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**The Story of Abraham-
Lessons in Morality**

Welcome to the Ann Arbor Jewish Cultural Society or JCS. I see many familiar faces, but also some new faces, so let me explain who we are and what our philosophy is.

Quoting directly from our website: “The JCS is the Secular Humanistic Jewish congregation in Ann Arbor. We believe that Judaism is the magnificent creation of the Jewish people over time and in every land. Our Jewish heritage is a source of identity, pride and ethics. Jewish history teaches us much about rights and responsibilities, about human behavior, and about community. Jewish culture enriches and inspires us.

Our goal is to add to, enjoy and transmit our heritage. Jews have always been a diverse people and we believe that this diversity is a strength. The many movements in Jewish tradition provide comfortable homes for Jews of differing beliefs. We believe that a Jew is one who, regardless of birth, identifies with the history, culture, and future of the Jewish people. There have always been Jews who identified with Jewish history, culture and peoplehood. We have had various names throughout the ages, some accepting, some less complementary. In response to the Enlightenment, Secular Jews in Eastern Europe began to name themselves and to celebrate Jewish culture in nonreligious ways. In the late 1800's Secular Judaism emerged as a recognizable movement in Jewish life. It was joined in the 1960's by Humanistic Judaism, which has a more Western European flavor and outlook. The two movements together now form the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, with Federations in North America, South America, Israel, Europe, Australia and the former Soviet Union.”

My selection of the Story of Abraham fits in with this philosophy of a history and heritage that exists outside of a religious context. Let's look at why the story of Abraham matters. Abraham is an important figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Judaism, Abraham is called *Avraham Avinu* or "Abraham, our Father". In Christianity, the promise to Abraham that through his offspring “all the nations of the world will come to be blessed” is taken as a reference to the coming of Jesus. In Islam, he is a prophet of Islam and the ancestor of Muhammad through his first born son Ishmael. Abraham is so important that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are sometimes referred to as the “Abrahamic” religions.

To the point of examining the moral lessons of the story, by their very nature religions look to the stories of key figures of the past to determine the appropriateness of contemporary actions. I would offer that discussions of the right of modern Israel, the land that shares its name with the grandson of Abraham, to exist often come back to legacy granted to the family of Abraham.

I hope that you will agree that Abraham is worthy of discussion. What are our sources of information about Abraham? An important source is the Bible, which as we discussed last year includes historical, as well as religious and moral, writings. Attempts should be made to corroborate historical information in the Bible with other, independent, sources.

In examining the Biblical stories, it is important to note that the Bible has been a **living work** and that many authors have contributed to Biblical stories over time. Often, stories are changed to suit the sensibilities, the agenda if you will, of changing times. The story of Abraham is retold, for

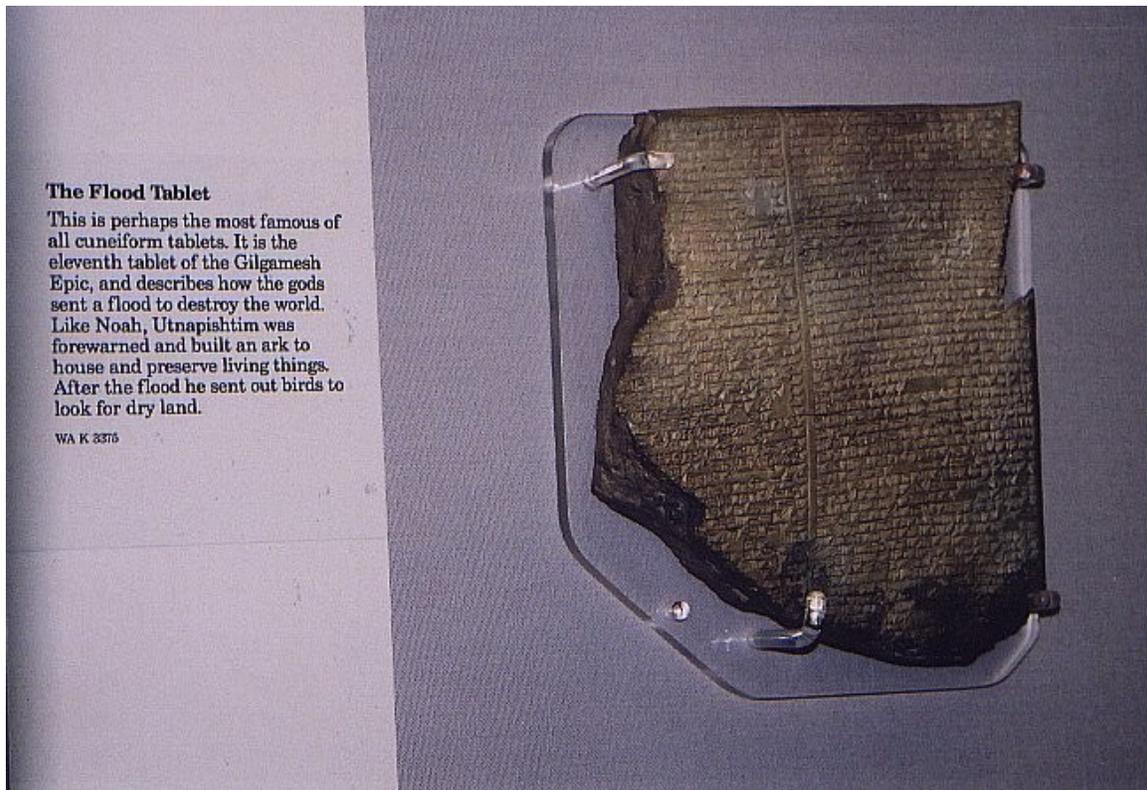
example, in The Book of Jubilees, a re-telling of the Bible written circa 200 BCE. Details unfavorable to the characterization of Abraham, such as his lie to the Pharaoh of Egypt, are omitted. Other details, not present in the Old Testament, are added.

But there is also a significant body of archaeological data emerging about the events and places in the Bible. Abraham is said to have come from the city of Ur of the Chaldees. Pietro della Valle found what is believed to be the city in the mid-seventeenth century and it has been under excavation since. The remains of Ur can be found near the city of Nasiriyah, south of Baghdad in modern day Iraq.



Let's begin with the pre-history of the Abraham story. As we discussed last year, the early stories in the Book of Genesis are Sumerian in origin. Sumeria, the name given to the civilization that flourished in Mesopotamia, the land between the Two Rivers in what is today modern Iraq, was a loose confederation of city states. The stories of Adam and the Garden of Eden, for example, show Sumerian origin by etymology and similarities with the book of Gilgamesh. The Sumerian god Enki has a symbol of snakes coiled about a tree and is a giver of knowledge. In Sumerian mythology a great flood comes and Ut-napishtim and his wife survive along with "the seed of all living creatures." Based on these archaeological data, we can conclude that the early parts of Genesis retell Sumerian myths.

But the Abraham story marks a departure from the mythology. The story seems more realistic and doesn't harken back to the older myths of the Sumerians. The story speaks of the history of a different people.



The ancestors of Abraham were worshippers of the God *Elohim*, which is often considered to be derived from *El* and/or *Eloah*. The oldest references to the god *El* have been outside the city of Ugarit, on the Mediterranean coast of what is today Syria. This puts into context the Biblical quote “Your father was a wandering Syrian.” *El* was both a generic word for any “god” (hence the plural form of *Elohim*) and was also the special name or title of a particular god who was distinguished from other gods as being the god, or in the monotheistic sense, God. These inscriptions date back to circa 2300 BCE.

Some hypothesize that *El* was an abbreviated form of the name of the Sumerian god Anil. That makes sense as history shows us that when different peoples meet, there is a blending of cultures, including religions. Regardless, the evidence suggests that the ancient Hebrews were a group of *El* worshippers, whose origins lay in ancient Syria, but who came to dwell in the land of the Sumerians. But they did not live in the cities of the Sumerians, but rather outside in the hills and plains, where they were referred to as the Hebrew or “traveling people” presumably from their nomadic ways. They came into the cities to trade. Until Abraham, who was still Avram at that time.

A note about names. Avram means “exalted father.” After making a compact with God, Avram is changed to Abraham, which means “father of many nations.” His wife also undergoes a name change, from Sarai to Sarah. The associated change in meaning is more subtle, with Sarai perhaps denoting “MY woman of high birth” and Sarah indicating that she is (has become) her own person.

Genesis 12 begins with the Hebrew words: *Lekh Lekha*

“Go-you-forth
from your land,
from your kindred,
from your father’s house,
to the land that I will let you see.
2 I will make a great nation of you
and will give-you-blessing
and will make your name great.
Be a blessing!
3 I will bless those who bless you,
he who curses you, I will damn.
All the clans of the soil will find blessing through you!
4 Avram went, as YHWH had spoken to him, and Lot went with him.”

It is important to note that Avram is pretty passive in his initial interactions with God. He didn’t ask to be chosen. He didn’t fast or implore God to contact him. The Bible doesn’t portray Avram as self-sacrificing. In the Jubilees, Avram would be credited as being the father of monotheism. But that is written in part to make Avram seem greater than in the Bible and to explain later Biblical events. In the Bible, Genesis 11, Avram is happily dwelling in Harran, where he and his family have prospered:

Terah begot Avram, Nahor, and Haran;
and Haran begot Lot.
28 Haran died in the living-presence of Terah his father in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans.
29 Avram and Nahor took themselves wives;
the name of Avram’s wife was Sarai,
the name of Nahor’s wife was Milca— daughter of Haran, father of Milca and father of Yisca.
30 Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.
31 Terah took Avram his son and Lot son of Haran, his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, wife of Avram his son,
they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go to the land of Canaan.
But when they had come as far as Harran, they settled there.
32 And the days of Terah were five years and two hundred years,
then Terah died, in Harran.

Not only is he dwelling in Harran, he is an old man:

Genesis 12:

And Avram was five years and seventy years old when he went out of Harran.

5 Avram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, all their property that they had gained, and the persons whom they had made-their-own in Harran, and they went out to go to the land of Canaan.

When they came to the land of Canaan,

6 Avram passed through the land, as far as the Place of Shekhem, as far as the Oak of Moreh.

So, here is Avram, this 75 year-old man, living childless but prosperous in the land of Harran, when a voice tells him "Go you forth!" His "specialness," outside of familial heritage, has not been invented yet.

But at any rate, Avram and his wife and his followers come into the land of Canaan, but they don't stay long. Avram and Sarai are forced to flee to Egypt and here we gain an insight into the morality of Avram, from Genesis 12:

10 Now there was a famine in the land,
and Avram went down to Egypt, to sojourn there,
for the famine was heavy in the land.

11 It was when he came near to Egypt that he said to Sarai his wife:

Now here, I know well that you are a woman fair to look at.

12 It will be, when the Egyptians see you and say: She is his wife,
that they will kill me, but you they will allow to live.

13 Pray say that you are my sister

so that it may go well with me on your account, that I myself may live thanks to you.

14 It was when Avram came to Egypt, that the Egyptians saw how exceedingly fair the woman was;

15 when Pharaoh's courtiers saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh,
and the woman was taken away into Pharaoh's house.

16 It went well with Avram on her account,
sheep and oxen, donkeys, servants and maids, she-asses and camels,
became his.

In order, Avram lies about his relationship with his wife, allows her to be taken away into the house of Pharaoh and then accepts payment for Sarai. Not what we would call moral behavior by today's standards.

Skipping ahead in the Bible, this is not the only time that Sarai will be taken by a king. When the family, now grown as we shall see, journeys to the land of Gerar:

Genesis 20:

1 And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the land of the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar.

2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife: 'She is my sister.' And Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him: 'Behold, thou shalt die, because of the woman whom thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.'

4 Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said: 'LORD, wilt Thou slay even a righteous nation?'

5 Said he not himself unto me: She is my sister? and she, even she herself said: He is my brother. In the simplicity of my heart and the innocency of my hands have I done this.'

6 And God said unto him in the dream: 'Yea, I know that in the simplicity of thy heart thou hast done this, and I also withheld thee from sinning against Me. Therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.'

7 Now therefore restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live; and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.'

8 And Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears; and the men were sore afraid.

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him: 'What hast thou done unto us? and wherein have I sinned against thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.'

10 And Abimelech said unto Abraham: 'What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?'

11 And Abraham said: 'Because I thought: Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.'

12 And moreover she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and so she became my wife.'

13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her: This is thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me: He is my brother.'

14 And Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.'

15 And Abimelech said: 'Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.'

What does it tell us about the value of women in those times? Women were not considered “people” but could be used as pawns. Avram makes no bones about his motivation, Sarai must sacrifice so that things will go well for Avram. Sarai’s feeling in the matter were not considered, or at least not commented upon. Did she respond to Avram or simply bow her head? Was she dragged off to Pharaoh against her will or did she accept her fate? In the second story Abraham says that Sarah was in agreement with the arrangement.

But wait, isn’t God the arbiter of moral behavior? Does He punish Avram for using Sarai this way? Not at all. He punishes Pharaoh for allowing himself to be duped.

17 But YHWH plagued Pharaoh with great plagues, and also his household, because of Sarai, Avram’s wife.

18 Pharaoh had Avram called, and said:
What is this that you have done to me!
Why did you not tell me that she is your wife?

19 Why did you say: She is my sister?
—So I took her for myself as a wife.
But now, here is your wife, take her and go!

20 So Pharaoh put men in charge of him, who escorted him and his wife and all that was his.

The line “What is this that you have done to me!” is worth repeating. Pharaoh did not know that he had done anything wrong. Avram had raised no objection to Sarai being taken, at least known that is recorded. It was Avram’s idea and he would benefit from his scheme:

Genesis 13 continues:

1 Avram traveled up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that was his, and Lot with him, to the Negev.

2 And Avram was exceedingly heavily laden with livestock, with silver and with gold.

So Avram had the best of the bargain, coming out with a great deal of wealth and only at the cost of allowing his wife to be raped a little. But he left Egypt with more than silver and gold. Sarai was still childless, but a solution had been presented.

Genesis 16:1 Now Sarai, Avram’s wife, had not borne him (children).

She had an Egyptian maid—her name was Hagar.

2 Sarai said to Avram:

Now here, Yhwh has obstructed me from bearing;

pray come in to my maid,

perhaps I may be built-up-with-sons through her!

Avram hearkened to Sarai’s voice:

3 Sarai, Avram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian-woman, her maid,

at the end of ten years of Avram’s being settled in the land of Canaan,

and gave her to her husband Avram as a wife for him.

4 He came in to Hagar, and she became pregnant.

Again, we see women being used as objects. Hagar’s wishes are not taken into consideration

There is conflict between the two women, Sarai complains of Hagar that "I myself gave my maid into your bosom, but now that she sees that she is pregnant, I have become of light-worth in her eyes. " Avram advises Sarai "Here, your maid is in your hand, deal with her however seems good in your eyes." And so "Sarai afflicted her, so that she (Hagar) had to flee from her." And then God himself enter into the picture:

7 But YHWH's messenger found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.

8 He said:

Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence do you come, whither are you going?

She said:

I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress.

9 YHWH's messenger said to her:

Return to your mistress and let yourself be afflicted under her hand!

10 And YHWH's messenger said to her:

I will make your seed many, yes, many, it will be too many to count!

11 And YHWH's messenger said to her:

Here, you are pregnant, you will bear a son;

call his name: Yishmael/God Harkens,

for God has hearkened to your being afflicted.

12 He shall be a wild-ass of a man,

his hand against all, hand of all against him,

yet in the presence of all his brothers shall he dwell.

Here we have not merely Avram telling Sarai to beat her pregnant maid, we have God Himself telling Hagar to endure the beatings.

This is a section particularly meaningful to Muslims. We'll return to it later. Hagar survives the beatings and bears Avram a son, Ishmael.

After a visit from God, in the person of one of three visitors, the other two presumably being angels, Sarai does indeed become pregnant and bears Avram a son, Isaac. But all is not happy in the household:

In Genesis 21, Sara says:

6 Now Sara said:
God has made laughter for me,
all who hear of it will laugh for me.

But the gift of laughter is, it seems, to be hers alone, for only a few lines later:

9 Once Sara saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian-woman, whom
she had borne to Avraham, laughing....
10 She said to Avraham:
Drive out this slave-woman and her son,
for the son of this slave-woman shall not share-inheritance with my son, with Yitzhak!
11 The matter was exceedingly bad in Avraham's eyes because of
his son.
12 But God said to Avraham:
Do not let it be bad in your eyes concerning the lad and concerning your slave-woman;
in all that Sara says to you, hearken to her voice,
for it is through Yitzhak that seed will be called by your (name).
13 But also the son of the slave-woman—a nation will I make of him,
for he too is your seed.
14 Avraham started-early in the morning,
he took some bread and a skin of water
and gave them to Hagar—placing them upon her shoulder—
together with the child and sent her away.
She went off and roamed in the wilderness of Be'er-Sheva.

Avraham expresses no concern whatsoever about the fate of Hagar, the woman with whom he has had a child. Instead his concern is only for Ishmael, "The matter was exceedingly bad in Avraham's eyes because of his son."

After God's reassurances about the eventual fate of Ishmael, the mother and son are driven out into desert. They almost die of thirst, but the hand of God reaches out to save them.

19 God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water;
she went, filled the skin with water, and gave the lad to drink.
20 And God was with the lad as he grew up,
he settled in the wilderness, and became an archer, a bowman.
21 He settled in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt.

The story is only concerned with the male heir.

The Muslim version of the story is quite different. Abraham takes the pair into safety, into what will become the city of Mecca. Not only are Hagar and Ishmael more valuable in the Muslim version, but Abraham is a more moral figure, concerned with the well-being of both Ishmael and Hagar.

Now we come of the most famous story of the Abraham saga.

Genesis 22:

1 Now after these events it was
that God tested Avraham
and said to him:
Avraham!
He said:
Here I am.

2 He said:
Pray take your son,
your only-one,
whom you love,
Yitzhak,
and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing,
and offer him up there as an offering-up
upon one of the mountains
that I will tell you of.

3 Avraham started-early in the morning,
he saddled his donkey,
he took his two serving-lads with him and Yitzhak his son,
he split wood for the offering-up
and arose and went to the place that God had told him of.
4 On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes
and saw the place from afar.

6 Avraham took the wood for the offering-up,
he placed them upon Yitzhak his son,
in his hand he took the fire and the knife.
Thus the two of them went together.

7 Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, he said:
Father!
He said:
Here I am, my son.
He said:
Here are the fire and the wood,
but where is the lamb for the offering-up?

8 Avraham said:
God will see-for-himself to the lamb for the offering-up,
my son.

Thus the two of them went together.

9 They came to the place that God had told him of;
there Avraham built the slaughter-site
and arranged the wood

and bound Yitzhak his son
and placed him on the slaughter-site atop the wood.

10 And Avraham stretched out his hand,
he took the knife to slay his son.

11 But YHWH's messenger called to him from heaven
and said:

Avraham! Avraham!

He said:

Here I am.

12 He said:

Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,
do not do anything to him!

For now I know

that you are in awe of God—

you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me.

Again, this story will be rewritten and added to by subsequent writers, but the story from Genesis is told to offer up his son....and without hesitation, he goes. There is no resistance, no weeping or moaning. And Yitzhak is an unwitting sacrifice. When he becomes if not suspicious then at least concerned Abraham offers an answer intended to deflect him.

Was Yitzhak willingly bound? Genesis offers no comments either way. Maybe he was, or maybe his father wrestled him to the altar. Later authors speculate, based on what they would have done or what they think Abraham should have done, but the Bible does not say.

The Bible does portray Yitzhak as the least of the Patriarchs. He is the only one not to have direct contact with God (Jacob will even wrestle with God) and he appears as something of a fool when he bestows on Jacob the blessing intended for Esau.

There should be no question as to how the experience effected Isaac, whether he was willing, passive or unwilling. In Genesis 31:42, he refers to god as “the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the Fear (or Terror) of Isaac.”

Lest we be unfair in our characterization of Abraham, the Bible does show Abraham displaying human emotion at the death of Sarah. “And Sarah died in Kiriatharba--the same is Hebron--in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.” And when Ephron asks of Abraham a price for a place to bury Sarah, Abraham does not balk, but “And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.”

Now to our conclusions. Genesis, absent of subsequent rewrites, shows Abraham to be a cunning, self-centered, survival-oriented desert chieftain. None of these qualities should be surprising if he was, in fact, a historical character. He was a wanderer, a nomad, from a long line of nomads living in the desert. He trades his wife, not once but twice, for wealth. But with that wealth, he is able to secure for his descendants a place of their own to live. (Let's not overvalue the consequence; it seems uncertain that he will have descendants at the time that these events occur.)

He doesn't seem to value either of his wives, or for that matter his sons, very much. He has no problem in letting Sarah beat Hagar, or in driving Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert.

The essential morality of the story of Abraham is an unswerving willingness to heed the Voice of God. He is told to go to a destination unnamed "to the land that I will let you see" and he sets off. He is told to sacrifice his son "whom he loves" and he gathers the wood and gets the knife ready. He doesn't ask about or consider the consequences. For some, this is the height of faith. For others, we would call that fanaticism.

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