before their own classes of students, sometimes also “channel” the instructors who had the greatest influence upon them. Such memories of one’s own school years can be positively augmented if one is privileged to develop personal relationships with contemporary exemplars of excellence whose activities and achievements can serve as additional models of professionalism, sophistication, dedication, and success.

But even if a Jewish educator feels that neither his past nor his present have been populated with truly great Jewish teachers,

purely historical figures can also play such a role, sometimes even to greater effect than those with whom one has had firsthand experience.³ One such historical personage who readily serves as a paradigm for Jewish educators throughout the ages is Abraham, our biblical forefather, the progenitor of the Jewish people. Maimonides⁴ views Abraham's *raison d'être* as the fulfillment of an essentially educational mission to spread monotheism throughout the Middle East:

There were prophets before Moses, such as the patriarchs Shem, Eber, Noah, Methushelah, and Enoch....

Men like Abraham, who received a large measure of prophetic inspiration, called their fellow men together and led them by training and instruction to the truth which they had perceived. Thus Abraham taught, and showed by philosophical arguments, that there is one God, that He has created everything that exists besides Him, that neither the constellations nor anything in the air ought to be worshipped; he trained his fellow men in this belief, won their attention by pleasant words as well as by acts of kindness....

Our Sages, when speaking of prophets before Moses (which would therefore include Abraham),⁵ used expressions like the following: *Bet Din* (court) of Eber,⁶ *Bet Din* of Methushelah, and in the college of Methushelah; although all these were prophets, yet they taught their fellow men in the manner of preachers, teachers, and pedagogues.

Maimonides' premise regarding Abraham and his prophetic colleagues should lead a Jewish educator to speculate regarding the pedagogic techniques that Abraham employed and consider whether any of these approaches might be appropriate for contemporary educational activities.

However, it must be noted that Maimonides' description of Abraham's efforts at spreading monotheism appears to be based exclusively upon rabbinic texts and interpretations rather than

the accounts of the Patriarch's life that we find in the verses of the Bible itself.⁷ While classical rabbinic understandings of the Written Tradition in general, and the personalities that are its foci in particular, are central to a traditional understanding of these texts, Rava's dictum that *Ein Mikra Yotzeh Midai Peshuto* (a biblical text cannot be interpreted without also addressing its literal meaning)⁸ cannot be ignored. Adopting such a literal approach to the biblical verses describing Abraham's life found in Genesis 11:26–25:10; 26:5 results in the conclusion that the Bible appears to go out of its way to emphasize Abraham's exemplary moral and ethical behavior,⁹ rather than the actual substantive attempt on the part of the Patriarch to inculcate monotheism within his contemporaries. A rabbinic source that does appear true to the literal meaning of the biblical text vis-à-vis its description of Abraham's activities is found in *Ethics of the Fathers* (5:19), where, instead of being depicted as a master religious educator per se, Abraham is portrayed as a giant of ethical perfection:

Whoever possesses these three personal qualities is considered a *Talmid*/disciple¹⁰ of Abraham, our Forefather...

(Those endowed with) generosity (lit., a "good eye"), a humble spirit, and a lowly soul are numbered among the disciples of Abraham, our Forefather.¹¹

The specific terminology of *Talmid* employed by this Mishna not only suggests that Abraham's activities, although seeming to be simply reflections of the man's inner goodness, were in fact at least to some degree self-consciously educational, with a focus upon character education rather than theological teachings, but also reflects a particular perspective regarding the manner in which character and personality traits develop and manifest themselves within an individual over the course of his life. While some traditional Jewish sources¹² appear to assume that at least a portion of moral, spiritual, and ethical tendencies and behaviors are primar-

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upbringing, and consequently there may always be a limit to the effectiveness of self-conscious moral and ethical education from the adolescent years onward,¹³ the Mishna Avot's usage of the term *Talmid* reflects a contrary orientation. Stating that one can choose to become a successful "student" of a particular philosophy or lifestyle at any point of his life suggests that a person always possesses the ability to will himself either to transform his character in order to become more like someone whom he admires, or to live up to ethical standards articulated in literature that he is studying and that he wishes to internalize. If it is assumed that one can exercise his autonomous moral choice in order to self-identify and become Abraham's literal and figurative "disciple," then he similarly can will himself to move positively along the moral spectrum to at least approach to some extent the rarified attributes that characterized Abraham. Perhaps it was specifically these exemplary personal qualities that Abraham either already possessed prior to receiving his first Divine summons (Genesis 12:1-3), or at least had the potential to develop subsequently, that qualified him for being chosen by God to win adherents to monotheism throughout the Middle East and thereby essentially found the Jewish people.

A Jewish educator who decides to make himself into someone who will be identified as a student of Abraham operates, in my opinion, on at least two levels with respect to contemporary formal educational enterprises. On the one hand, each must assume personal responsibility to strive to perfect his own spiritual and character traits, that is, to make himself into an "Abrahamic" figure, and thereby become worthy of his students' emulation in word and deed. Reish Lakish offered his pun in *Sanhedrin* 18a on *Zephania* 2:1¹⁴ with respect to judges having themselves to be subject to judgment,¹⁵ stating that first one must have his own house in order before he can presume to give directives to others, and the same should be true with respect to teachers of Judaism, if they desire to be taken seriously by their students. On the other hand, even if a teacher succeeds in attaining his own high standards of

ethics and conduct, he must also believe in the possibility of his students potentially doing the same, at least partly as a result of his teachings and personal example.¹⁶

While Maimonides might insist that outstanding character traits and behavior might serve as a mere “means” rather than a significant “end” with respect to the promulgation of religious ideas,¹⁷ it is possible that the Torah, on the level of simple literalness, presents the opposite perspective. The manner in which Abraham’s activities are presented in the Bible strongly suggests that personal example, particularly actions that would fall under the rubric of *Kiddush HaShem* (the sanctification of God’s name), might have been this forefather’s primary concern. Assuming such an approach, suddenly God’s initial comments to Abraham take on newfound meaning:

And I will Make you into a great nation and I will bless you and I will Aggrandize your name and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse, and all of the families of the earth will bless by means of you [i.e., they will use you and your life as the exemplar of being blessed]. (Genesis 12:2–3)

Whereas God’s blessing within this context could be interpreted as connoting the degree of material success that Abraham will enjoy – that is, others will use Abraham’s example as the type of material success that they wish for someone for whom they care¹⁸ – it is also possible that Abraham’s great moral and spiritual standing will serve as a paradigm of virtue that people will come to wish for one another. And when these individuals stop to reflect upon the possible origins of Abraham’s unique and extremely admirable personal qualities, only then might they conclude that it is his religious beliefs that have powerfully informed the lifestyle that he is following. Whereas the “nature/nurture” debate can usually be invoked with regard to accounting for notable behavior and value system, Abraham’s attitudes and actions, in light of his iconoclastic

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nature with respect to not only the rest of his contemporaries but even his blood relatives,¹⁹ must be attributed to his idiosyncratic religious beliefs. The same Efron who ends up accepting from Abraham an exorbitant price for the Machpelah Cave so that the Patriarch could bury his wife Sara, says to him, "Listen my master, you are a prince of God in our midst." (Genesis 23:6) Consequently, Abraham's attracting attention to himself by his singular *menschlichkeit* might have been all he needed to do to advance interest in the monotheism to which he fervently adhered.

The classical rabbinic texts illustrating *Kiddush HaShem* vis-à-vis the non-Jewish world²⁰ reflect just such an associative chain of thought, – remarkable ethical practice leading onlookers to attribute actions that are not associated with typical human nature to the specific Jewish belief system and code of practice of the individuals in question:

✎ A) YOMA 86A

As the rabbis taught: "And you will love the Lord, your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) – that the Name of Heaven should become Beloved by means of you. That one should read and study (Torah) and serve scholars, and his dealings with people should be courteous – about such an individual, what do ²¹"בריות" / others say concerning him? Happy is his father that taught him Torah, happy is his teacher who taught him Torah, woe to those who did not study Torah. This person who has learned Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how refined is his behavior, concerning him is said, "And He said to me, 'You are My servant, Israel, that via you I am glorified.'" (Isaiah 49:3)

✎ B) TALMUD YERUSHALMI BAVA METZIA 2:5

Shimon ben Shetach (supported himself by means of) producing linen fabric. His students said to him, "Rabbi! This is

beneath your dignity. We will purchase for you a donkey and you will not need to further do this work." They went and bought for him a donkey from a Syrian.²² A jewel (was found by the students following the sale) to be attached to its neck. They came to him (R. Shimon ben Shetach) and said, "You will no longer have to work at all!" He said to them, "Why?" They said to him, "We bought a donkey from a Syrian and a jewel was hung around its neck." He said to them, "Did the seller know this?" They said to him, "No." He said to them, "We have to go and return it [the jewel]." (They said to him,) "Didn't R. Huna Bibi *bar* Gozlon in the name of R. HaTivon in the presence of Rebbe say: Even according to the view that stealing from a non-Jew is prohibited, everyone agrees that if he errs (in terms of giving something of value to a Jew when he did not have to) that it is permitted to keep it." (He said to them,) "What do you think – Shimon ben Shetach is a barbarian?" R. Shimon ben Shetach was more desirous of (a non-Jew declaring), "Let the Name of the God of the Jews be blessed" than any sort of this-worldly reward.

R. Chanina recounted the following anecdote:

The rabbis purchased a bushel of wheat from a certain Roman soldier. They found in it a bundle of coins, and they returned them to the seller. He said: "Blessed is the God of the Jews."

Aba Oshia from Turia said (after finding lost jewelry belonging to a queen): "These are yours." [She said:] "These are worthless to me. I have better jewelry. I have other jewelry!" He said to her: "The Torah decrees that we have to return it."²³ She said: "Blessed is the God of the Jews."

R. Shmuel bar Sisretai went up to Rome. The queen lost her bracelet and he found it. A decree was proclaimed throughout the country – Whoever returns it within three days, will receive such and such [as a reward]; after three days, his head will be cut off. He did not return it within the three days. After three days had passed, he returned it. She

said to him: "Were you outside the country [and therefore were unaware of the decree?]. He said: "I was in the country." She said: "Did you not hear the decree?" He said: "I heard it." She said: "And what did the decree say?" He said: "Whoever returns it within three days will receive such and such [as a reward]; after three days, his head will be cut off." She said to him: "So why did you not return it?" He said to her: "It should not be said that because I feared you I did it, but rather because I feared God." She said: "Blessed be the God of the Jews."

†8 C) SHEILTOT OF R. ACHAI, PARSHAT
VAYECHI, SHEILTA 36

It is unnecessary to state that once a person makes a verbal commitment to sell to another something (that he is morally bound to follow through on the sale), but even if he merely decided within his heart to do so, although he did not verbally express such an intention, it is inappropriate for him to change his mind, as it is written (Psalms 15:1-2), "A Psalm of David. *HaShem*, who dwells in Your Tent, who resides in Your Holy Mountain? One who goes wholeheartedly and does righteousness and speaks truth in his heart."

This is exemplified by R. Safra. He had a donkey that he wished to sell. A man²⁴ came and made an offer at the time when R. Safra was reciting *Kriyat Shema*. He said to him, "Will you sell to me for such-and-such a price?" He (R. Safra) did not answer (because of his being in the middle of the *Shema*). He (the prospective buyer) thought that the price was unsatisfactory. He increased his offer, and he said to him, "Will you sell to me for such-and-such a price?" He did not answer. When he (R. Safra) had completed (his recitation of the *Shema*), he said to him, "For the amount that you offered initially, I had concluded in my heart to sell to you. The additional amount I will not take from you."²⁵

It is intriguing to consider whether *Kiddush HaShem* should be an educational goal with respect to a Jewish educator's classroom students. One could argue that by virtue of their participation in a Jewish studies experience, they do not have the same requirements as might an idolater or another nonbeliever. Yet is such an assumption defensible, even in an Orthodox day school? I have written in the past²⁶ that a relevant model for Jewish education that takes place in a day school, let alone as part of venues whose goals are less clearly defined, is the process of conversion. Not only must information and skills be imparted by teacher to student, but also long-term commitment to the lifestyle and its values.²⁷ It is possible that a *Kiddush HaShem* framework for thinking about curricular choices, classroom and extracurricular activities, and an overall approach would render much of Jewish education more effective and long-lasting than it is presently thought to be.

An alternate view regarding the relationship between *chesed* and theological belief is offered by Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik. He contends that Abraham's inherent devotion to acts of kindness itself directly led to his overtly educational activities:²⁸

While the urge to teach is personalistic and metaphysical, there is also another urge, one that is of a moral character: teaching as an act of *chesed* or *caritas*.²⁹ *Chesed* consists of an existential communal awareness, an open and not closed life, a life not as a castle or fortress, but as an accessible tent....

The principle of *chesed* mandates not only providing material but spiritual goods. The Bible decrees (Leviticus 25:35), "If your brother becomes increasingly poor, and his means fail with you, then you shall uphold him; as a stranger and a sojourner shall he live with you." This law is related not only to economic poverty, but also to spiritual deprivation. Just as we are duty bound to feed the poor and clothe the destitute, we are equally obligated to teach the ignorant, dispel prejudice and superstition, and enlighten those who live in darkness. To teach is an act of great charity.³⁰

However, it would seem to me that with respect to the sort of teaching that could be considered a clear-cut act of *chesed*, a distinction might be drawn between the subject matter that Abraham may have taught and what a contemporary Jewish studies teacher is required to impart to his students. Teaching the great theme of monotheism, as well as any of the other seven Noachide commandments,³¹ could be considered a function of a *chesed* orientation in the sense that for a human being to live a civilized existence³² allows him to maximize his potential and enjoy a heightened quality of life. But could the same be said with respect to teaching the more esoteric and ritualistic aspects of Jewish tradition? It could be maintained that since someone halachically defined as a Jew is expected to adhere to his traditions, my informing him of those religious requirements is helping the student to live up to God's expectations, and in that sense I am doing him a great kindness. Furthermore, on an intellectual level, an educated individual is always considered superior to one who is lacking in knowledge.³³

On the other hand, Jewish law seems to contain a counter-theme as well: "Leave Israel alone. It is better that they sin inadvertently rather than intentionally."³⁴ The quite realistic assumption that just teaching someone does not mean that he will adhere to what he has been taught would imply that at least on certain occasions, my teaching an uninterested, immature, or simply rebellious student could be considered entrapment and insensitivity rather than an act of kindness. If we were to take seriously Solomon's directive (Proverbs 22:6), "Educate the youth in accordance with his manner/interests/predilections, [then] even when he becomes elderly, he will not depart from it [the teachings]," then only the type of Jewish teaching that is appropriate and practical for the student at this point in his life and religious development could be truly characterized as an act of *chesed* rather than a waste of time, or even an additional cause for disinterest and hostility to the tradition.³⁵

Admittedly, when we consider the descriptions of Abraham's

educational activities from the perspective of the Midrash and the classical rabbinic commentators, in contrast to the Bible's accounts of the patriarch, a different picture seems to emerge. Rather than allowing his ethical actions and hospitality to speak for themselves, Abraham is depicted, at least during his younger years, as confrontational and impatient with those who adhere to religious beliefs differing from his radical monotheism. Noting a textual curiosity in Genesis 11:28, "And Haran died in the face/presence of Terach, his father," the Midrash presents an involved scenario whereby Abraham's audacity regarding publicly attacking idolatry leads to the death of his brother, which the text is therefore understood to attribute at least indirectly to his father:

Beraishit Rabba 38:13

R. Chiya bar brai D'Rav Ada D'Yafo: Terach (Abraham's father) was an idolator. One time he went out to a place and left Abraham to sell (idols) in his place. A man came and wanted to buy. He (Abraham) said to him, "How old are you?" He replied, "I am 50 or 60." He said to him, "Woe unto the man who is 60 and who worships one that is a day old [the idol had just been made that day]." The man was embarrassed and left. One time a woman came holding a sack of flour. She said to him (Abraham), "Go and offer this before them [the idols]." He went, took an axe, smashed all of the idols (but one), and placed the axe in the hand of the largest idol. When his father returned, he said to him, "Who did this to them?" He said to him, "How can I keep this from you? A woman came carrying a bag of flour. She told me to offer it before them. I offered it before them. This one said, 'I wish to be first,' and this one said, 'I wish to be first.' The largest one rose up, took an axe, and broke the others." He said to him, "Why are you telling me lies? Can these think?" He said to him, "Why don't your ears listen to what your mouth is saying?" He (Terach) brought him (Abraham) to Nimrod.³⁶ He said to him, "Wor-

that can extinguish the fire?" He said to him, "Worship the water." He said to him, "Why don't we worship the clouds that absorb the water?" He said to him, "Worship the clouds." He said to him, "Why don't we worship the wind that disperses the clouds?" He said to him, "Worship the wind." He said to him, "Why don't we worship man, who can stand up to the wind?" He said to him, "You are playing with words. I worship the fire. I will throw you into it, and your God can come and save you from him [my god.]" Haran (Abraham's brother) was standing there, undecided. He said, "If Abraham proves victorious, I will say that I agree with Abraham. And if Nimrod wins, then I will say that I agree with Nimrod." When Abraham was thrown into the furnace and emerged unscathed, they said to him (Haran), "In whom do you believe?" He said, "I agree with Abraham." They took him and threw him into the furnace and he was burnt. Consequently, he died in front of Terach his father.³⁷

Maimonides depicts Abraham as standing on street corners engaging in public debate with passers-by, rather than directly defying or threatening King Nimrod with regard to religious matters.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, the Laws of Idolatry 1:3

When he reached the age of 40, he came to recognize God's existence. When he recognized (God) and understood, he began to offer answers to the inhabitants of Ur Kasdim and to arrange debates with them and said, "This is not the way of truth that you are following." And he began to destroy idols and make known to the people that it is wrong to (Genesis 21:33) worship any god but the God of the Universe, and only to Him should one bow down, and to offer sacrifices so that all people should come to know Him. Furthermore it is proper to destroy all images so that the people should not come to err, the way that these do who believe that there are no gods other than these idols. When he was victorious

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over the others by means of his proofs, the king attempted to execute him³⁸ and a miracle was performed and he left Haran. He began to stand and call out in a great voice to the entire world to make known to them that there is One God for the entire world, and only to Him is it appropriate to worship, and he would go and call and gather the people from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, until he reached the land of Canaan, and he would call out, as it is said (Genesis 21:33), "And he called there on the Name of God, Deity of the world."³⁹ And when the people would gather to him and ask him questions regarding his words, he would make known to each individual in accordance with his intelligence so that he would cause him to return⁴⁰ to the path of truth to the point where there gathered to him thousands and tens of thousands, and these are the people of the "house of Abraham" (Genesis 14:14, 23, 27; 18:19) and he implanted in their hearts this great essential principle (monotheism), and he composed books regarding this and made it known to his son Isaac.

Residues of the confrontationalist attitude that is attributed by rabbinic sources and commentators to the young Abraham⁴¹ can be detected in some of the biblical texts that describe his activities when he is somewhat older. Following his victory over the kings that had kidnapped Lot, Abraham does not hesitate to boldly reject, in a somewhat insulting manner, the King of Sodom's offer to allow him to keep the spoils of war: "(I do not want that) you shall say, 'I have enriched Abraham.'" (ibid., 14:23) His introductory comment, which perhaps contains the rationale for Abraham's unwillingness to keep any of the materiel taken from the vanquished: "I have raised my hand to *HaShem*, God on high, the Possessor of heaven and earth" (Ibid., 22), could also be viewed as an indirect "slap in the face" in light of the Torah's earlier comment regarding Sodom's inhabitants: "And the people of Sodom were evil and

Just as Abraham apparently felt that the king of Sodom had to bear some responsibility for the moral and spiritual shortcomings of his citizenry, he bluntly levels a similar charge against the King of Gerar. When Avimelech asks him why he and Sara concealed their true relationship when they first came to the kingdom, Abraham fearlessly responds: "There is no fear of God in this place and I could have been killed concerning my wife." (ibid., 20:11) And when the same king comes together with his military general to try to strike a peace accord with Abraham, the patriarch speaks accusatorially regarding iniquities that he believes he has suffered at the hand of the king's servants: "And Abraham rebuked Avimelech concerning the well of water that Avimelech's servants had stolen from him." (ibid., 21:25)

It could even be suggested that the manner in which Abraham negotiates with God regarding the impending destruction of Sodom and Amora (ibid., 18:23 ff.) reflects a powerful fearlessness when he felt the cause was just and/or someone had been acting incorrectly, regardless of whom he was addressing. By extension, with regard to Abraham's promulgating monotheism, it could be readily imagined that he would be ready to strike a similar tone of prophetic righteousness and assuredness. Extrapolating from these examples of Abraham's behavior, Jewish educators would be expected similarly to forthrightly defend Jewish values when the mores and assumptions of a student's culture and society are subjected to close scrutiny and found wanting (such as Socrates' "gadfly" model),⁴² in the interests of convincing him or her to strive for higher and more meaningful spiritual and moral existence.

However, a more complex, and in my view more interesting, conclusion could be drawn if we assumed that the manner in which Abraham "spoke to power" was decidedly different from the approach that he employed at a later point in his life, when he was trying to influence the beliefs of the common man more effectively than he had in the past. When dealing with governmental leaders, one usually does not have the luxury of attempting to develop a deep social relationship over time. How many

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audiences does one ever get to have with a king? Furthermore, a king is responsible not only for his own conduct, but that of his entire nation, and therefore directness is of the essence if change is to be effected. The same could be said with respect to Divine revelations, for who knows how many revelations one will receive, and the Almighty's actions clearly have the potential to impact profoundly upon all of mankind as well as the entire universe. Consequently, we can understand how Abraham felt that he had to make the best of his limited opportunities to advocate for what he considered the most effective way a country or the universe ought to be run.

However when one deals with people who serendipitously cross one's threshold, such as the strangers to whom Abraham offers hospitality and kindness, such people may take to heart over time the extraordinary and therefore indelible kindness they encountered, and they have the option of returning. In such a case it would seem that confrontation would not necessarily prove maximally effective. It is evocative to consider that Abraham may have self-consciously changed his approach in this regard once he came to Canaan, repressing his natural confrontational nature which he may have allowed to function unchecked with respect to all of his interpersonal relationships in Ur Kasdim, in order to become a more effective communicator and advocator for religious belief. Such an approach makes Abraham that much more of a wonderfully rich model of what the ideal educator has to do in order to be effective in the classroom. Not only must he turn himself into a disciple of Abraham in developing his own high standards of ethics and sensitivity, but he may have to reorient and even reinvent his natural personality in order to become more relevant and accessible to his students.⁴³

Searching for personal meaning in the stories of the Torah can lead us to profound truths regarding not only the religious experience, but also how we should ideally conduct ourselves in our strivings to share such truths with our colleagues, peers, and students.

§ NOTES

1. Presentation to Jerusalem Fellows, March 1986.
2. David T. Hansen is of a similar mind:
Many are drawn to teaching because of teachers that they have had... The call to teach comes from what they have seen and experienced in the world, not solely from that they may have "heard" in their inner heart and mind...
(*The Call to Teach*, [New York: Teachers College Press, 1995], p.6).
3. Becoming intimately acquainted with one's own teacher(s) can entail not only positive experiences when the person's outstanding virtues are in ample evidence, but also disappointments when human flaws simultaneously come into view. One whom we come to know exclusively through our literature and ancient traditions can achieve, at least in our mind's eye and imagination, a level of perfection that is effectively beyond reproach and therefore an ongoing source of unadulterated inspiration. Although even biblical figures, whatever great heights they may reach over the course of their lifetimes, invariably have some shortcomings as well, in the spirit of Solomon's statement "Because with respect to man there is no completely righteous individual in the world who has done only good and has not sinned" (Ecclesiastes 7:20), nevertheless I find that it is easier to keep in mind the totality of an individual's life achievements when you have his entire record before you, as opposed to knowing someone who either has lived or is continuing to live in "real time," and there is always the possibility that newly discovered revelations will alter one's opinion of the person and his achievements. See n. 9 below for a specific instance of such a mixed approach to a biblical figure.
4. *The Guide for the Perplexed* 11:39, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover Publications, 1904) 1956, p. 231.
5. Whereas the concept of the "Yeshiva of Shem and Eber" is clearly not based upon any biblical text (see my essay "Stealth Torah Teachers" at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Noach.html>), but rather is a rabbinic idea cited in, e.g., *Genesis Rabba* 63:6, *Song of Songs Rabba* 6:6, the possibility that Abraham also had some sort of educational institution is possibly hinted at in Genesis 14:14, where the term *Chanichav* could legitimately be translated as "[Abraham's] students." See n. 7 below.
6. See *Genesis Rabba* 43.
7. Perhaps the best-known rabbinic reference to Abraham's and Sara's attempts at proselytizing is Genesis 12:5, where, among those who accompany them on their journey to Canaan, are included, "the souls that *Asu* [lit. they made] in Charan." But even the medieval commentator Rashi, who often incorporates rabbinic midrash in his interpretations, explains that the simple, literal meaning of this verse is a reference to the male and female servants that the couple acquired, rather than the initiates that they had converted. In this regard, Rashi agrees with Ibn Ezra, who similarly understands the phrase in question as referring either to those who were born into Abraham's and Sara's household or the servants that they purchased, as the preferred understanding, in contrast to the view that the verse refers to religious disciples.
A lesser-known source suggesting that Abraham was sponsoring some sort of "school" for religious thought and development is the usage of the word *Chanichav* found in Genesis 14:14. Yet from the wide range of translations that are offered for this word (Brown, Driver Briggs: "his tried and trusty men"; Da'at Mikra: "these are his servants, skilled swordsmen with military training"; ArtScroll Stone: "his disciples"; JPS, Schocken Bible: "his retainers"; Soncino Hertz: "his trained men"; The Living Torah: "his fighting men"; R. S.R. Hirsch: "all those who had been born into his house and educated by him"), it is apparent that the relationship between these individuals and Abraham is unclear, to say the least.
Another possible biblical reference to Abraham's attempting to spread monotheism are three verses (Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33) in which appear forms of the phrase, "And he called upon the Name of God." While these verses could be taken to connote that Abraham self-consciously constructed altars, offered sacrifices, and publicized his belief in God before

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the assembled masses, it is equally possible that we are given descriptions of Abraham's ongoing private faith and that these ritual observances took place out of sight of the general populace.

The first time that a divine order is issued to Abraham regarding possibly spreading the belief in a Single God is in Genesis 17:1, 4, "...I am the All-Inclusive/Powerful God, walk before Me and be whole...And you will be a father to a multitude of nations." Yet a literal rendering of the phrase in question would have to admit the possibility that "walking before God" could refer to living a moral, spiritual life without any conscious intention or specific activity designed to directly influence others to adopt a similar path. But there are rabbinic interpreters, such as *Netziv* on 17:4 who is in turn cited by *Daat Mikra*, that insist that this passage is a reflection of God's expectation of Abraham's engaging in active proselytizing in order to win at least admirers if not adherents to monotheism. Prior to this point, divine revelations received by Abraham dealt exclusively with promises of future offspring (12:2-3; 13:16; 15:4-5) and/or the eventual inheritance by these offspring of the land of Canaan (13:14-15, 17; 15:16).

The most explicit reference to Abraham literally serving as a religious and moral educator is found in 18:19, "Because I knew him with respect to his commanding his children and the members of his household after him, and they will observe the way of *HaShem*, to do righteousness and judgment." Yet it is still unclear from this verse exactly when God arrived at His evaluation of Abraham's intention to preserve and convey his religious and ethical beliefs as well as his values to his extended family - this question continues to assume that Abraham never received a direct divine commandment to undertake such a project. Was Abraham's educational enterprise known to God even before He first appeared to Abraham, when He instructed him to leave his homeland and travel to Canaan, or was this evaluation arrived at only after divine scrutiny of a significant amount of Abraham's freely willed actions and beliefs? Furthermore, just because Abraham was concerned about the conduct of his relatively limited circle of relatives, students, and servants ("children"; "members of his household"), why does this verse necessarily imply that he would also attempt to influence those outside his immediate circle with respect to such beliefs and behavior?

8. *Yevamot* 24a.

9. Examples of Abraham's exceptional ethical and kind actions include:

- a) rescuing Lot (14:13-6);
- b) refusing to accept compensation from the corrupt King of Sodom (14:21-4);
- c) offering outstanding hospitality to the three "guests" who ultimately turn out to be Angels (18:1-8);
- d) arguing with God in order to save Sodom and Amorrah and their inhabitants from destruction (18:20-32);
- e) rebuking Avimelech, King of Gerar, regarding the lack of morality in his kingdom (20:11);
- f) establishing an *Eishel* (according to one interpretation, an inn so that passers-by could be offered hospitality) (21:33);
- g) acquiring a burial ground for Sarah at great cost (21:23).

Of course, courses of action that could be considered the converse of these virtuous deeds are also evident in Genesis. These might include:

- a) lying twice about his relationship to Sarah in order to protect himself, yet at the same time potentially compromising his wife's virtue (12:11-20; 20:2);
- b) sending Hagar and Ishmael away from the encampment with insufficient provisions that would allow them to survive in the desert (21:14);
- c) not arguing with God to try to save Isaac from being sacrificed at the *Akeida* (22:1-10).

If the reader is not inclined to justify these latter actions by means of involved explanations, it becomes necessary to adopt the approach recommended to me by Nechama Leibowitz, (a great Jewish educator who continues to serve as a powerful role model for my educational efforts) regarding how to go about teaching King David's sin with BatSheva and his dispatching

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her husband Uriah to be killed in battle (11 Samuel 11). In a private conversation in 1986, she told me that it is important to teach David's transgression in a candid and frank manner. However, this clearly regrettable incident must be carefully placed within the context of David's entire life and his many positive achievements. What would be pedagogically improper as well as patently unfair is to focus exclusively upon this particular shortcoming, however egregious it may be, and therefore leave students with the impression that this incident was the most notable and memorable aspect of David's entire life. By analogy, therefore, less than admirable actions on the part of Abraham do not detract from the great kindnesses and charitable behavior that he demonstrated time and again over the course of his lifetime, as long as the full measure of his achievements are made available for consideration and evaluation.

10. Another biblical character whom we are urged to emulate in a "disciple" mode is Aaron, who, similar to Abraham, exhibited exemplary character traits throughout his life:

Pirkei Avot 1:12 Hillel said: Be among the disciples of Aaron, i.e., love peace, pursue peace, love people (the generic term *briyot* [lit. "creatures"] implies all human beings regardless of religion, nationality or ethnicity), and bring them closer to *Torah* (this latter sentiment does not necessarily mean either conversion or an exclusive concern with Jews since only they are commanded to study *Torah* and observe its laws, but rather it could be interpreted to refer to the aspects of *Torah* that even non-Jews have to observe, i.e., the 7 Noachide Commandments – see *Sanhedrin* 59a, statement of R. Meir).

11. A parallel rabbinic source is found in *Beitza* 32b:

[Regarding a community that failed to provide a newcomer with a livelihood and food], it was said that these descended from the mixed multitude (see, e.g., Numbers 11:4), for it is written, (Deuteronomy 13:18, regarding an *Ihr HaNidachat* [lit. a city that is to be obliterated], a city where the majority of its inhabitants have engaged in idolatry), "And there should not be attached to your hand anything from the property of the city in order that God will no longer be angered, and He will give to you mercy and will be merciful to you, and will multiply you as He swore to your forefathers." Anyone who is merciful to people, it is a well-known indication that he is a descendant of our father Abraham; and anyone who is not merciful to people, it is a well-known indication that he is not a descendant of our father Abraham.

While references to the assumption that those who are really descended from Abraham will act in accordance with the Forefather's kindness and ethical sensitivity appear in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Slaves 9:8; Gifts to the Poor 10:2; and Prohibitions of Intimacy 19:17 demonstrating that the Talmudic passage in *Beitza* refers to an assumption regarding the genetics of the Jewish people – the fact that converts are welcome to become part of the Jewish nation suggests that this argument can be taken only so far – rather than actual students of Abraham, nevertheless, it would appear that what is being discussed is a manner of behavior that was originally associated with Abraham, and which is expected of his biological and spiritual descendants. It could then be said that it is Abraham's original influence and personal example that allowed the comprehensive statement regarding the character traits of the Jewish people attributed to King David in *Yevamot* 79a to be made:

He said: There are three indicators regarding this nation (the Jews): They are merciful, they are modest/easily embarrassed/in awe of God, and they are practitioners of acts of kindness –

They are merciful, as it is said, (Deuteronomy 13:18)...(see the reference in *Beitza* above).

They are in awe of God, as it is said, (Exodus 20:16) "...in order that His Fear shall be upon your faces in order that you shall not sin," And they are practitioners of acts of kindness, as it is said, (Genesis 18:19), "Because I knew him with respect to his commanding his children and the members of his household after him, and they will observe the Way of *HaShem*, to do righteousness and judgment."

12. E.g., in *Yevamot* 79a, when King David decrees that the Gibeonites would not be allowed to

become full-fledged converts to the Jewish people because "they" lacked the capacity for qualities of compassion, modesty, and proactively engaging in acts of kindness, as reflected in "their" demand for revenge from the descendants of King Saul, sweeping generalizations are made regarding each of the individuals comprising this people who may not have had the opportunity to weigh in on the question of demanding revenge, as well as the nature of future generations who potentially might not display similar traits. Similar assumptions can be attributed to the biblical injunctions against every member of Amalek (Exodus 17:14-16) and the inhabitants of Amon and Moav (Deuteronomy 23:4) as well as Egypt (Ibid. 23:8-9.)

A second Talmudic source reflecting the assumption that at best prophylactic measures can be taken to prevent flawed personalities from acting out, but that focused education will be unable to change inherent character, can be found in *Shabbat* 156b. The Talmud describes how R. Nachman bar Yitzchak's mother, once having been informed by a soothsayer that her son will be a thief, took the precaution of requiring him to keep his head covered in order to remind him that there is Someone above him and therefore he should not give in to his personal temptations. One day, however, when the wind blew the head covering off, the Rabbi found himself beginning to climb someone else's tree in order to take for himself its fruit. While this individual's mother might have believed that the external reminder would eventually be internalized, thereby allowing her son to develop greater self-control, from R. Nachman bar Yitzchak's own account, this does not appear to have happened.

13. It is intriguing to consider in light of this discussion R. Chananya's famous dictum (*Berachot* 33b; *Megilla* 25a; *Nidda* 16b), "Everything is in God's Hands, except for [an individual's] fear of Heaven," i.e., while we are endowed genetically with all sorts of physical, emotional, and personal qualities, the pure freedom to make moral decisions is ours alone. Assuming that different people have different personal tendencies – see *Shabbat* 156a for attributing these differences to astrological causes – can at least *Yirat Shamayim* (the fear of Heaven) be substantively taught and learned (the language in Deuteronomy 4:10; 14:23; 17:19; 31:12-13 suggests that this can be achieved via education, albeit perhaps experiential as opposed to cognitive), so that a change in one's character can be observed, or should any such apparent changes be attributed merely to the individual's fear of punishment and desire for rewards, a most ulterior motivation for restraining one's drives and passions?

Furthermore *Rambam's* insistence in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, Chap. 5-7, that all of Judaism is premised upon the individual's ability to make his own moral choices would also suggest that there is room for a person to self-consciously develop positively over time in this regard.

14. "*Hitkosheshu VeKoshu*" literally means "Gather yourselves together (reflexive form of the verb) and gather together." However the similarity of the word *Koshesh* to *Koshet*, the latter signifying "adorning," hence "adorn yourself," served as the basis for Reish Lakish's comment.
15. The pun serves as an explanation for why kings of the Kingdom of Israel were not allowed to judge, because of their refusal to submit themselves to judgment, as embodied by King Yanai.
16. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2008), pp.98-99, articulates this prerequisite for successful teaching as follows:

The element of faith is indispensable for any pedagogical endeavor. A teacher who lacks confidence that his pupil is able to grasp the ideas that he passes on to him will never be successful. The teacher must also have faith that learning will have a moral impact upon the disciple. We believe that knowledge is redemptive and therapeutic performance. A pessimist must never do any teaching or be entrusted with the care of a child, since his efforts are doomed to failure from the very outset. All educational activities are identical with mothering, for what is mothering if not displaying unlimited faith in a child?

17. See the section from *The Guide for the Perplexed* 11:39 referenced above.

18. See, e.g., Rashi on Genesis 12:3.
19. In Genesis 12:1, Abraham is instructed to leave not only his birthplace, but also the members of his extended family. Although he originally takes along Lot, his nephew, they part company as a result of a moral disagreement concerning the legitimacy of using as pasture land meadows belonging to others (Genesis 13:7-13). The depiction of Lot choosing to live in Sodom and Amora despite their residents' being described as "evil and sinful toward God" once again iterates how Abraham was fundamentally different not only from those outside his family circle, but even from those within it.
20. While *Kiddush HaShem* (sanctifying God's name) is typically associated with martyrdom, particularly during times of persecution of Jews, the concept also reflects types of behaviors that engender admiration and even emulation on the part of adherents of other religions.
21. The term "בריות" is a general term that applies to Jews and non-Jews, leading to the conclusion that the verse in Deuteronomy calls upon Jews to cause God to be loved by all those with whom they come into contact. (Although such a conclusion might be weakened by the sentiment, "Woe to those who did not study Torah" – why would a non-Jew necessarily value, let alone be familiar with Torah study? it could nevertheless be understood as admiration for generic Jewish education rather than the study of a particular subject matter.)
22. A non-Jew.
23. As R. Shimon ben Shetach's students properly said to their teacher concerning an error that a non-Jew may have made during the course of a business dealing with a Jew, there is no legal obligation to return what was mistakenly given, so too with respect to found objects. Consequently, the representation that the Torah demands such action would appear more for the benefit of appearances than reflecting the actual parameters of the law. A homiletic approach would maintain that since Jews are obligated in creating scenarios of *Kiddush HaShem*, the strict letter of the law is trumped by such an overriding concern, which is indeed a Jew's obligation.
24. In R. Soloveitchik's *Abraham's Journey*, p. 107, the story is said to involve "a gentile aristocrat." Such an assumption does not appear to be based upon the standard text of the *She'iltot*.
25. Although in this instance, there is no record of the potential buyer's response, it is assumed that he was duly impressed by R. Safra's honesty.
26. See "Three Models to Inspire the Objectives of Torah Instruction in the Modern Orthodox Day School," in *Ten Da'at*, 7:1 (Fall 1993), 10-13.
27. See "Jewish Education for Commitment" in *Ten Da'at* 12 (Summer 1999), 15-31.
28. *Abraham's Journey*, p. 102.
29. Latin for "charity," spiritual and brotherly love, love for all people.
30. R. Soloveitchik expressed a similar theme with respect to *chesed* inherent within the Passover *Seder*.
- The *chesed* community exists at two levels. At one level, the individual shares his material possessions with other members of the community who are less fortunate. This is the helping or sharing community. At the second level, the individual gives away the spiritual goods with which God has blessed him. He lets other members of the community get a glimpse of the beautiful treasures he has acquired through a painstaking effort, diligence, and complete devotion. In the same manner that the Torah requires economic man to open his storage room or his safe deposit box and let others share in his savings, so too does the Torah require of spiritual man to open his mind, his heart, his existence. Invite others! Let them share your thoughts about Pesach, your feelings about *Yom HaKippurim*, your experiences of prayer, of God, man and the world. This is the *Torat Chesed* community, the teaching community.
- *Festival of Freedom* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2006), pp. 19-20.
31. *Sanhedrin* 56a: The creation of a civil law system, refraining from blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery, and eating the flesh from a living animal.
32. The premise that the seven Noachide commandments define civilized, humane life. The

Gemara that measures the right of non-Jews to be protected by the law if they observe seven Noachide commandments.

33. E.g., *Avot* 1:16: R. Gamliel says: Make for yourself a teacher and extricate yourself from doubt.

Avot 3:5: He (R. Gamliel the son of R. Yehuda HaNasi) said: The ignoramus cannot fear sin, and the common man cannot be pious.

34. *Shabbat* 148b; *Beitza* 30a; *Bava Batra* 60b.

35. See my "Teaching Talmudic Discussions Concerning Non-Jews" (forthcoming).

36. Nimrod is presumed to be the most powerful ruler of this time period, since he is the first about which is said that he possessed a kingdom – see Genesis 10:10.

37. Another midrash supplies additional information with regard to Abraham's fearlessness in dealing with both his parents as well as Nimrod. While parallels can be noted between the two sources, e.g., Abraham's recognition of the nondeity status of various things worshipped by others, leading to his deciding to destroy these objects of worship, important differences regarding Abraham's discussions not only with his father but also with his mother, his burning the idols rather than chopping them into pieces, Abraham's catching Nimrod himself in an inconsistency regarding his theological beliefs and as a consequence threatening to kill him, add texture to the picture of Abraham envisioned by the rabbis of the Midrash as a young impetuous man:

Otzar HaMidrashim (Eisenstadt) "Avraham Avinu," col. 7 (contained in Bar Ilan CD-ROM, edition 15+).

What did Terach do? He hid his son in a cave for three years. God prepared for him (the child) two "windows"; from one would flow oil, from the other flour. When he was three, he emerged from the cave. He thought to himself regarding Who had created the heavens, the earth, and himself. He prayed the entire day to the sun, and in the evening the sun set in the west and the moon rose in the east. When he saw the moon and the stars surrounding it, he said, "This is the one who created the heavens and me. These stars are His ministers and servants." He prayed all night to the moon. In the morning the moon set in the west and the sun rose in the east. He said, "Neither of these are powerful. There is a master that is superior to them. To Him I will pray and prostrate myself." He went to his father and asked him, "Father! Who created the heavens and the earth and me?" His father responded, "My gods created all of these." Abraham said, "Show me your gods, because perhaps they have the ability to create all these." He immediately brought him his idols and showed them to him. He went to his mother and said, "Mother! Cook good and tasty foods and I will bring them to my father's gods." He placed the foods before the largest of the idols, but there was no response. Immediately the Divine Spirit descended upon him and called out, "They have a mouth but they do not speak; they have eyes but they do not see" (Psalms 115:5). Immediately he took fire and burnt (almost all of) them (the idols), took out the largest of them and placed the fire into its hand. When his father came to his home and found his idols burnt, he said to Abraham, "My son! Why did you burn my idols?" He said, "I didn't burn them. The biggest among them became angered and he burned the others." He said to him, "My foolish son! They have neither the strength nor life force to do these things. Behold I manufactured them out of wood." He said to him, "Let your ears listen to what your mouth says! If they do not have the strength, then why did you say that they created the heavens and the earth?"

What did Terach do? He went to Nimrod and said, "My son burned my and your gods." He sent for Abraham and asked him, "Why did you do this?" He said, "I didn't do it, but rather the largest idol." Nimrod said, "Are they alive that they can do this?" He said to him, "Let your ears hear what your mouth says! And if they do not have these abilities, why do you forsake the actual Creator of heaven and earth and bow down to wood?" He said to him, "I created the heaven and earth with my power!" Abraham said to him, "You are able to create? When I left the cave, I saw the sun rise in the east and set in the west. If you can cause it to rise in the west and set in the east, I will bow down to you. And if you can't, then the One who gave me

the strength to burn the idols, He should give me strength and I will kill you!" Nimrod said to his advisors, "What should the judgment of this one be?" They said to him, "It is about him that is said that in the future a nation will descend from him that will inherit this world and the next world. Now in accordance with the judgment that he has meted out, should be done to him." Immediately they threw Abraham into the fiery furnace. At that moment, God filled him (Nimrod) with mercy and he saved him, as it is said, "I am HaShem Who took you out of Ur Kasdim" (Genesis 15:7).

A third variation on the theme of Abraham's having to be saved from being burned in a furnace is found in *Midrash Tanchuma* (cited in *Torah Shleima*, R. Menachem Kasher, Vol. 1, Jerusalem: Beit Torah Shleima, 5752, p. 517, #75 on Genesis 11:8) and vastly expanded upon in Josephus' *Antiqui* 1, 8, 1, cited by Louis Ginzberg in his *The Legends of the Jews* (vol. 1, [Philadelphia: JPS, 1909] pp. 174-176.) In this rendering of Abraham's heroism and total commitment to his monotheistic beliefs, his confrontation with Nimrod is precipitated by his refusal to approve of the plan to build the Tower of Babel, which was assumed by the rabbis to have been initiated, at least in part, by Nimrod. (See Genesis 10:10; 11:9 for textual support for such a Midrashic claim.) Abraham is depicted as not only defiantly and openly resisting pressure to approve the plan, but also demonstrating greater religious fervor than others who had previously been deemed just as pious as the patriarch. Additionally, the saving of Abraham in this version is much more dramatic, and the "collateral damage" is significantly more extensive than just the death of Abraham's brother Haran, as reported in the *Beraishit Rabba* source.

With the spread of mankind, corruption increased. While Noah was still alive, the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth appointed princes over each of the three groups - Nimrod for the descendants of Ham, Jaktan (*ibid.*, 10:25) for the descendants of Shem, and Phenech (no such individual is listed in *ibid.*, 10:2-4) for the descendants of Japheth. Ten years before Noah's death, the number of those subject to the three princes amounted to millions. When this great confluence of men came to Babylonia upon their journeying, they said to one another, "Behold the time is coming when at the end of days, neighbor will be separated from neighbor, and brother from brother, and one will carry on war against the other. Go, let us build us a city and a tower whose top will reach unto heaven, and let us make a great name upon the earth (*ibid.*, 11:4). And now let us make bricks and each one will write his name on his brick." All agreed to this proposal with the exception of ten pious men, Abraham among them. They refused to join the others. They were seized by the people and brought before the three princes, to whom they gave the following reason for their refusal: "We will not make bricks, nor remain with you, for we know but one God and Him we serve." (The existence of contemporary monotheists in addition to Abraham is indicated by *ibid.*, 14:18.) Even if you burn us in the fire together with the bricks, we will not walk in your ways." Nimrod and Phenech (Jaktan, the son of Ever, the descendant of Shem, is also assumed to be a monotheist, and therefore sympathetic to the objection of the twelve. This might beg the question regarding why he himself did not protest the plan. As is stated in this tradition, the desire to avoid war is certainly not objectionable; the idolatrous dimension might have been introduced only after there had been an original agreement to undertake the project) flew into such a passion over the twelve men that they resolved to throw them into the fire. Jaktan, however, besides being a God-fearing man, was of close kin to the men on trial, and he essayed to save them. He proposed to his two colleagues to grant them a seven-day respite. His plan was accepted, such deference being paid him as the primate among the three (the result of Noah's blessing in *ibid.*, 9:26-27?) The twelve were incarcerated in the house of Jaktan. In the night, he charged 50 of his attendants to mount the prisoners on mules and take them to the mountains. Thus they would escape the threatened punishment. Jaktan provided them with food for a month. He was sure that in the meantime either a change of sentiment would come about, and the people desist from their purpose, or God would help the fugitives. Eleven of the prisoners assented to the plan with gratitude. Abraham alone rejected it, saying, "Behold today we flee to the mountains to escape the fire. But if wild beasts rush out of the

mountains to consume us or if food is lacking that we die of famine, we shall be found fleeing from before the people of the land and dying in our sins. Now, as the Lord lives, in Whom I trust, I will not depart from this place wherein they have imprisoned me, and if I am to die because of my sins, then I will die by the will of God, in accordance with His decree." In vain Jaktan endeavored to persuade Abraham to flee. He persisted in his refusal. He remained behind alone in the prison house while the other eleven made their escape. At the expiration of the set term, when the people returned and demanded the death of the twelve captives, Jaktan could produce only Abraham. His excuse was that the rest had broken loose during the night. The people were about to throw themselves upon Abraham and throw him into the lime kiln. Suddenly an earthquake was felt, the fire darted from the furnace, and all who were standing round about, 84,000 of the people, were consumed and Abraham remained untouched. (Perhaps this is the Midrashic gloss on *ibid.*, 11:8). Thereupon he repaired to his eleven friends in the mountains and told them of the miracle that had befallen for his sake. They all returned with him and, unmolested by the people, they gave praise and thanks to God.

38. Although Maimonides does not cite the Midrashic confrontation with Nimrod, he nevertheless assumes that the governmental authorities were disconcerted by Abraham's challenging the religious assumptions of the society and therefore sought to eliminate him. Abraham's family's relocation from Ur Kasdim is therefore understood as stemming from Abraham's activities speaking out against idolatry.
39. See *fn. 7*.
40. The assumption of the Bible is that man began as monotheistic in terms of the deity known to Adam and Eve and only later came to believe in polytheism – see Genesis 4:26, Rashi – and therefore had to be "returned" to monotheism first by Noah and then by Abraham.
41. We first hear of Abraham as more than just a name in a list of genealogy in Genesis 12:1.
42. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadfly_\(social\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadfly_(social)).
43. The Bible offers a foil for such an understanding of Abraham – the prophet Elijah, who was unable to "retool" when confronted with rejection on the part of the Jewish people, and therefore whose career as God's representative comes to an abrupt end. Abraham apparently does learn the lesson that God is to be found in the "still small voice" – see 1 Kings 19:11–12.