

Why Does God Choose Abraham?

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When I was a freshman in college, I took a course in Hebrew Scriptures. One day, as we reached Genesis 12, which Sydney read for us this evening, I began furiously flipping through the pages. My professor asked, "Barry, what's wrong?" I answered, "I can't find the story about Abraham smashing his father's idols!" "Ah," she responded, "you're the product of a fine Reform Temple education. They taught you that story, but didn't tell you that it's Midrash, not Torah."

Midrash is a story, or more broadly an explanation, often told by the ancient rabbis to fill a hole they found in the biblical text. No gap is more glaring than Torah's failure to explain why God chooses Abraham to establish our covenant.

Enter the idol-smashing story: We are taught that Terach, Abraham's father, is an idol maker and merchant. One day, called away on a business trip, Terach asks Abraham to mind the store. Abhorring idolatry, Abraham takes a stick, smashes all but the largest idol, and places the stick in that dominant statue's hands. When his father comes home, horrified, he asks Abraham, "What happened?" Abraham explains that the gods had begun quarreling, knocking one another to their destruction, until the largest one had enough, took the stick and matters into his own hands, and finished off all the others. Terach responds: "That's impossible! They are made of stone and wood. These gods couldn't destroy one another." A satisfied Abraham asks his father to consider his own words: He has been making mere idols, not actual gods.

According to that version of the story, God doesn't so much choose Abraham as Abraham chooses God.

We like this story. It suggests that the Jewish people deserve our unique relationship with God. Abraham earned God's love from the beginning. Then, we who continue to worship the one God also merit God's ongoing favor.

Many of our ancestors were less moved by that version of events. Having been conquered, and seen their Temple destroyed, they feared a covenant established because of Abraham's righteousness. If one generation's goodness

could inspire the sacred bond, another's sin could break it. Perhaps they had lost God's favor, revoked because of their people's idolatry.

Enter another Midrash. The King of Ur dreams that one of his subjects is pregnant with a son who will rise to become the father of a great and mighty nation, one that might one day challenge his own. The king then instructs his soldiers: Go find this woman. As soon as she gives birth, take her son away, and leave him for dead. The king's servants do exactly that, abandoning the infant in a cave.

God, though, sends birds to feed the baby. Then, at three days of age, the infant miraculously walks to the entrance of the cave. Seeing the sun, he pledges his worshipful fidelity to what seems to be the greatest of all powers. Hours later, though, the sun sets, and the moon rises. Baby Abraham now rationalizes that the moon must be the greatest of all, since it can provide light even in the absence of the sun. Eventually, though, the moon, too, sets. Then, the infant Abraham proclaims, "There must be one God who controls them all," and pledges his allegiance to the one, true God.

This second story includes the element of Abraham's choosing God. However, it also suggests that Abraham is chosen for that magnificent destiny even before his birth.

This story introduces a profound religious idea, one that some modern Jews find distasteful. It's called "grace," a word that rings Christian to our ears. We shouldn't be surprised, though, that Judaism and Christianity -- indeed, many religions -- share similar concepts. Grace -- *chen*, in Hebrew -- is the notion that God can love for no reason other than that God loves. We call that "unconditional love."

My Reform Religious School of the late 1960's and '70's preferred to teach that Abraham deserved to be chosen. That's called "justice."

However, "grace" may be the better, and more comforting, explanation. Many of our ancestors preferred it. After all, if God's love is unconditional, it cannot be removed, even if we don't entirely deserve God's favor at one particular moment in our history or another.

Back in that college Hebrew Scriptures class, simply reading Genesis 12, I learned that the Torah itself seems to suggest that God chooses Abraham for no

particular reason, certainly not for any that is stated. Put another way, the rabbis who suggest that Abraham is chosen as an act of grace, of unconditional love, would seem to be more faithful to the Torah itself, their story about the cave notwithstanding.

Abraham is chosen, of course, not only for a covenant with God, but also with the land we call Israel. If we, as Abraham's descendants, deserve the land because of our righteousness or our patriarch's, perhaps we may feel entitled to behave arrogantly toward others in Israel. If, on the other hand, we accept the gift of the covenant as an act of God's love, we may feel no less entitled to the land. At the same time, we may be moved to share the love we have known with others. We may imagine that God also loves other human beings unconditionally, not descendants of Abraham and Sarah alone. Recognizing that our covenant is unconditional, we may place greater faith in its continuance. Feeling more secure, we may seek to find ways to live out our covenant in a free and secure Israel, at peace, by sharing the land we love more generously with others who also love that land, who also see it as God's gift.

This week, I learned yet another Midrash, an ancient text taught most recently by my colleague, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg. A traveler comes across a building in flames. He looks for the building manager, hoping that person will deal with the fire. Just then, a shout comes from the top floor of the burning building: "I own the building." The Midrash continues, Abraham is like the traveler, who sees the world on fire, that is, injustice in the world. God says to Abraham: "I am the owner of the world." God is asking Abraham's help, and Sarah's help, and all their descendants' help, to correct the injustices of the world.

Let us all, as heirs to God's great covenant, commit ourselves to living justly, like Abraham before us. Let us open our eyes to the brokenness of this world, and let us see ourselves as chosen, above all, to right those wrongs. And let us humbly receive the gift of God's love, God's grace, for Abraham, for his descendants, and for all humankind.

Amen.