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RABBI SOLOVEITCHIK'S ABRAHAM

It seems remarkable that the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the premier advocate of Jewish law (*halakha*) as the template of Judaism who frequently identified himself as the *Ish Halakha*, the halakhic personality, should designate the Patriarch Abraham as the first and ostensibly typical Jewish person.¹ Abraham, after all, lived long before Torah was given to Israel. Moses would have been the man! He received Torah, Oral and Written, and bestowed it upon Israel; he led God's people to the gates of the Holy Land; above all, he risked his life for the survival of the people. Judaism and Torah began with Moses.

Yet Rabbi Soloveitchik was fascinated by Abraham. He was fascinated by Abraham's independence, *elan*, verve – and, surprisingly, restlessness. Perhaps the older Rav recognized Abraham in himself as a young lad. I myself remember how my father ז"ל would recall the Rav as a restless young student—constantly on the move—visiting family in Warsaw. Of course, much of this discourse is homiletic²; Rabbi Soloveitchik's reading of the Bible would not satisfy contemporary academic research. But that is not our concern; this study largely focuses on the Rav's religious and literary thought and finds the midrash no less a legitimate and rewarding reading than the *peshat*. But midrash, too, is anchored in the biblical text.

How did Abraham discover God? As a young lad, when he was a shepherd, he used to spend the night in the fields. He could not sleep because he was restless ... He particularly counted the stars ... Abraham discovered God with the stars/

God communicated with Abraham constantly ... [T]he intuitive insights and sudden flashes of his mind were words the Almighty addresses to prophets. They constituted a message from the Almighty to him....

¹ Page references in the text are to Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Abraham's Journey: Reflections on the Life of the Founding Patriarch*, eds., David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler (New York: Toras HoRav and Ktav, 2008).

² On homiletics as a medium of the Rav's thought, see P. Peli, "Homiletics in the Thought of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik," *Tradition* 3:23 (1988), 9-31. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Philo also wrote on Abraham.

Abraham discovered God all by himself. No one taught him, no one guided him. He drew his conclusions from premises his own mind postulated. His knowledge was nurtured by intuitive flashes from within... Abraham... had to devote some forty years to the bold and heroic enterprise of joining the Infinite....

[Man] manifests his questing for God through his restlessness, which from time to time results in unwarranted and unjustified nervous physical movement... In a word, a child's restlessness represents the spontaneous drive to God that every human being experiences... [Abraham] did succeed in converting volatile primeval emotions into advanced knowledge... [H]e converted this restlessness into thought...

Abraham had no transcendental or apocalyptic help in the form of a revelation. God wanted Abraham to discover Him in a natural, normal way. (39-47)

Abraham not only discovered God behind the laws of physics; his monotheism was ethical and taught the law of *hesed*. This is apparently crucial. The story of Abraham's open tent, his welcoming of the three different, dusky men, is inherent to the monotheism preached on the philosophical and metaphysical level. "He rebelled against paganism not only because he resented untruth and erroneous thinking but also for the sake of substituting an ethical life for an immoral one. The Torah hated idolatry because it represented an ugly life, a cruel and vulgar approach to one's fellow man." (46-47) The ethics of Abraham insisted on an openness to the other. It is clear that Soloveitchik is here presenting his own view of what the Judaism of Abraham's people should be about, what constituted the initial discovery.

Abraham thus represented a dual assertion about the good life in Soloveitchik's reading—it contained both ethical as well as metaphysical virtues. All this before a revelation, independent of Sinai. Man is expected to discover these realities as components of the world surrounding him. Put differently, Abraham will be committed to the bold implications of both monotheistic metaphysics and its ethics.

Is Moses less committed? Not necessarily. And Moses, as current Maimonidean scholarship has demonstrated, is the central figure of Maimonidean anthropology; the ideal perfect man the human being who will not be duplicated.³ But Abraham was the first—first to watch the stars and first to open his tent in all directions. And Abraham will be

³ See the concluding chapter of Sarah Stroumsa, *Maimonides in his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

persecuted as Jews were: “I have no doubt that he disagreed with the doctrine of all men.... these erring men reviled blamed and belittled him” (Guide 3:29). “They would even try to kill him” (Mishneh Torah, *Avodat Kokhavim* 1, 3). The young R. Soloveitchik would hardly make the same claim about his contemporaries, but his initial environment in America was less than welcoming.

Abraham cannot be understood without his *hagira* (sojourn) and without God’s command to sacrifice Isaac. For the Rav, too, these experiences would be seminal in his reading of the first Patriarch. Both these experiences, which have much in common—biographically as well as semantically—are crucial for a proper grasp of Abraham’s progress and life as Rabbi Soloveitchik perceives them. We ought to realize that, for the Rav, both the command to leave his ancestral home and the command to abandon and murder his son Isaac are cultural no less than physical actions, and that Abraham fulfills them in his consciousness even as he pursues them as concrete biographical realities. Indeed, it is as aspects of his mentality that Abraham fully internalizes the implications of each expectation.⁴

The *hagira* motif implies an unconditional commitment to and complete involvement with God at all times.... In every phase, *homo absconditus*, hidden man, separates himself from his ancestral environment and becomes homeless, lonely, engaged in an almost incessant flight from his country... To meet God and confront infinity implies an act of heroic skepticism—a reappraisal of all goods and values, a shattering critique of all accepted categories and standards.... the uprootedness of the human soul, in the disruption of human solidarities... not excluding the most intimate relationships, such as those prevailing between a person and his next of kin (the natural community). A new world is born, and nothing is carried over to it from the old....

We think in terms of and via media with which we were confronted as a child. I still see my father and mother the way they looked when I was young... I have wandered from place to place, I have prayed in many synagogues. I have sat in many *sukkot*, I have celebrated many *seder* nights. However, when I visualize a Yom Kippur service, I see the *Beit ha-Midrash ha-Gadol* in Choslovitch, where I davened as a child, where I stood next to my father... To forget these pictures means to terminate one’s identity... And yet God told Abraham to forget (76-78).

⁴ See Avi Sagi, “Gerut, Galut, ve-Ribbonut,” *Tarbut Demokratit* 16 (2015), 219-275. I suspect that Sagi’s contextualization of Abraham’s detachment from land and state is different than my reading.

Abraham's departure from his home is not primarily a physical uprooting but a denial of value and cultural significance in the service of the new and the radically redefined. To meet God, man "becomes homeless, lonely, engaged in an almost incessant flight from his country and kindred... an act of transvaluation and heroic skepticism..." (76-77)

It is incongruous to find the believer labeled a skeptic; it is most revealing that this term was chosen by the Rav as required by Abrahamic religion.⁵ Man, in spite of his physical and mental participation in natural events and processes, must never deal in absolutes with regard to finite creation, must never ascribe unlimited worth and supremacy to human achievements institutions and values.... Relativization of man-made values and institutions is a basic article in Judaism. This skepticism is translated into a basic psychological motif in Soloveitchik's thought—that of the loneliness and singularity accompanying the life of the truly spiritual person and, indeed, the Divine entity Himself. Ultimately, one must disengage—so as to meet God—but not merely as physical dislocation. Nor is this merely a neo-Zionist rejection of *galut*. Zionism is irrelevant here; or, to be more precise, the Rav offers a spiritual reading of *galut*. The Akedah is one of the most poignant events in Abraham's life; it too receives a spiritualized reading.

The Rav indicates, as do many other readers of this story, that Abraham is required to give up his promised future when he is commanded to sacrifice his son. Past and future balance each other out: *lekh lekha*. This is commonplace. Less trivial, though, is the physical and emotional valence of this sacrifice, the fact that it exists not in the paternal consciousness alone but also as imagined physical reality, a combination very Jewish:

We can imagine Abraham's desolation and loneliness. He knew that on the way back there would be no Isaac. He knew that this would be the last journey with Isaac. In a matter of days, Isaac would be gone and Abraham would travel alone. There would be no more companionship, no more young child in the house, no more laughter, no more enjoyment, no more joy.... and God was satisfied. (70)

⁵ "In order to become a believer... one has to go through the phase of not believing in time-honored principles... Abraham... was a skeptic, doubting and questioning everything.... [man] must never deal in absolutes with regard to finite creation, must never ascribe unlimited worth... to human achievements, institutions and values." (78-80)

TRADITION

The Abrahamic disposition was not merely pietistic, as we might expect. As we have seen, the young Abraham was restless and anxious; as he matured, he was lonely and courageous, defying the society in which he lived, declaring his independence.

Abraham not only saw the galaxies regularly swirling above his head and looked at them, at their motion, intensely. Abraham was not only obedient to God's command but actually discovered Him both in His command to man and in the law given to nature. Despite the Jewish predilection for observance and loyalty to given law, Abraham is valorized by midrash and Maimonides as the man who first had the courage to penetrate the mystery of creation and its implications. Abraham's courage is cultic and religious as he defies pagan sensuousness, but intellectual and philosophical; he stakes out the moral implications of creation and himself shoulders the burden later embodied in command and code.

Abraham will be a founder—of a religion, a belief, and a people. He will remain distinct and even isolated; others will recognize their separation from him. Abraham's moral and philosophical uniqueness was not unnoticed—others knew he was different and special. At the same time, there are two senses in which he acknowledges his humanity and even strives to live beyond his being “of the other side of the river.” This is true of all Jews.

First, Abraham is lonely. Despite his rejection of pagan society, he also wants to be accepted by it; despite his realization that he must deny its very essence, he also wants to be an organic part of its human fabric. Jewish monotheism is also, at first, a message to the world and of the world. So Abraham begins his odyssey as part of a human journey, planted in human soil. “Two wills were locked in a struggle: the will to move on, to flee, to wander, to renounce—and the will to stay, to strike roots, to form relationships, to create a fellowship, to share with a community.... There are two Abrahams, one the nomad who wanders with his sheep and the other ... the citizen and comrade ... But the gesture of creation is inseparably linked with negation and withdrawal.” (86-87) The gesture of withdrawal will ultimately triumph, despite its price.

Second, the movement towards Messianic redemption is articulated in Abrahamic structures. Messiahhood or election is not implanted—inherently—in certain figures in a way that reminds us of Judah Halevi. Rather, individuals are designated as worthy by virtue of their qualities, and they are selected by their concrete embodiment of these abilities—a more Maimonidean view. The daughters of Lot, and Ruth, are thus part of the Messianic process despite the tawdry: “The poor of biblical times

used to glean after the reapers. The Almighty, too, gleaned and gathered—not ears of corn but beautiful inclinations and from these He wove the soul of the King Messiah. God found a heroic girl in Moab... the Messiah's personality... was to embody the finest and most beautiful elements concealed in the depths of mankind..." (181) The messianic process is an organic part of human activity and development. The Abrahamic turn represents the finest in human abilities. It began with the discovery by man of God as single cosmic creator and proceeds to a redemption in universal history by the finest of human abilities. Abrahamic Jews have rejected a Messianic period in favor of a human Messiah and have believed confidently in a "King Messiah" – not primarily to affirm the monarchic element but rather to retain rather than reject the immemorial belief in human virtues and abilities.⁶

This acceptance of human abilities and virtues is of one piece with Rabbi Soloveitchik's generally—though not exclusively—positive attitude towards culture as a whole. The welcoming and absorbing attitude thus becomes a part of the messianic process, which it anticipates and adumbrates. The Abrahamic journey is one with the progress of humankind.

⁶ See S. Schwarzschild, "The Personal Messiah," in M. Kellner, ed, *In Pursuit of the Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 19-28.