

From Abraham to Jonah

By Rabbi Samuel Silver

The High Holydays begin with Abraham and end with Jonah.

The Scriptural reading on Rosh Hashanah concentrates on the first Jew.

Abraham was the trail-blazer of Judaism. As a Jew, he stood alone very often against the rest of the world.

In the Talmud Abraham is described as an Ivri (Hebrew), meaning that on one side was all of humanity, genuflecting to gods made of sticks and stones, indulging in strife and savagery, oblivious of the feelings of others, without compassion and commiseration and a feeling of reverence.

And on the other side, was Abraham, the over man. Over is a Hebrew word meaning almost what it means in English: over against. It is linked to the word Ivri, which means in this context one on the other side of a boundry.

Abrahamism might therefore be described as the persistent adherence to Jewish values in the face of odds.

In our day, the people of Abraham has been a lone minority too.

The UN is the end-product of Hebraic idealism.

Yet many in it have turned against the people who fathered the UN concept.

Islam is an offshoot of Judaism. Yet an Islamic conference had the hutzpah to call for the exclusion of Israel from the UN family.

No religion on earth is more concerned for the dignity of women than the one founded by Abraham. Yet, the women's conclave in Mexico City lumped Zionism (which is another word for granting equality to women and to all people) with imperialism and apartheid.

The Christian world remains silent at the distortions about Judaism, even though there would be no Christianity were it not for Abraham and his successors.

So when the Torah is read on Rosh Hashanah we are called upon to emulate the idealism of Abraham in our daily living and to exhibit the same intrepidity Abraham exhibited in the teeth of the overwhelming pagan majority of mankind.

But the Holydays end with Jonah.

When Jonah is read near the close of Yom Kippur, it is a reminder that Judaism is not for itself alone. Jonah is the everlasting representative of the narrow-minded individual who focuses exclusively on his own group.

Jonah scorned and spurned the gentile. He was not interested in preaching to the non-Jew. He had to be forcibly thrust back to the divine

mission of communicating the message of atonement and reform to the gentiles.

Even when Nineveh astonishingly took Jonah seriously and regretted its evil ways, putting on sackcloth and ashes and vowing to rise to a higher moral level, Jonah was contemptuous of the "goyim."

The Book of Jonah is a reproach to those who are particularistic, who think only of themselves and their own people or nation. The Book of Jonah is summarized in the famous Hillel query: "If I am for myself, what am I?"

So by the time dusk is imminent on the Day of Atonement, we should have experienced an internal broadening of our outlook and have felt the imperative need to take the teachings of Abraham and apply them to the world at large.

This world is a better one because of what it has received from the descendants of Abraham. Even if the non-Jewish spiritual heirs of Abraham are not yet fully aware of their indebtedness to the First Patriarch, we should persist in adorning the world with his precepts.

Certainly, the United States of America would not be what it is were it not for the spiritualizing gifts it received from Hebraism.

Happy New Year

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