

“On Sharing a Common Ancestor”

4 November 2006, *Parashat Lekh Lekha*

South West Essex and Settlement Reform Synagogue

Leo Baeck College and SWESRS are united in many ways, not the least of which is that we are both celebrating our fiftieth anniversary, which makes 1956 a banner year in the history of Anglo-Jewry. I understand that most of not all of your rabbis during this 50-year period have been alumni of the College. Indeed, among the most highly respected and distinguished of all our alumni is your Rabbi Maurice Michaels. We are certainly grateful for the financial support you have provided to the College in the past, and no less important for the fact, as Rabbi Michaels informs me, that more students have gone to the College from SWERS than from any other synagogue. I hope that there is someone sitting here today, perhaps our Bar Mitzvah boy, who will carry forward that tradition into the next generation.

I would like to address today a topic that is close to the hearts of our students at Leo Baeck College: inter-religious dialogue, under the theme suggested by our Torah reading: “On Sharing a Common Ancestor.” And my text for today is a statement by an academic colleague of mine at Yale Divinity School (Lamin Sanneh): “Few things divide people more than what they have in common.” This apparently paradoxical yet powerfully provocative formulation presents a challenge to our thinking about sharing a common ancestor. So frequently, we hear Abraham—whose story really begins with our parashah this week—invoked as the ancestor shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims, his discovery of and faith in the one true God of the universe as the source for all three religions. What are the implications of these claims? How have they functioned historically? Has Abraham united

or divided his purported descendants? And what is the potential for the belief in a common ancestor to foster mutual understanding today? These are the questions I would like to begin to explore with you.

Now to be sure, Jews have shared more than a common ancestor with their daughter religions. We share a Sacred Scripture with Christians but not with Muslims: our Tanach, the Christian Old Testament. And we share a common sacred geography of Jerusalem with Muslims—the Temple Mount, their *Haram as-Sharif*—but not with Christians, who do not venerate the Temple Mount and consider the holiest sites in Jerusalem to be elsewhere in the city.

Indeed, Abraham has been a hot topic in recent years. The late Pope John Paul II frequently referred to “the children of Abraham,” as in his Easter message on April 11, 2004: “Grant that all who consider themselves children of Abraham may rediscover the brotherhood that they share and that prompts in them designs of cooperation and peace.” For his silver jubilee in the papacy, a “Concert of Reconciliation” was held in the Vatican on January 17 (2004), featuring a motet for double choir and 13 brass instruments by the American composer John Harbison called “Abraham;” the official Vatican invitation stated that the event reflects “the commitment to reconciliation that all the children of Abraham – Jews, Christians and Muslims – must embrace with conviction.” What does this claim to be children of Abraham actually mean? I suggest that there are two components, one physical, which I will pass over quickly, the other spiritual.

To summarize about physical descent: Jews and Muslims claimed descent from a common ancestor; Christian thinkers traditionally did *not* make this claim, believing instead that they were descended from Noah not through Shem (the ancestor of Abraham) but through Japhet. All tended to agree that Jews were descended from Abraham through Isaac and Arabs through Ishmael, who became far more significant in subsequent Islamic tradition, attaining the status of a prophet, commissioned by God to bring the divine message of Prayer and Charity to the peoples of the wilderness (Qur'an 19: 54–55). But this led to some significant infighting over whether the condescension toward Ishmael reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures was an authentic reflection of his character, and therefore the character of his descendants, or an intentional alteration and distortion of God's word introduced by the Jews for polemical purposes.

Now regarding *spiritual* descent from Abraham, we find that each faith claimed to have been the religion of Abraham—and by implication, that the other two are distortions of the source. Thus it is still often maintained that Abraham was the first Jew, or the prototypical Christian, or the original Muslim. Needless to say, we have here a set of incompatible assertions, a common spiritual ancestor whose identity is strongly contested, a model of rivalry and competition. Let us take a few moments to see how these work.

For Jews, the problem was that Abraham and the other Patriarchs lived before the Revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Jews have traditionally believed that this revelation included not just the Ten Commandments, but all of the 613 commandments of the written law, together with

their interpretations, applications, and expansions known as the “oral law,” eventually written in the Talmud. Now according to the Biblical narrative, Abraham was explicitly given the commandment of circumcision for himself and the male members of his household. But what about the other commandments: did he work or travel on the Sabbath, eat pork, have *hametz* on Pesach and regular meals on Yom Kippur? The modern scholar might well say that even according to the Biblical account, such practices did not become forbidden until later. But for the traditional Jewish mentality, this idea was difficult to internalize. We therefore find a concerted effort—not universal but widely accepted—to claim that Abraham observed all of the commandments later given to the entire people of Israel.

For example, in Genesis 18:8, when welcoming the three strangers, we are told that “He took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them.” But Jewish dietary laws prohibit the consumption of milk and meat together. Commentators who cannot imagine that Abraham served his guests these two categories of food together insist that he first served the milkhics, and then waited the appropriate amount of time before serving the fleishiks. (Hizkuni, Hertz). Long after the Biblical period, Jews, who had no real historical sense and could not imagine the Patriarchs as religiously different from themselves, depicted Abraham and his son and grandson as fully observant Pharisaic Jews, re-inventing Abraham in their own image.

Needless to say, such thinking was very far removed from the Christian mentality. Yet Christians indulged their own type of anachronism. (I remember seeing a beautiful example of this mind-set in a magnificently il-

luminated medieval Christian Psalter displayed in the British Library. What were the illustrations? Not scenes from the life of King David, but scenes from the life of Christ. According to the artist, what David was writing, was a mapping of the events of salvation history to occur centuries in the future. Since he was very well aware of this meaning, David was a Christian centuries before the birth of Christ. And the same with Abraham. When he took his son Isaac to the mountain, and placed two pieces of wood on the boy's shoulders as they ascended together to offer him as a sacrifice, he was enacting a prototype, a prefiguration of the ultimate sacrifice of the Son in the future.

Even more important for Christian theology, Abraham became the prototype of the believer who is justified in God's sight *not* by the observance of the commandments but by faith alone. This is accomplished through a rather ingenious argument made by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans. Genesis chapter 15 tells of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars of heaven. The next verse states, *Ve-he'emin ba-Adonai va-yahsheveha lo tzedakah* (15:5); the translation of these deceptively ambiguous five words that works best for Paul would be, "He put faith in God, who counted it to him as righteousness." Thus Abraham was justified by his faith. It is not until two chapters and at least 13 years later that Abraham was given the commandment of circumcision. Thus the commandment of circumcision could not be the basis the promise to Abraham. Generalizing from this, Paul concludes, "It was not through law that Abraham, or his posterity, was given the promise that the world would be their inheritance, but through the righteousness that came from faith." Abraham is therefore "the father of all who have faith when uncircumcized,

so that righteousness is counted to them” (Romans 4: 11,13). Where Jews strived to make Abraham a faithful observer of all the commandments, Paul takes even the one commandment specifically addressed to him—circumcision—and removes it from a fundamental role in his spiritual status. Abraham is the paradigm for the believer.

Historically, we would say that Islam emerged as a new religion in world history in the wake of the career of Muhammad in the first half of the seventh century of the Christian era. But just as Jews found it difficult to process the possibility that Abraham violated the dietary laws, and Christians could not imagine that King David and the prophet Isaiah were unaware of the savior Messiah who would redeem mankind under during the period of Roman rule, so Muslims were unwilling to accept the assertion that their religion was a latecomer on the historical scene. Unlike our age, when the claim that something is “new” is generally taken to imply that it is better, an improvement over the past, theirs was an age in which something new was automatically under suspicion. The regnant assumption was that truth and greatness resided in antiquity.

Therefore Muslim thinkers asserted that Islam was the original true religion, from which Judaism and Christianity had later branched off. Here Muslims maintain their spiritual connection to Abraham as the one who dramatically broke from the regnant idolatry of his age (as Muhammad would later do in his own time). Indeed, the Qur’an contains a piquant narrative about Abraham as archetypal iconoclast. Left alone with an array of statues of various gods, he broke all of them except for the biggest one. When he was challenged by the idol-worshippers, he replied that “the biggest of

them did it; ask them this if they are able to talk.” Shamefully they admitted their “gods” were unable either to act or to speak (21:58–66). This story is familiar to Jews as it appears in the classical work of rabbinic commentary, the Midrash Rabbah.

Abraham not only rejected the idols so prevalent in his age; he discovered the truth of the one God and dedicated his life to God’s service. The *Life of the Prophet* records that Jews and Christians in Medina disputed against each other whether Abraham was a Jew or a Christian. The Muslim response was that “Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was an upright man (*hanif*) who surrendered to God” (citing Qu’ran 3:67), that is, he was a Muslim: one who submits or surrenders to God. Therefore, “Those of mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him.” (Peters, 33). Here was a way of trumping the claims of both religions. Just as the Christians argued that Abraham was justified by faith before his circumcision, the Qur’an reminds us that Abraham’s submission to God preceded the revelation of either the Torah or the Gospel (3:55-58). He was therefore the first Muslim.

Furthermore, in Muslim collective memory and historical consciousness, Abraham and his son Ishmael played a crucial role in establishing the core institutions of their religion. They were the ones who built the Ka’ba in Mecca, the most venerated sanctuary of mainstream Islam, which the Qur’an describes as “a place of assembly for men, and a place of safety” and sanctity (2:125). “Remember: Abraham and Isma’il raised the foundations of the House (with this prayer): ‘Our Lord! Accept (this service) for us’ (2:127; cf Wheeler, 100). The Ka’ba later became a place of idolatry, corrupting the

religion of Abraham, until it was purified and rebuilt by Muhammad.. Finally, Abraham is described in the Qur'an as the source of the main rituals that characterize the *hadj* or pilgrimage to Mecca, including circumambulation, spiritual retreat, and prostration. Other rituals of the *hadj* are associated with the story of the banished Isma'il and his mother Hajar, who search for water and finally discovered a well on the site that would become Mecca (Wheeler, 97). In short, for Muslims as well as for Jews, but not for Christians, Abraham serves as both a physical and spiritual ancestor.

But sharing a common ancestor has not historically been a natural source of closeness, as we see in the Muslim insistence that Jews had falsified the text of the Bible to substitute the name of Isaac for Isma'il, *their* ancestor, who was the son Abraham was summoned to sacrifice. "Few things divide people more than what they have in common."

Yet this must not be the final word. There were examples in the past – and in many dialogue groups today – of Jews and Christians studying Scripture together, listening to each other and learning from each other. There were examples in the past – more difficult to find today – of Jews and Muslims venerating in common a shrine at the traditional grave site of one of the prophets recognized in both traditions (Ezekiel, Daniel).¹ And, alongside the forced efforts to construct Abraham as a halakhically-observant Jew, or someone justified in God's sight purely by faith, or as the architect of the Ka'ba in Mecca, we find basis for a common ground as well: in Abraham as

¹ Veneration for tomb of Daniel that crosses religious boundaries: Benjamin of Tudela, transl., p. 109. At tomb of Ezekiel, "distinguished Muslims also come there to pray, so great is their love for Ezekiel the Prophet; and they call it the Dwelling of Beauty. All Arabs come there to pray" (p. 104).

the courageous loner who challenged the idols of his age for a vision that has inspired millions of believers through the ages.

As a small child, “Abraham went outside in the evening and looked at . . . the heavens and the earth. He looked in the sky and saw a star, and said, ‘This is my Lord.’ Then he watched it until it disappeared, and said, ‘I do not like things that set.’” Then the moon rose and he saw its glow and said, ‘This is my Lord,’ and watched it until it disappeared. . . . When the day broke, and the sun rose, he saw the greatness of the sun, . . . a light more brilliant than anything he had seen before, and he said, ‘This is my Lord, this is the greatest.’ When it set he said, ‘I am finished associating things with God. I set my face to the one who created the heavens and the earth’”. To many Jews, and perhaps to some Christians, this legend will sound familiar, and indeed it is found in the rabbinic Midrash. But the version I cited, virtually identical, is taken from *The Life of the Prophet* by ibn Ishaq (Wheeler, 86). This story is indeed a reminder that—despite the churlish complaints of a few Christian fundamentalists, Jews, Christians and Muslims do indeed worship the same God.

There is much for us to discover in Abraham beyond a common ancestor. There is Abraham the monotheist who discovered the one true God, Creator of the world with all its diversity; Abraham the iconoclast who physically destroyed the idols of his society in order to demonstrate their futility; Abraham the man whose faith was so strong that he was willing to leave behind his home in a great civilization to make a new home in an unknown backwater land, whose trust was so strong that he was willing offer as a sacrifice what was most precious to him in the world; Abraham who

volunteered to divide valuable territory with his nephew Lot, who insisted on paying in full for the burial plot that was offered to him free of charge by Ephron the Hittite; who was willing to go to war to protect the life and possessions of his nephew, but who refused to keep even “a thread or a sandal strap” of spoils; Abraham who challenged God’s justice in the decision to destroy righteous and wicked alike in Sodom. Abraham whose sons Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father in the ancestral plot.

But let us not forget that all this emphasis on the potential kinship among the “children of Abraham” – Jews, Christians, and Muslims – leaves many hundreds of millions of human beings who do not recognize Abraham, who may never have heard of Abraham, beyond the pale. Having given due thought to the challenges of sharing a common ancestor in Abraham, our next task will be to move on to the meaning of metaphorically sharing common ancestors in *Adam and Eve*, including the larger human family *beyond* the three western religions. But that is another sermon—and I do hope you will invite me back on some occasion before our respective institutions are celebrating their *one-hundredth* anniversaries.

