Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madaah, Laws of Idolatry 1:3

After Abraham was weaned, while still an infant, his mind began to reflect. By day and by night he was thinking and wondering: "How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere should continuously be guiding the world and have no one to guide it and cause it to turn round; for it cannot be that it turns round of itself." He had no teacher, no one to instruct him in aught. He was submerged in Ur of the Chaldees, among silly idolaters. His father and mother and the entire population worshiped idols, and he worshiped with them. But his mind was busily working and reflecting until he had attained the way of truth, apprehended the correct line of thought, and knew that there is one God, that He guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and that among all that exist, there is no god besides Him. He realized that men everywhere were in error, and that what had occasioned their error was that they worshiped the stars and the images, so that the truth perished from their minds. Abraham was forty years old when he recognized his Creator. Having attained this knowledge, he began to refute the inhabitants of Ur of the Chaldees, arguing with them and saying to them, "The course you are following is not the way of truth." He broke the images and commenced to instruct the people that it was not right to serve any one but the God of the universe, to whom alone it was proper to bow down, offer up sacrifices and make libations, so that all human creatures might, in the future, know Him; and that it was proper to destroy and shatter all the images, so that the people might not err like these who thought that there was no god but these images. When he had prevailed over them with his arguments, the king (of the country) sought to slay him. He was miraculously saved and emigrated to Haran. He then began to proclaim to the whole world with great power and to instruct the people that the entire universe had but one Creator and that Him it was right to worship. He went from city to city and from kingdom to kingdom, calling and gathering together the inhabitants till he arrived in the land of Canaan. There, too, he proclaimed his message, as it is said, "And he called there on the name of the Lord, God of the universe" (Gen. 21:33). When the people flocked to him and questioned him regarding his assertions, he would instruct each one according to his capacity till he had brought him to the way of

truth, and thus thousands and tens of thousands joined him. These were the persons referred to in the phrase, "men of the house of Abraham."

Abraham implanted in their hearts this great doctrine, composed books on it, and taught it to Isaac, his son. Isaac settled down, instructing and exhorting. He imparted the doctrine to Jacob and ordained him to teach it. He, too, settled down, taught and morally strengthened all who joined him. The patriarch Jacob instructed all his sons, set apart Levi, appointed him head (teacher) and placed him in a college to teach the way of God and keep the charge of Abraham. He charged his sons to appoint, from the tribe of Levi, one instructor after another, in uninterrupted succession, so that the doctrine might never be forgotten. And so it went on with ever increasing vigor among Jacob's children and their adherents till they became a people that knew God. When the Israelites had stayed a long while in Egypt, they relapsed, learned the practices of their neighbors, and, like them, worshiped idols, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, that steadfastly kept the charge of the patriarch. This tribe of Levi never practiced idolatry. The doctrine implanted by Abraham would, in a very short time, have been uprooted, and Jacob's descendants would have lapsed into the error and perversities universally prevalent.

But because of God's love for us and because He kept the oath made to our ancestor Abraham, He appointed Moses to be our teacher and the teacher of all the prophets and charged him with his mission. After Moses had begun to exercise his prophetic functions and Israel had been chosen by the Almighty as His heritage, He crowned them with precepts, and showed them the way to worship Him and how to deal with idolatry and with those who go astray after it.*

Chapter 11

1 We should not follow the customs of the Gentiles, nor imitate them in dress or in their way of trimming the hair, as it is said, "And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I have cast out before you" (Lev. 20:23); "Neither shall you walk in their statutes" (*ibid.* 18:3); "Take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared to follow them" (Deut. 12:30).

הָיָה הָעוֹלָם הוֹלֵךְ וּמִתְגַּלְגֵּל[א] עַד שֶׁנּוֹלַד עַמּוּדוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם[ב] — וְהוּא אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ.

ג כֵּיצַד שֶׁנִּגְמַל[ג] אֵיתָן[ד] זֶה הִתְחִיל לְשוֹטֵט[ה] בְּדַעְתּוֹ — וְהוּא קָטָן — וְהִתְחִיל לַחְשֹׁב בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וְהָיָה תָּמֵהַּ: הֵיאַךְ אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁיִּהְיֶה הַגַּלְגַּל הַזֶּה נוֹהֵג תָּמִיד וְלֹא יִהְיֶה לוֹ מַנְהִיג[ו]? וּמִי יְסַבֵּב אוֹתוֹ? — לְפִי שֶׁאֵי־אֶפְשָׁר שֶׁיְּסַבֵּב אֶת־עַצְמוֹ! וְלֹא הָיָה לוֹ מְלַמֵּד וְלֹא מוֹדִיעַ דָּבָר, אֶלָּא מֻשְׁקָע[ז] בְּאוּר־כַּשְׂדִּים בֵּין עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה־זָרָה הַטִּפְּשִׁים; וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ וְכָל־הָעָם עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדָה־זָרָה וְהוּא עוֹבֵד עִמָּהֶם[ח]. וְלִבּוֹ מְשׁוֹטֵט וּמֵבִין[ט] — עַד שֶׁהִשִּׂיג דֶּרֶךְ הָאֱמֶת וְהֵבִין קַו הַצֶּדֶק מִתְּבוּנָתוֹ הַנְּכוֹנָה[י], וְיָדַע שֶׁיֵּשׁ שָׁם אֱלוֹהַּ אֶחָד וְהוּא מַנְהִיג הַגַּלְגַּל, וְהוּא

אמרו: תשעה נכנסו בחייהם בגן עדן, ואלה הם: חנוך, אליהו וכו' (מס' דא"ז פ"א). מתושלח — עליו אמרו: „מתושלח צדיק גמור היה" וכו' (ילקוט שמעוני, בראשית אות מב, בשם מדרש אבכיר) ובמסכת (סנהדרין קח:) אמרו: „שבעה ימים נתלו לדור המבול, והם ימי אבלו של מתושלח", כלומר: כדי שיוכלו להתאבל ולהספיד כראוי לו לאותו צדיק, נתעכב המבול שבעה ימים לכבודו. נח — מעידה התורה: נח איש צדיק תמים היה (בראשית ו, ט). שם ועבר — ידועים כמרביצי תורה ומפיצי תרבות בבתי־מדרשיהם: ותלך לדרוש את ה' (בראשית כה, כב), שהלכה לבית־מדרשם של שם ועבר (בראשית־רבה, פרק סג). וכן אמרו (ע"ז לו:): בבית־דינו של שם ועבר גזרו על הזנות, דכתיב: ויאמר יהודה הוציאוה ותשרף (בראשית לח, כד). והשווה דברי רבנו (מו"נ ח"ב, לט): „וכן תמצא החכמים אומרים באלה הנביאים שקדמו למשה: בית־דינו של עבר, בית־דינו של מתושלח, מדרשו של מתושלח — כולם, עליהם השלום, היו נביאים" וכו'. א הולך ונמשך, הולך ומתפתח. ב שהעולם התרבותי עומד עליו. ג כשנעתק משדי אמו, והוא אז כבן שלש שנים. ד עמוד חזק זה שלא ימוט לעולם, והוא — אברהם אבינו, שנקרא: „איתן האזרחי" (תהלים פט, א). אמר רב: איתן האזרחי — זה אברהם (ב"ב טו.). ואמרו (ר"ה יא.): ירח איתנים — הוא חודש תשרי שנולדו בו איתני עולם — האבות. איתן — פירושו: חזק ומתמיד בקיומו, כמו: והאיתנים מוסדי ארץ (מיכה ו, ו); נחל איתן (עמוס ה, כד) — שמימיו אינם פוסקים. ה לחפש ברוחו: לחקור ולהתבונן. על שם הכתוב: ישוטטו לבקש את דבר ה' (עמוס ח, יב); ישוטטו רבים ותרבה הדעת (דניאל יב, ד). ו כמאמרם: שהיה אברהם אבינו אומר: תאמר, שהעולם הזה בלי מנהיג! הציץ עליו הקב"ה ואמר לו: אני הוא בעל העולם! (בראשית־רבה, פרק לט). ז שקוע ונתון בתוכם. ח כמו שמצינו: אברהם אבינו היה מתפחד ואומר: שמא יש בידי עוון שהייתי עובד עבודה־זרה כל השנים הללו. אמר לו הקב"ה: לך טל ילדותך (תהלים קי, ג) — מה טל זה פורח, אף אתה עוונותיך פורחים ואינם (בראשית־רבה, פרק סד). ט ומתבונן. י כמו שאמר רבי שמעון: אב לא לימדו, ורב לא היה לו. ומהיכן למד את

בָּרָא הַכֹּל, וְאֵין בְּכָל־הַנִּמְצָא[א] אֱלוֹהַּ חוּץ מִמֶּנּוּ. וְיָדַע שֶׁכָּל־הָעוֹלָם טוֹעִים, וְדָבָר[ב] שֶׁגָּרַם לָהֶם לְטָעוּת זוֹ, שֶׁעוֹבְדִים אֶת־הַכּוֹכָבִים וְאֶת־הַצּוּרוֹת עַד שֶׁאָבַד הָאֱמֶת מִדַּעְתָּם. וּבֶן־אַרְבָּעִים[ג] שָׁנָה הִכִּיר אַבְרָהָם אֶת־בּוֹרְאוֹ. כֵּיוָן שֶׁהִכִּיר וְיָדַע הִתְחִיל לְהָשִׁיב תְּשׁוּבוֹת[ד] עַל־בְּנֵי אוּר־כַּשְׂדִּים[ה] וְלַעֲרֹךְ דִּין[ו] עִמָּהֶם וְלוֹמַר: שֶׁאֵין זוֹ דֶּרֶךְ הָאֱמֶת שֶׁאַתֶּם הוֹלְכִים בָּהּ; וְשִׁבֵּר הַצְּלָמִים[ז] וְהִתְחִיל לְהוֹדִיעַ לָעָם שֶׁאֵין רָאוּי לַעֲבֹד אֶלָּא לֵאלוֹהַּ הָעוֹלָם — וְלוֹ רָאוּי לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וּלְהַקְרִיב וּלְנַסֵּךְ, כְּדֵי שֶׁיַּכִּירוּהוּ כָּל־הַבְּרוּאִים הַבָּאִים. וְרָאוּי לְאַבֵּד וּלְשַׁבֵּר כָּל־הַצּוּרוֹת כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִטְעוּ בָּהֶן כָּל־הָעָם, כְּמוֹ אֵלּוּ שֶׁהֵם מְדַמִּים שֶׁאֵין שֵׁם אֱלוֹהַּ אֶלָּא אֵלּוּ. כֵּיוָן שֶׁגָּבַר עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרֵאָיוֹתָיו, בִּקֵּשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ[ח] לְהָרְגוֹ — וְנַעֲשָׂה לוֹ נֵס וְיָצָא לְחָרָן. וְהִתְחִיל לַעֲמֹד וְלִקְרֹא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל לְכָל־הָעוֹלָם וּלְהוֹדִיעָם שֶׁיֵּשׁ שֵׁם אֱלוֹהַּ אֶחָד לְכָל־הָעוֹלָם — וְלוֹ רָאוּי לַעֲבֹד. וְהָיָה מְהַלֵּךְ וְקוֹרֵא וּמְקַבֵּץ הָעָם מֵעִיר לְעִיר וּמִמַּמְלָכָה לְמַמְלָכָה עַד שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן — וְהוּא קוֹרֵא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיִּקְרָא[ט] שָׁם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֵל עוֹלָם (בראשית כא, לג). וְכֵיוָן

התורה? — זימן לו הקב"ה שתי כליותיו כמין שני רבנים והיו נובעות ומלמדות אותו תורה וחכמה (בראשית־רבה, פ' סא). א בכל המציאות, בכל העולם כולו. ב ידע גם גלגולי הסיבות שהביאום לידי כך: לעבוד עבודה־זרה בדמות צורות ותמונות. ג לכאורה יש סתירה בין דברי רבנו כאן ובין דברי חז"ל שאמרו (נדרים לב.): „שאברהם הכיר את הבורא כשהיה בן שלש שנים" — על יסוד הכתוב: עֵקֶב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי (בראשית כו, ה), כמנין עקב משנות חייו שהיו קעה. אולם אפשר לקיים אלה ואלה, ויישוב הסתירה אנו מוצאים כאן בדברי רבנו: „כיון שנגמל איתן זה התחיל לשוטט בדעתו", כלומר: אחרי היגמלו והיה לבן־שלש התחיל לדרוש ולבקש את ה', וכשהגיע לארבעים, שנות הבינה, השלים להכירו (כסף־משנה). אפס תמוה הדבר, מאיזה מקור שאב רבנו? שהרי במדרש (בראשית־רבה, פ' סד) נמצא: „ר' יוחנן ור' חנינא דאמרי תרוייהו: בן ארבעים ושמונה שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו"; ובמספר זה החזיקו „הגהות מימוניות", דפוס קושטא ועוד. ומרן ה„כסף־משנה" כותב: וצריכים לומר, שרבנו היה גורס: ר' יוחנן ור' חנינא דאמרי תרוייהו: „בן ארבעים שנה הכיר אברהם את הבורא", ולא בן ארבעים ושמונה. ד להקשות קושיות, על דרך לשון החכמים: „שתי תשובות בדבר"; „ואם לדין — יש תשובה". ה עיר מולדתו או עיר מגוריו. לפי המדרש (בראשית־רבה, פ' לח), מלשון: אשר אור לו בציון (ישעיה לא, ט), על שם מדורת האש שהשליכוהו בה על שברו את צלמי אביו. ו להתווכח. ז (ש) ח זהו נמרוד מלך בבל (שם). ט ואמרו חז"ל:

שֶׁהָיוּ הָעָם מִתְקַבְּצִים אֵלָיו וְשׁוֹאֲלִים לוֹ עַל־דְּבָרָיו, הָיָה מוֹדִיעַ לְכָל־אֶחָד וְאֶחָד כְּפִי דַּעְתּוֹ עַד שֶׁיַּחֲזִירֵהוּ לְדֶרֶךְ הָאֱמֶת – עַד שֶׁנִּתְקַבְּצוּ אֵלָיו אֲלָפִים וּרְבָבוֹת, וְהֵם אַנְשֵׁי בֵּית אַבְרָהָם[א]. וְשָׁתַל בְּלִבָּם הָעִקָּר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה[ב] וְחִבֵּר בּוֹ סְפָרִים[ג] וְהוֹדִיעוֹ לְיִצְחָק בְּנוֹ. וְיָשַׁב יִצְחָק מְלַמֵּד וּמַחֲזִיר[ד]; וְיִצְחָק הוֹדִיעַ לְיַעֲקֹב[ה] וּמְנָהוּ לְלַמֵּד, וְיָשַׁב מְלַמֵּד וּמַחֲזִיר[ו] כָּל־הַגְּלוּיִים אֵלָיו[ז]. וְיַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ לִמֵּד בָּנָיו כֻּלָּם, וְהִבְדִּיל לֵוִי וּמְנָהוּ[ח] רֹאשׁ וְהוֹשִׁיבוֹ בְּיִשִּׁיבָה[ט] לְלַמֵּד דֶּרֶךְ הַשֵּׁם וְלִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹת אַבְרָהָם; וְצִוָּה אֶת־בָּנָיו שֶׁלֹּא יַפְסִיקוּ מִבְּנֵי לֵוִי מְמֻנֶּה אַחַר מְמֻנֶּה – כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִשְׁתַּכַּח[י] הַלִּמּוּד. וְהָיָה הַדָּבָר הוֹלֵךְ וּמִתְגַּבֵּר בִּבְנֵי־יַעֲקֹב וּבַגְּלוּיִים עֲלֵיהֶם, וְנֶעֱשָׂת[יא] בָּעוֹלָם אֻמָּה שֶׁהִיא יוֹדַעַת אֶת־ה'. עַד שֶׁאָרְכוּ הַיָּמִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם וְחָזְרוּ לְלַמֵּד מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם וְלַעֲבֹד כּוֹכָבִים[יב] כְּמוֹתָם – חוּץ מִשֵּׁבֶט לֵוִי שֶׁעָמַד בְּמִצְוַת אָבוֹת, וּמֵעוֹלָם לֹא עָבַד שֵׁבֶט לֵוִי[יג] עֲבוֹדָה־זָרָה. וְכִמְעַט קָט[יד] הָיָה, וְהָעִקָּר[טו] שֶׁשָּׁתַל אַבְרָהָם נֶעֱקַר וְחוֹזְרִים בְּנֵי־יַעֲקֹב לְטָעוּת הָעַמִּים[טז] וּתְעִיָּתָם.

א אל תקרא: ויקרא – אלא ויקריא, מלמד: שהקריא אברהם אבינו שמו של הקדוש־ברוך־הוא בפי כל עובר ושב" (סוטה י.). א ואת הנפש אשר עשו בחרן (בראשית יב, ה) – שהכניסן תחת כנפי השכינה: אברהם מגייר את האנשים ושרה מגיירת הנשים ומעלה עליהם הכתוב כאילו עשאום (בראשית־רבה, לט). ב שורש האמונה באל עולם אחד ואפסות האלילים. ג גמירי, דעבודה־זרה דאברהם אבינו ארבע מאה פירקי הויין (ע"ז יד:) – קבלה בידינו, שספר בן ארבע מאות פרקים על עניני עבודה־זרה היה בידי אברהם. ד אותם לדרך האמת. ונוסחות אחרות: ומזהיר; ומחזיק. ה (שמות־רבה, פ"א). ו שהלכו אחרי תורתו ונתחברו אליו. ז „אמר המלאך ליעקב: לא כך אמרת: „עשר אעשרנו לך" – הרי יש לך בנים ולא עישרת אותם?.. התחיל מבנימין ועלה לוי „קודש לה'" וברכו, שיהיו בני־לוי משרתים לפניו בארץ כמלאכי השרת בשמים" (פרקי דרבי אליעזר, פרק לז). ח מימיהם של אבותינו לא פסקה ישיבה מהם: היו במצרים – היתה ישיבה עמהם; היו במדבר – ישיבה עמהם וכו' (יומא כח:). ט בשאר הדפוסים: תישכח הלימוד. י ונעשתה, כנוסח אוקספורד. ונוסחה אחרת: ונעשית. יא (שמות־רבה, פ' טז): „וכן אתה מוצא בישראל, כשהיו במצרים היו עובדי עבודה־זרה". יב כמאמרם (ספרי, ברכה): כי שמרו אמרתך וברית ינצורו (דברים לג, ט), „אמרתך" – זו עבודה־זרה, „וברית ינצורו" – זו ברית־מילה. וכן אמרו (יומא סו:): שבטו של לוי לא עבד עבודה־זרה. יג כעבור זמן מועט, כלשון הכתוב: (יחזקאל טז, מז). קט – תמונה מקוצרת מן קטן, שהנון יסוד נופל במלה. יד שורש האמונה שנזכר למעלה. טו כנוסח אוקספורד; ובשאר הדפוסים: העולם.

וּמֵאַהֲבַת ה' אוֹתָנוּ וּמִשְׁמְרוֹ אֶת־הַשְּׁבוּעָה לְאַבְרָהָם[א] אָבִינוּ, עָשָׂה[ב] מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ, רַבָּן שֶׁל כָּל־הַנְּבִיאִים, וּשְׁלָחוֹ. כֵּיוָן שֶׁנִּתְנַבֵּא מֹשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ וּבָחַר ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְנַחֲלָה – הִכְתִּירָם בְּמִצְוֹת וְהוֹדִיעָם דֶּרֶךְ עֲבוֹדָתוֹ, וּמַה־יִּהְיֶה מִשְׁפַּט עוֹבְדֵי־כּוֹכָבִים וְכָל־הַטּוֹעִים אַחֲרֵיהָ.

LETTER TO OBADIAH THE PROSELYTE

Thus says Moses, the son of Rabbi Maimon, one of the exiles from Jerusalem, who lived in Spain:

I received the question of the master Obadiah, the wise and learned proselyte, may the Lord reward him for his work, may a perfect recompense be bestowed upon him by the Lord of Israel, under whose wings he has sought cover.

You ask me if you, too, are allowed to say in the blessings and prayers you offer alone or in the congregation: "Our God" and "God of our fathers," "You who have sanctified us through Your commandments," "You who have separated us," "You who have chosen us," "You who have inherited us," "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt," "You who have worked miracles to our fathers," and more of this kind.

Yes, you may say all this in the prescribed order and not change it in the least. In the same way as every Jew by birth says his blessing and prayer, you, too, shall bless and pray alike, whether you are alone or pray in the congregation. The reason for this is, that Abraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration; he brought many children under the wings of the Divine Presence; he gave them counsel and advice, and ordered his sons and the members of his household after him to keep the ways of the Lord forever, as it is written, "For I have known him to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as it is prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Abraham our Father, peace be with him. These men are Abraham's household, and he it is who converted them to righteousness.

In the same way as he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testa-

ment he left to his children and household after him. Thus Abraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism.

Therefore you shall pray, "Our God" and "God of our fathers," because Abraham, peace be with him, is *your* father. And you shall pray, "You who have taken for his own our fathers," for the land has been given to Abraham, as it is said, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give to you" (Gen. 13:17). As to the words, "You who have brought us out of the land of Egypt" or "You who have done miracles to our fathers"—these you may change, if you will, and say, "You who have brought Israel out of the land of Egypt" and "You who have done miracles to Israel." If, however, you do not change them, it is no transgression, because since you have come under the wings of the Divine Presence and confessed the Lord, no difference exists between you and us, and all miracles done to us have been done as it were to us and to you. Thus it is said in the Book of Isaiah, "Neither let the son of the stranger, that has joined himself to the Lord, speak, saying, 'The Lord has utterly separated me from His people'" (Is. 56:3). There is no difference whatever between you and us. You shall certainly say the blessing, "Who has chosen us," "Who has given us," "Who have taken us for Your own" and "Who has separated us": for the Creator, may He be extolled, has indeed chosen you and separated you from the nations and given you the Torah. For the Torah has been given to us and to the proselytes, as it is said, "One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation, and also for the stranger that sojourns with you, an ordinance for ever in your generations; as you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord" (Num. 15:15). Know that our fathers, when they came out of Egypt, were mostly idolaters; they had mingled with the pagans in Egypt and imitated their way of life, until the Holy One, may He be blessed, sent Moses our Teacher, the master of all prophets, who separated us from the nations and brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence, us and all proselytes, and gave to all of us one Law.

Do not consider your origin as inferior. While we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you derive from Him through whose word the world was created. As is said by Isaiah: "One shall say, I am the Lord's, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob" (Is. 44:5).

When I was watching over the gods of my father Farah [Terah] and my brother Nahor, I was experimenting [to find out] which god was truly the strongest. Then, at the time when my [priestly] lot came up and I was to finish the service of my father Farah's sacrifice to his gods of wood and stone, of gold and silver and copper and iron, I, Abraham, having entered their sanctuary for the service, found a god named Marumat,[2] which had been carved out of stone, fallen at the feet of an iron god, Nakhin. And it came to pass that, when I saw this, my heart was troubled, and I thought to myself that I, Abraham, would be unable to return it to its place all by myself, since it was heavy, [carved] out of a great stone; so I went to inform my father, and he went in with me. And as we both were moving it to return it to its place, its head fell off of it in such a way that I was left holding on to its head. And it came to pass, when my father saw that the head of his god, Marumat, had fallen off of it, he said to me, "Abraham," and I replied, "Here I am." And he said: "Bring me a chisel from the house." And I brought it. Then he carved another Marumat, without a head, out of another stone, and [placed on it] the head that had been broken off from [the first] Marumat, and then smashed that [first] Marumat.

Then I said to myself, "What are these useless things that my father is doing? Is he not rather a god to his gods, since it is by virtue of his sculpting and shaping, by his skillfulness, that they come into being? It would be more fitting for them to bow down to my father, since they are his handiwork. Yet what is my father's reward from his labors? Behold, Marumat fell down and was unable to get up in his own temple, nor could I lift him on my own, until my father came and then we lifted him together. And even so we were unable, and [Marumat's] head fell off of him, and [my father] placed it upon another stone of another god which he had made without a head . . ." And I said to myself, "If it is thus, how then can my father's god Marumat, having a head made from one stone and [the rest] being made from another stone, save someone or hear a person's prayer and grant him anything?"

—*Apocalypse of Abraham* chs. 1, 3

R. Ḥiyya said: Terah was an idolator. Once he went off somewhere and left Abraham to sell [idols] in his place. A certain man came wishing to buy. [Abraham] said to him: "How old are you?" He said: "Fifty." He said: "Fifty years old and you are going to bow down to something only one day old [that is, this idol]?!" The man went off in embarrassment. Later, a woman came bearing a container of flour. She said to him, "Here, offer this before them [the idols]." He took a stick and broke them [the idols] and then put the stick into the hand of the biggest of them. When his father came he said to him, "What happened to these?" He said to him: . . . "One [idol] said, 'Let me be the first to eat,' another said, 'No, let me be the first to eat,' then the biggest one took a stick and broke them [the others]." [Terah said:] "Why are you mocking me—do these idols know anything?" [Abraham] said: "Cannot your ears hear the words coming from your own mouth?"

—*Genesis Rabba* 38:13

Midrashim: Apocalypse of Abraham; Genesis Rabbah 38:13, Philo, Jubilees 11-12; Judith 5.

He [Abraham] grew up with this idea and was a true Chaldean for some time, until, opening the soul's eye from the depth of sleep, he came to behold the pure ray in place of the deep darkness, and he followed that light and perceived what he had not seen before, One who guides and steers the world, presiding over it and managing its affairs. —Philo, *On Abraham* 71

And the child [Abraham] began to realize the errors of the land—that everyone was going astray after graven images and after impurity.

And he [Abraham] separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him.

And he began to pray to the Creator of all so that He might save him from the errors of mankind . . .

And it came to pass . . . that Abram said to his father, "O father," and he said, "Yes, my son?" And he said: "What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? For there is no spirit in them, because they are mute, and they are an error of the mind . . ." And his father said to him, "I also know that, my son, but what shall I do to the people who have ordered me to serve before them [that is, the idols]. If I speak to them truthfully, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them [the idols] so that they might worship them and praise them." —*Jubilees* 11:16, 12:1–3, 6–7

[A foreign general explains:] This people [the Jews] is descended from the Chaldeans. At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they would not follow the gods of their fathers who were in Chaldea. **For they had left the ways of their ancestors, and they worshiped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know**; hence they [the Chaldeans] drove them out from the presence of their gods and they fled to Mesopotamia, and lived there for a long time. Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan. —Jth. 5:6–9

רצג = פ״ן מ״ב.

שאלות ששאל [1] ר׳ עובדיה גר צדק מרבינו משה זצ״ל ותשובותיו.

אמר משה ב״ר מימון מבני גלות ירושלם אשר בספרד זצ״ל. הגיע אלינו שאלות מרבנא

ורבנא עובדיה המשכיל המבין גר הצדק ישלם יי פעלו ותהי משכרתו שלימה מעם יי אלהי ישראל אשר בא [2] לחסות תחת כנפיו. שאלת על עסקי הברכות והתפלות בינך לבין עצמך או אם תתפלל בצבור היש לך לומר אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו ואשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו ואשר הבדילנו ואשר בחר בנו ושהנחלת את אבותינו ושהוצאתנו מארץ מצרים ושעשה נסים לאבותינו וכל כיוצא באלה הענינים. יש לך לומר הכל כתקנם ואל תשנה דבר אלא כמו שיתפלל ויברך כל אזרח מישראל כך ראוי לך לברך ולהתפלל בין שהתפללת יחידי בין שהיית שליח צבור [3]. ועיקר הדבר שאברהם אבינו הוא שלמד כל העם והשכילם והודיעם דת האמת וייחודו של הקב״ה ובעט בע״ז והפר עבודתה והכניס [4] רבים תחת כנפי השכינה ולמדם והורם וצוה בניו ובני ביתו אחריו לשמור דרך י״י כמו שכתו׳ בתורה כי ידעתיו [5] למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך י״י וגו׳. לפיכך כל מי שיתגייר עד סוף כל הדורות וכל המיחד שמו של הקב״ה כמו שהוא כתוב בתורה תלמידו של אברהם אבינו ע״ה ובני ביתו הם כולם והוא החזיר אותם למוטב כשם שהחזיר את אנשי דורו בפיו [6] ובלמודו כך החזיר כל העתידים להתגייר בצואתו שצוה את בניו ואת בני ביתו אחריו. נמצא אברהם אבינו ע״ה הוא אב לזרעו הכשרים ההולכים בדרכיו ואב לתלמידיו וכל גר שיתגייר. לפיכך יש לך לאמר אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שאברהם ע״ה הוא אביך ויש לך לומר שהנחלת את אבותינו שלאברהם נתנת הארץ שנ׳ קום התהלך בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה. אבל שהוצאתנו ממצרים או שעשית נסים לאבותינו אם רצית לשנות ולומר שהוצאת את ישראל ממצרים ושעשית נסים עם ישראל אמור. ואם לא שנית אין בכך הפסד כלום מאחר שנכנסת תחת כנפי השכינה ונלוית אליו אין כאן הפרש בינינו ובינך. וכל הנסים שנעשו כאלו לנו ולך נעשו. הרי הוא אומר בישעיה ואל יאמר בן הנכר [7] הנלוה אל יי לאמר הבדל הבדילני י״י מעל עמו וגו׳. אין שום הפרש כלל בינינו ובינך לכל דבר. ודאי יש לך לברך אשר בחר בנו ואשר נתן לנו ואשר הנחילנו ואשר הבדילנו. שכבר בחר בך הבורא יתעלה והבדילך מן האומות ונתן לך התורה שהתורה לנו ולגרים שנ׳ הקהל חוקה אחת לכם [8] ולגר הגר חוקת עולם לדורותיכם ככם כגר יהיה לפני י״י. תורה אחת ומשפט אחד יהיה לכם ולגר הגר אתכם. ודע כי אבותינו שיצאו ממצרים רובם עובדי ע״ז היו במצרים נתערבו בגוים ולמדו מעשיהם עד ששלח הקב״ה משה רבינו ע״ה רבן של כל הנביאים והבדילנו מן העמים והכניסנו תחת כנפי השכינה לנו ולכל הגרים ושם לכולנו חוקה אחת. ואל יהא יחוסך קל בעיניך אם אנו מתיחסים לאברהם יצחק ויעקב אתה מתיחס למי שאמר והיה העולם. וכך מפורש בישעיה זה יאמר לי״י [9] אני וזה יקרא בשם יעקב וגו׳. וכל מה שאמרנו לך בענין הברכות שלא

2. [בא : באת (כיב״א)].
3. בין שהתפללת... : בין שתתפלל... בין שהיית ש״ץ (ת). [... בין עם הצבור (כיב״א)].
4. והכניס : בנים רבים (ת [כיב״א]).
5. כי ידעתיו : בראשית י״ח י״ט.
6. [בפיו : בפיו ובלשונו (כיב״א)].
7. ואל יאמר בן הנכר : ישעי׳ נ״ו ג׳.
8. חקת אחת לכם : במד׳ ט״ו ט״ו.
9. זה יאמר לי״י : ישעי׳ מ״ד ה׳.

תשבה כבר ראיה לזה ממסכת בכורים[10] תמן תנינן הגר מביא ואינו קורא שאינו יכול לומר אשר נשבע י"י לאבותינו לתת לנו[11]. וכשהוא מתפלל בינו לבין עצמו אומר אלהינו ואלהי אבות ישראל. וכשהוא מתפלל בבית הכנסת אומר אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו[12] זהו סתם משנה. והיא לר' מאיר ואינה הלכה[13] אלא כמו שנתפרש בירושלמי[14] תמן אמרינן תני בשם ר' יהודה גר עצמו מביא וקורא מאי טעמיה כי אב המון גוים נתתיך לשעבר היית אב[15] לאברהם מיכאן ואילך אב לכל הבריות. ר' יהושע בן לוי אמר הלכה כר' יהודה. אתא עובדא קמיה דר' אבהו והורי כר' יהודה. הנה נתברר לך שיש לך לומר אשר נשבע י"י לאבותינו לתת לנו. ושאברהם אב לך ולנו ולכל הצדיקים[16] ללכת בדרכיו והוא הדין לשאר הברכות והתפלות שלא תשנה כלום. וכתב משה ב"ר מימון זצ"ל[17].

10. ממסכת בכורים: פ"א מ"ד. עיי"ש בפי' המשניות: ומפני זה יכול גר לומר וכו' לפי שאברהם היה אב לכל העולם לפי שהוא למדם אמונה.

11. לאבותינו לתת לנו: וכשהוא מתפלל בבית הכנסת אומר אלהי אבותיכם. ואם היתה אמו מישראל אומר אלהי אבותינו. וכשהוא מתפלל בינו לבין עצמו (ת). [וכשהוא מתפלל בב"ה אומר אלהי אבותינו וכשהוא מתפלל לעצמו אומר אלהי ואלהי אבות ישראל. זהו סתם משנה. (כי"ב)].

12. או"א: אלהי אבותיכם (כי"ב).

13. ואינה הלכה: ה' בכורים פ"ד ה"ג הגר מביא וקורא שנא' לאברהם אב המון גוים נתתיך הרי הוא אב כל העולם כולו שנכנסין תחת כנפי שכינה ולאברהם היתה השבועה תחלה שירשו בניו את הארץ.

14. בירושלמי: ביכורים שם הובא ברדב"ז לה' בכורים ובכ"מ שם. ועי' ספר המצות מ"ע סי' ר"ז.

15. היית אב: היה אב לאדם מכאן ואילך. ת [כי"א]. 16. ולכל הצדיקים: שהורגו ללכת (ק).

17. ע"ד התשובה עי' ווערטהיימר גנזי ירושלים ח"ב עמ' ז'. עפנשטיין ע' 44.

CHAPTER V

From Mesopotamia to Canaan

Nahum Sarna, the Bible scholar and expert in the Ancient Near east background (in *Understanding Genesis*)

The problem of Ur

Four times biblical sources mention Ur as the original point of departure. We are told that Haran, Abraham's brother, died while the family still lived in the city.[1] After the patriarch had arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him as the One "who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" (15:8). Many centuries later, the small community of Jews who had returned from the Babylonian exile recalled the fact that God had chosen Abraham and had brought him forth from "Ur of the Chaldeans."[2]

> Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. (11 : 31)

The genealogical lists close with information about the family of Abraham. The passage here cited plainly establishes the fact that it came to Haran from some other place, and that the original intention was to migrate to the land of Canaan. We are given no reasons for Terah's exodus from Ur, nor any motivation for wanting to go to Canaan. Whatever the cause, it was apparently independent of any divine call. It was only after the family had interrupted the journey at Haran that the word of the Lord came to Abraham saying:

> "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." (12 : 1)

If the biblical Ur be indeed the ancient city of that name situated on the Euphrates in lower Mesopotamia, then we know that the childhood of Abraham was spent in one of the foremost centers of culture in the world of his day. Excavations of the site have shown that Ur reached the peak of its prosperity between the twenty-first and twentieth centuries B.C.E. About 1950 B.C.E. it was destroyed by the Elamites, never again to resume its former position.[6] The decline of the city would perhaps have been an important factor in the migration of Terah.[7]

It is of particular interest that the family went from Ur to Haran, for both cities were important centers of the worship of the moon-god Sin. In fact, the Abrahamic family names Terah, Sarah, Milcah and Laban, all reflect traces of a connection with moon worship.[8] The pagan antecedents of Abraham, well remembered in biblical times, may indeed refer to the official moon cult at Ur and Haran:

> "Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods." (JOSH. 24 : 2)

As has been noted, the original intention of Terah was to make his way to Canaan. From what we now know of the history of the second millennium B.C.E. it would be difficult to separate this migration from the extensive movements of peoples which were going on in the Near East. All over the ancient world masses were on the march, radically altering ethnic and political patterns.[9] Viewed against this broader background, the attachment of Terah and his family to the migratory stream of Semites wending their way from East to West was hardly more than a trivial incident. Yet to biblical historiosophy it became a stirring event of universal significance, productive of far-reaching consequences for mankind as a whole, and constituting a major turning point in human history.

The Bible expresses these ideas in its own idiom and through its own literary medium. We have already seen how it used the device of schematized chronology as the rhetorical framework for historiosophy. It is no accident that exactly ten generations separate Noah from Adam and that exactly ten more bring us to the birth of Abraham, another epochal juncture in history from the Bible's viewpoint. Just as a divine communication to Noah transforms a natural phenomenon into a purposeful event, so God's command to Abraham, "Go forth!" converts a routine migration into a fateful movement, inaugurating the birth of a new nation whose history and destiny are to acquire unique purpose. Once this consciousness of meaning was reached, it was not difficult to reinterpret, in retrospect, the original exodus from Ur as also belonging to the divine plan. Hence, God can later be described as addressing Himself to Abraham as the One who brought him out of Ur.[10]

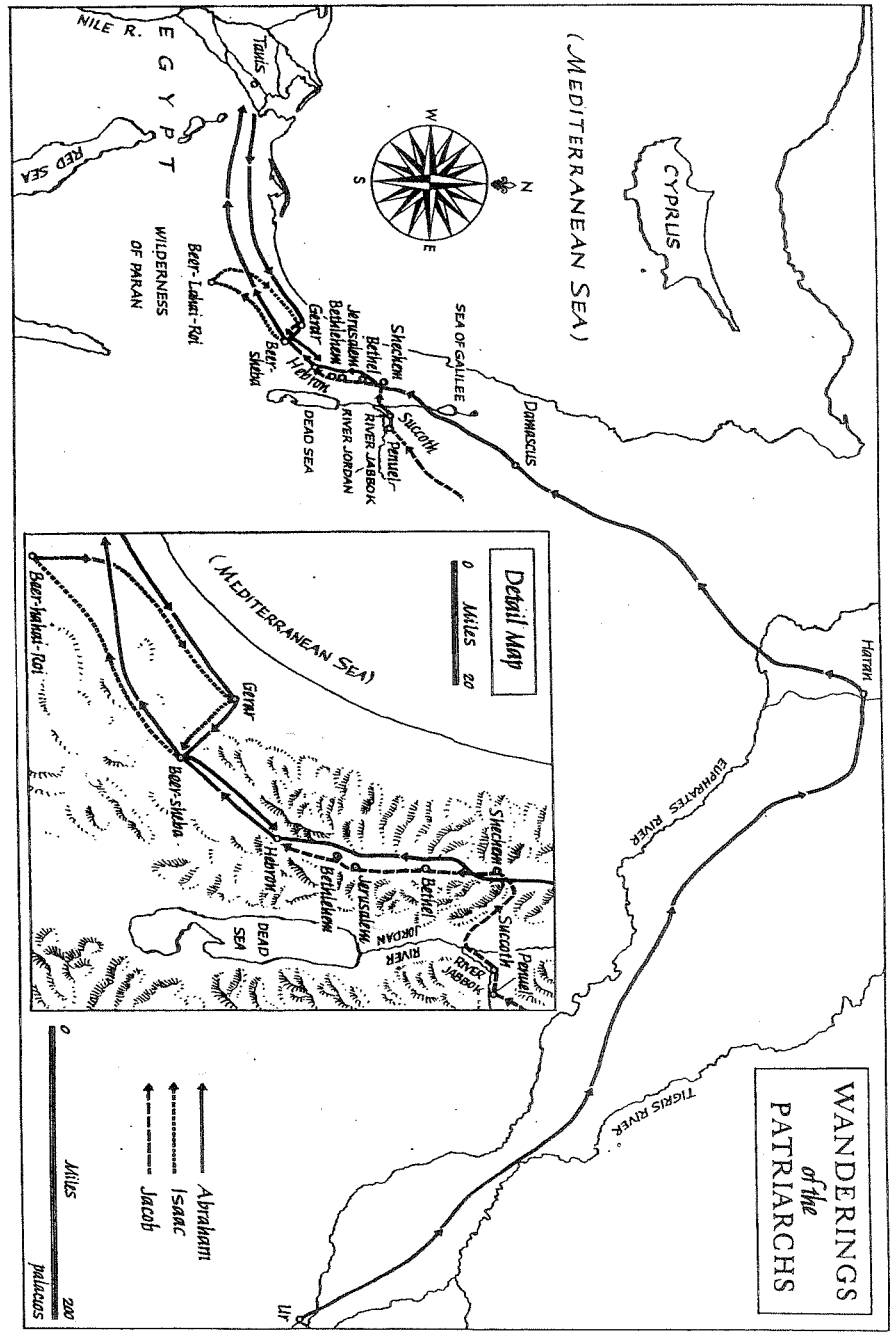
The divine promise

The order to Abraham to go forth from his father's house was accompanied by an assurance that the patriarch was to become the progenitor of a "great nation" (12:2). Since this was not the kind of promise that could possibly be fulfilled in the lifetime of the recipient, it was something that had to be accepted on faith. Certain it is that Scripture intended to emphasize just this aspect of Abraham's personality and the magnitude of his act of faith.

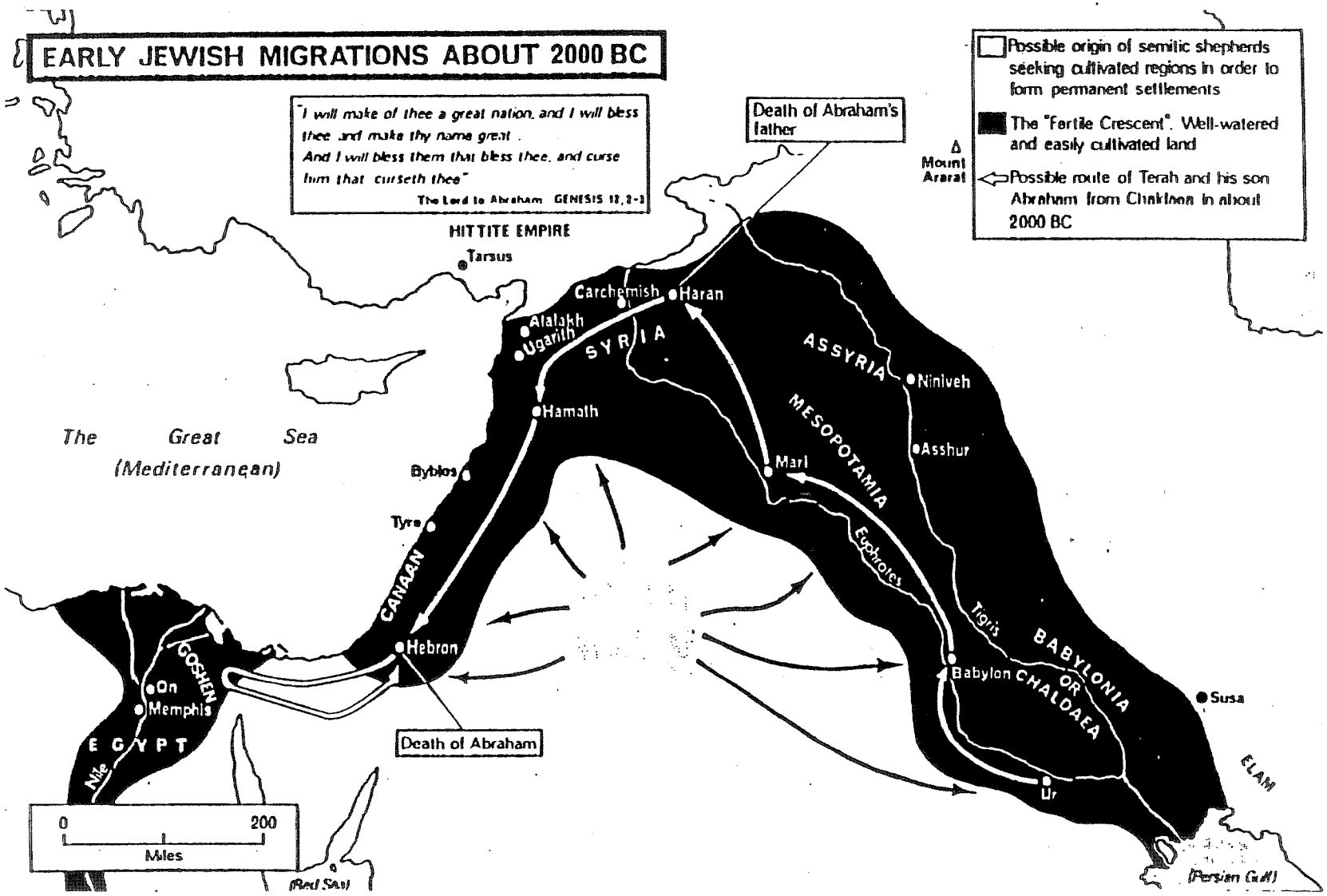
We had previously been told that Sarah was barren,[11] so that God's pledge of nationhood taxed the patriarch's credulity to the full. Nor was the vagueness of the ultimate destination—"the land that I will show you" (12:1)—calculated to arouse an enthusiastic response; while the migration from Haran involved for Abraham the agonizing decision to wrench himself away from his family in the sure knowledge that he was not likely ever again to see his father. In point of fact, Terah lived in Haran for another sixty years after he bade farewell to his son.[12]

It might appear somewhat strange that the divine promise of nationhood should have necessitated a sacrifice of this nature. Could not the ancestral soil of Mesopotamia have witnessed the birth of Israel? The answer to this question may perhaps be sought in the very nature of Mesopotamian civilization as contrasted with the destiny of the nation yet to emerge.

The land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers was already heir to a tradition of hoary antiquity by the time the first of the patriarchs arrived on the scene. It could justifiably boast of monumental achievements and rightly take pride in the success of its administrative accomplishments. Intensive agriculture and extensive foreign trade sustained a stratified society controlled through a highly centralized royal authority with its professional bureaucracy and an elaborately organized temple government. But it was not a situation that would be likely to encourage a challenge to its basic conservatism. The burden of tradition lay very heavily upon the ancient Near East, above all in the sphere of religion. The overcrowded, changeable pantheon resting upon a mountain of complex mythological symbolism, served to accentuate the inherent deficiencies of paganism in providing satisfactory answers to the problems of existence. The ever-present pall of anxiety that hung over Mesopotamian life is the measure of the failure of its civilization, religiously speaking. Consequently, it is not to be wondered at that the fulfillment of God's purposes in history through the mediation of a new people required a radical break with the past and the finding of a new and more fruitful soil.[13]



Archeologist's Abraham



כולנו בני אברהם* / יהודה עמיחי

אֲנַחְנוּ כֻּלָּנוּ בְּנֵי אַבְרָהָם
אֲבָל אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם הַנְּכָדִים שֶׁל תֶּרַח, אֲבִי אַבְרָהָם.
וְעַכְשָׁו אוּלַי הִגִּיעַ זְמַן הַנְּכָדִים לַעֲשׂוֹת
לַאֲבִיהֶם מַה שֶׁהוּא עָשָׂה לְאָבִיו,
שֶׁשָּׁבַר אֶת תְּרָפָיו וַאֲלִילָיו, אֶת דָּתוֹ וֶאֱמוּנָתוֹ.
אֲבָל גַּם זֹאת תִּהְיֶה הַתְחָלַת דָּת חֲדָשָׁה.

יהודה עמיחי (ישראל, המאה ה־20), משורר
*השיר המקורי ללא כותרת.

Are Jewish Intellectual Rebels the Disciples of Abraham?

1. Paul Mendes-Flohr

Isaac Deutscher affectionately calls them "Jewish heretics." George Steiner celebrates them as "meta-rabbis." Daniel Bell lauds them as "prophets of alienation." They are referring to the modern Jewish intellectuals and to the fact, as Steiner puts it, "that the Jewish element had been largely dominant in the revolutions of thought and of sensibility experienced by Western man over these last one hundred and twenty years. . . . Without Marx, Freud, or Kafka, without Schoenberg or Wittgenstein, the spirit of modernity, the reflexes of argument and uncertainty whereby we conduct our inner lives would not be conceivable. The disproportionate number of Jews among the intellectuals – individuals of critical dissent and cognitive originality of Western society continues to intrigue and student of modern culture.

Authors who assume the former, sociological perspective generally emphasize the "marginality" of the Jewish intellectual. Having left the Jewish community, the Jewish intellectual has embraced secular culture without adopting, in Thorstein Veblen's words, the gentile's "heritage of conventional preconception."

Other students of the subject feel that Jewish intellectualism must be explained culturally, by the peculiar Jewish bent of mind. George Steiner ascribes them to a cognitive inheritance bequeathed by traditional Judaism since the days of Abraham.
(Paul Mendes Flohr, Divided Passions. P. 23-24)

2. George Steiner

Hegel's analysis is ominous. By leaving his native land of Ur, Abraham deliberately "breaks the ties of love." He breaks the natural bonds which unite a human person to his ancestors and their places of burial. He abandons his neighbours and culture. To Hegel the most corrosive of alienations, of estrangements both from the rest of mankind and the harmonious integration of the self, Abraham, to Hegel, is a wanderer on the earth.

But I praise Abraham and the Jew whose only homeland is the text:

It is here that the creed of Spinoza and of Kafka meets with the conduct of Socrates. A true thinker, a truth-thinker, a scholar, must know that no nation, no body politic, no creed, no moral ideal and necessity, is worth a falsehood, a willed self-deception or the manipulation of a text. This knowledge and observance *are* his homeland. It is the false reading, the erratum that make him homeless.
("Our Homeland, the Text." by George Steiner. Salmagundi. No. 66, Winter 1985. P. 5-6,20.)

II. The Journey of Faith (*Genesis* 12:1-9)

Naomi Rosenblatt, "Abraham goes forth: Following a Personal Vision" (from *Wrestling with Angels)*

Contemporary Example of a Sense of Personal Calling
Chana Senesh
Etty Hilversum, Dutch Holocaust Survivor Diary

Walter Brueggemann - "The Abraham Narrative: The Embraced Call of God" (from *Genesis, Interpretation* - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)

Walter Brueggemann, Land as Promise and as Problem" *"To the Land I will Show You"* - a Yearning for a Place or for More Space? From *The Land,*

Peter Pitzele - Abraham is Called to his Vocation,
from *Our Fathers' Wells*

Moshe Weinfeld, Abraham the Patriarch in the light of Greek Founders of a New Colony
from *The Promise of the Land*, pp. 1-21

Abraham Goes Forth: Following a Personal Vision

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

—*Proverbs 29:18*

Naomi Rosenblatt, *Wrestling with Angels*

My patients have one trait in common. They enter therapy when their lives become so painful that change is no longer an option—it's imperative. But even in desperate circumstances, change remains an intimidating choice requiring courage. It means abandoning the familiar for the unknown, and therefore carries with it unforeseen risks and consequences. As the French novelist Anatole France wrote, "All changes, even the most longed for, are melancholy. For what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves. We must die to one life before we can enter another."

The tension between the desire for change and the fear of it can be painful. What is it that allows some people to transform their lives while others only imagine personal change?

We can embark on a new beginning only when we have enough confidence in our vision for the future to overcome our anxieties about change. But to do so, we first need to achieve a measure of clarity about the leap we are making.

My patients often find it helpful to walk through the following steps:

First, identifying the source of our pain and dissatisfaction. This isn't as obvious a step as it may sound. It's often easier for us to deny the causes of our unhappiness than to face them head-on. Because once we locate the source of our pain, we're called upon to take action to remedy it.

Second, articulating a vision for the future. A personal vision emerges from an amalgam of our imagination, hopes, and values. But we have to take the first step. We can't sit passively by and wait for a personal vision to appear to us. We have to articulate the changes we want in our lives and decide which choices we are ready to commit to.

Third, building faith in our vision and in ourselves. Since there are always unpredictable consequences to change, we need to have enough confidence in ourselves to embark on the long journey toward realizing our dream. We have to be willing to take on risks, to overcome obstacles, and to view the inevitable setbacks as necessary detours on the winding road of change and growth.

We are the only ones who can bring about change in our lives. No hero from literature, the movies, or the Bible can do it for us. But by witnessing the risks that others have had the courage to take on, we can strengthen our own faith in the rewards of change.

Like so many of us, Abraham sits down at the banquet of life and comes away hungry. But unlike most of us, Abraham demonstrates both the vision and the courage to go forth in search of a more fulfilling life.

Abraham as an Adult Risk-Taker

Like all the patriarchs of Genesis, Abraham is a seeker.

Unlike the mythological heroes of other cultures, Abraham is not a young man setting out to seek his fortune, draw a sword from a stone, rescue a princess, or capture the golden fleece. He is a man in late middle age who has none of the advantages of youth: physical vigor, illusions of invulnerability, naïveté, innocence. What he does have is the maturity to seek a higher goal than romance, adventure, and personal glory. Having already learned the ways of the world, he has the perspective to see beyond his own life and to understand the importance of making sacrifices for future generations. His essential role is not as a son, but as a future father and head of a clan. Abraham has the maturity to conduct an ongoing dialogue with God while continuing to tend to the needs of his family and tribe.

Abraham's advanced age is what makes his leap of faith so impressive. His midlife crisis is a familiar phenomenon, but his response to it is not. Most of us gripe about our lives and fantasize about making a radical change. But how many among us actually heed our soul's call to "go forth"? Most of us conclude we are better off bearing whatever disappointments we may harbor in our lives. By the time we reach middle age we have too much at stake to make bold course corrections. We have our reputations to worry about, assets to protect, bills to pay, children to feed and educate. Rather than take a blind leap into the unknown, we usually settle for buying a new car or taking up a new hobby. Abraham remains an inspirational role model because he demonstrates the power of faith to overcome cynicism, despair, and defeatism at any age.

A vision is not the same as a plan. In fact, we often plan our lives obsessively so as to deny that we have no overall vision of why and toward what goals we are working. We plan our careers, our vacations, our retirements. We renovate our houses, change our lifestyles, and switch partners. But how often do we seriously assess where we are going in our lives, what values we want our lives to embody, or what we are willing to sacrifice for those values?

For Abraham, that reassessment comes relatively late in life, after he has secured for himself everything that life in cosmopolitan Mesopotamia has to offer—and found it wanting. Only when he finally allows himself to dream of a world beyond the boundaries of his daily routine—when he heeds the voice that commands him, "Go forth"—does Abraham's life begin anew. Until then he has lived both literally and figuratively "in his father's house." He has not yet made his life his own. It has been said that our life isn't really our own until our parents die. Many scholars have speculated about why the Bible provides so little biographical detail about Abraham's life before he hears God's call in middle age. One reason is that his story, and to some degree his life, does not truly begin until after his father Terah dies. Only then can he hear God's call to *"Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."*

Faith in the Future

Faith in the future is—in all of our lives—constantly at war with fear of the future. The playwright Tennessee Williams captured our ambivalence about the future when he wrote, "The future is called 'perhaps,' which is the only possible thing to call the future. And the important thing is not to let that scare you." Overcoming the innate human fear of the future is Abraham's greatest achievement.

... Though Abraham's fear never vanishes completely, God remains at his side to help conquer it. Abraham's faith in the future demonstrates that it's never too late in life to make a new beginning, and it is never too early to overcome spiritual inertia and give substance to our personal dreams.

Our ability to conceive of a future beyond our own lifetime, and to plan for that future, is what separates us from other animals and unites us with God. God conceived a plan for the universe and invited humankind to collaborate in its implementation. To the degree that we can conceive of the future as tangible—and act on that vision—we imitate God, in whose image we're created.

If we believe in the future, every choice we make today matters. Whether to plant a tree or pollute a stream, whether to build more schools or more prisons, whether to make peace or make war—none of these choices matters unless we feel responsible to the generations that follow us. But viewed through the lens of the future, the impact of everything we do today is magnified tenfold.

Any new venture—be it a marriage, a family, a business, or a voyage into the unknown—requires faith in the future. In this regard, Abraham is a prototypical immigrant, his journey fueled more by hope for the future than by any tangible assurances. When the Pilgrims journeyed to the New World, they had no concrete image of what awaited them at Plymouth Rock. All they knew was that if they could find a land where they would be free to worship their God, everything else would take care of itself. The Pilgrims were among the first, and perhaps the boldest, to emigrate to these shores. But every region of America was settled by trailblazers. When the pioneers headed west in wagon trains, they were guided by primitive maps and fragmentary anecdotes of what lay beyond the last settlement. But their journey into the wilderness was driven by a deep-seated hunger for a place of their own, a promised land in the New World.

The Power of a Blessing

In this short chapter of the Bible, the word "blessing" appears five times. God's hope is that by blessing the men and women of this family, they in turn will become a blessing to the earth. But first, they must *feel* blessed.

What does it mean to feel blessed?

In simplest terms, a blessing is the unconditional love that a parent can confer on a child. It is a way for the parent to envelop the child with a sense of safety and care. We need the blessing of our parents' love in order to feel whole, protected, and connected. We need this feeling of being blessed in order to go forth into the world with a sense of purpose and responsibility. If we feel truly blessed with love, our human potential multiplies exponentially. Feeling blessed allows us to love and to lead, to inspire by example or to walk alone when necessary.

When we are endowed with our parents' blessing, we internalcome receptive to and grateful for the myriad blessings of our life: the joy of being alive, the beauty of nature, the miracle of human creativity in all its manifestations. Only then, when we are fully appreciative of our blessings, can we become a blessing to the world by sharing our bounty with others.

God's blessing of Abraham initiates a tradition of each generation conferring a blessing on the next. God will also bless each generation as an affirmation of the covenant and a sign of His continuous care and protection. God's blessing is not merely a feel-good experience that descends from the heavens. It's a reminder to Abraham's descendants that they are created in His image and obliged to live up to their highest human potential. To be blessed by God carries a solemn responsibility to share that blessing with others. For Abraham and Sarah, becoming a "great people" and a blessing to the world entails a commitment to endow their actions with a significance that transcends their own lifetimes.

Simon Wiesenthal[38]

In our times young people often find it hard to choose an example to follow. They feel that there is little opportunity nowadays to show personal courage. Amid all the evil in the world, what difference can one person make? The bravery and self-sacrifice of Chana Szenes, the sufferings of her family and other ordinary people who become heroes under extraordinary circumstances, provide inspiration that even the greatest evil can be defeated.

Chana's aspirations for a normal life as a teacher and poet were interrupted in Budapest by homegrown anti-semitism and the Nazi menace from outside. At seventeen she took her first independent step by becoming a Zionist: "This word conveys so much," she wrote in her diary in October 1938, "but to me it means this: I have developed a stronger consciousness and pride in being Jewish.

My aim is to go to Palestine and help build the country. I have become a new person and it feels right. ***One must have a strong idea to feel enthusiastic about, one must feel that one's life is not superfluous or spent in vain, that one is needed — and Zionism gives me this purpose."***

Hannah Senesh from *A Different Light* Anthology

"It was not by chance that my life developed the way it did. It all came from some inner need, which at the time was beyond all reason, inevitable. Any other choice would have made me miserable."

"My conscience is tormented," she wrote in her diary, "that I have it too easy here. **I feel the need to do something, something difficult, which would require a great effort, so that I can justify my existence.**" "The time has come," she wrote, "to give back to society what has been lavished on me."

Budapest, Hungary, 1939

In 1939 Chana (Anikó) Szenes, a 17 year-old poet, a Hungarian nationalist, the daughter of a well-known writer, began to become interested in Zionism as Hungarian antisemitism grew. Chana tried to learn all she could about Palestine. She read everything she could find and talked to anybody who had visited or lived there. In less than a year she was committed to the movement and could marshal eloquent arguments to propound its tenets. Describing in a speech the achievements of the Palestinian Jews — whose numbers had grown from fifty thousand at the time of Herzl's visit to half a million — she said:

Diaspora cannot be a goal . . . We don't want handouts, but our lawful rights and our freedom, whatever we have achieved with our own hands. We must demand this as our human right, to have our homeland for the Jewish people. The solution is so clear: we need a Jewish state. If we renounce Zionism, we give up our traditions, our dignity, truth, our right to live. This small piece of land on the shores of the Mediterranean, that Jews after two thousand years once more feel is their own, has been large enough for the flowering of new Jewish life and culture, grown organically from its ancient roots. Even in its incomplete shape today, it is large enough to be an island in the sea of hopeless Jewish destinies, **where we can build a lighthouse of the Jewish spirit to shine a beacon of eternal values into the darkness, the light of faith in the one God.**

Haifa, Yom Kippur, 1939 and 1940

[On Yom Kippur, 1939, Chana's] first diary entry after arriving in Palestine reveals mixed emotions. It should have been a moment of unalloyed triumph and joy; after all, she had just achieved the greatest dream in her life against formidable odds. But her tone is subdued, poignant:

Yesterday, on the eve of Yom Kippur, I felt very fragile, in spirit, that is. I drew up an account of what was left behind and what awaits me here and I wasn't sure if it'll be worth it. For a moment, I couldn't see the goal. But I also let myself go deliberately; it was good to dissolve all the tension, this constant vigilance, it was good to cry for once. Even through the tears I could feel that I had chosen well, that my life's goal lies here. I might also say, this is my vocation. I want my stay here to be the fulfillment of a vocation, and not a form of vegetating. I think everybody here is on a similar mission.

בין הנביא לצנחנית – "הנני, שלחני"

ואשמע את קול אדני אֹמֵר: את מי אשלח, ומי ילך לנו? ואֹמַר: הנני, שלחני.

ישעיהו 8

בשבת, השכם בבוקר, עליתי על ההרים מול כפר גלעדי. סביבה נפלאה. וברעננות הבוקר הנפלא הבינותי למה קיבל משה את התורה על ההר. רק בהרים אפשר לקבל פקודה מלמעלה, כשרואים כמה קטון האדם, ובכל זאת מרגישים את הביטחון בקרבת האלוהים. על ההר מתרחב האופק בכל המובנים, ומבינים את סדר העולם. בהרים יכולים להאמין וצריך להאמין. בהרים עולה השאלה מאליה: את מי אשלח? – שלח אותי! לשרת את הטוב ואת היפה. האוכל?

חנה סנש, מיומנה, יולי 1940

לא היתה מקריות בהשתלשלות הדברים בחיי. הכול היה הכרח פנימי ובשעתו עמד למעלה מוויכוח, ללא כל אפשרות אחרת. בכל דרך אחרת הייתי אומללה. לא, זה מופרז, אבל לא הייתי שלמה עם עצמי.

חנה סנש, מיומנה, 19.9.1943

בדרך... / חנה סנש

קוֹל קָרָא, וְהָלַכְתִּי,
הָלַכְתִּי, כִּי קָרָא הַקּוֹל.
הָלַכְתִּי לְכַל אֶפֶל.

אַך עַל פָּרְשַׁת דְּרָכִים
סָתַמְתִּי אָזְנַי בַּלֶּכֶן הַקָּר
וּבָכִיתִי.
כִּי אִבַּדְתִּי דָּבָר.

קיסריה, דצמבר 1942

חנה סנש (הונגריה וישראל, המאה ה־20), חברת קיבוץ שדות ים, משוררת, שירתה כצנחנית בצבא הבריטי במלחמת העולם השנייה, נפלה בשבי הנאצים והוצאה להורג כשהיתה בת 23

חנה סנש: יומנים, שירים, עדויות, הקיבוץ המאוחד 1994, עמ' 222.
הודפס באישור המו"ל והמשפחה

My God, my God,
Let there be no end
To the sand and the sea,
To the rustle of the water,
To the shimmer of the sky,
To the prayer of man.

— CHANA SZENES
(HER KIBBUTZ AT CAESARA, 1942)

Happy is the match that was consumed in igniting the flame.
Happy is the flame that burned in the depths of those hearts.
Happy are the hearts that knew how to stop beating for the sake of honor.
Happy is the match that was consumed in igniting the flame.

— CHANA SZENES
(YUGOSLAVIA, MAY 13, 1944)

(Etty Hillesum), a young Jewish woman from the Netherlands, who in 1942 voluntarily reported to the camp at Westerbork in order to be of help there and to take part in the destiny of her people. In 1943 she was sent to the gas chamber in Auschwitz."[31]

I will go to any place on this earth where God sends me, and I am ready in every situation and until I die to bear witness . . . that it is not God's fault that everything has turned out this way, but our fault.

. . . and if God does not continue to help me, then I must help God . . . I will always endeavor to help God as well as I can.

I will help you, O God, that you do not forsake me, but right from the start I can vouch for nothing. Only this one thing becomes more and more clear to me: that you cannot help us, but that we must help you, and in so doing we ultimately help ourselves. That is the only thing that matters: to save in us, O God, a piece of yourself. Yes, my God, even you in these circumstances seem powerless to change very much . . . . I demand no account from you; you will later call us to account. And with almost every heartbeat it becomes clearer to me that you cannot help us, but that we must help you and defend up to the last your dwelling within us.[32]

The Abraham Narrative: The Embraced Call of God

Genesis 11:30—25:18

Walter Brueggemann - Faith in Response to a Great Promise from (*Genesis,* Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; . . . (Heb. 11:8).
>
> By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. . . . (Heb. 11:11)
>
> By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, . . . He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; . . . (Heb. 11:17, 19).

The one who calls the worlds into being now makes a second call. This call is specific. Its object is identifiable in history. The call is addressed to aged Abraham and to barren Sarah. The purpose of the call is to fashion an alternative community in creation gone awry, to embody in human history the power of the blessing. It is the hope of God that in this new family all human history can be brought to the unity and harmony intended by the one who calls.

In its canonical form, Genesis is clear about two things. First, the God who forms the world is the same God who creates Israel. It is the same God who calls creation and who calls the community of faith. This same God works his powerful, creative purpose and intervenes in surprising, redemptive ways. The call to Sarah and Abraham has to do not simply with the forming of Israel but with the re-forming of creation, the transforming of the nations. The stories of this family are not ends in themselves but point to God's larger purposes. Thus Gen. 11:35—25:18 must be read in the context of Gen. 1:1—11:29.

Second, it is clear that Abraham and Sarah, in contrast to the resistant, mistrustful world presented in Gen. 1—11 (with the important exceptions of creation in chapter 1 and Noah) are responsive and receptive. They fully embrace the call of God. It is speculative to ask if this is the only family God has called in this way (cf. Amos 9:7). But it is unambiguous that this family has responded in a peculiar and faithful way. In this narrative, there is a striking correspondence between God's call and the response of Abraham and Sarah. It is that correlation that offers to us the theme of *promise and faith* around which the narrative revolves. In their present form, regardless of their earlier history, each of the texts must be considered in relation to the issues of promise and faith. *Promise* is God's mode of presence in these narratives. The promise is God's power and will to create a new future sharply discontinuous with the past and the present. The promise is God's resolve to form a new community wrought only by miracle and reliant only on God's faithfulness. *Faith* as response is the capacity to embrace that announced future with such passion that the present can be relinquished for the sake of that future.

The speech of God to this barren family, then, is a call to abandonment, renunciation, and relinquishment. It is a call for a dangerous departure from the presumed world of norms and security. The command is terse and peremptory, asking Abraham and Sarah to go "with closed eyes . . . until having renounced thy country, thou shalt have given thyself wholly to me" (Calvin). Such renunciation, of course, is exceedingly difficult to speak of in our culture which focuses on self-indulgence because "you owe yourself this." But notice, the summons is not law or discipline, but promise. The narrative knows that such departure from securities is the only way out of barrenness. The whole of the Abrahamic narrative is premised on this seeming contradiction: to stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is to have hope.

The future now to be received by Israel is no accomplishment or achievement by Israel. It is a gift by the one who is able to give good gifts (Matt. 7:11). That will be strange to those who believe the claims of our managed world. Could we imagine that we live in a world ordered by gifts? It is much like the dilemma of speech. If we could believe we are seriously addressed by one who calls us into being, then the *speaker* could possibly be taken as the *gift-giver.* But we are suspicious of serious speech and anyone bearing gifts.

The gifts of the promise are worth reflecting on. They are an index of what we crave: well-being, security, prosperity, prominence (cf. Mark 10:30). The situation envisioned in 12:2 is drastically contrasted with that of 11:30. Well-being cannot be conjured by Abraham and Sarah. It can only be given. But the giving depends upon receiving, upon Israel's conceding that the initiative for life is held by this other one. It requires a break with the ideology of modernity which assumes there is only us. There is no promise without a promise-maker. There is no real Genesis, no new beginning for barren people, apart from the reality of this God. It is thus not the command, but the promise, which puts the hard issue to Israel. It is the promise which requires a decision and a radical repentance. It is the promise which requires a rejection of all posturing, a recognition that the world revolves around and is powered by this other one who will be trusted and praised.

6. This promise of 12:1–3 dominates our pericope. It stands between the immobilized family of 11:30 and the responsive family of 12:4ff. Things are changed from the one to the other by this promise. Yet, though the text is fully focused on the promise in God's speech of verses 1–3, it is verse 4 which announces the motif which characterizes all of chapters 12:1—25:18. God's call to Abraham is accepted and embraced. Abraham went (v.4)! He believed the promise. He obeyed. He asked no questions. Believing the promise without any visible evidence is what is meant by faith (even though that term is not yet used). The Bible is shaped to show that God here forms a family to embrace the call and believe the promise. And he went!

The life of faith is one which keeps Israel in pursuit of the promise of land. But Abraham is not one who finally arrives at his destination. He trusts the promise. But his life falls short of grasping the fulfillment. He is in the land. But he does not yet possess it.

a. The metaphor of journey or sojourn is a radical one. It is a challenge to the dominant ideologies of our time which yearn for settlement, security, and placement. The life of this family is matched by the way of Yahweh himself. Thus Yahweh is understood not as a God who settles and dwells, but as a God who sojourns and moves about (II Sam. 7:4–6). In the David tradition which protests against royal absolutism, Yahweh is presented as a God who is known especially in his lordly freedom. This family is called to the same kind of freedom marked by precariousness and danger, the same risk Yahweh himself takes by sojourning with Israel.

CHAPTER 1

Land as Promise and as Problem

Walter Brueggemann, "To the Land I will Show You" - a Yearning for a Place or for More Space? from *The Land,*

The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant images. They may be understood in terms of sociological displacement, as Americans have become a *"nation of strangers,"*[1] highly mobile and rootless, as our entire social fabric becomes an artifact designed for obsolescence, and the design includes even us consumers! They may be understood in terms of psychological dislocation,[2] as increasing numbers of persons are disoriented, characterized as possessors of "the homeless mind."[3] The despair and yearning are expressed in the pathos of the "top forty" songs among the young, in the fear among the old that they are forgotten, in the helplessness of the poor in the face of "urban progress."[4] Remarkably the same sense of loss and the same yearning for place are much in evidence among those whom the world perceives as being well rooted and belonging, the white middle-class at the peak of success and productivity. Those whom we imagine to be secure and invested with "turf" in our time experience profound dislocation, and we are, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, "as having everything, and yet possessing nothing" (cf. 2. Cor. 6:10). We have become precisely the inversion of the life-giving One who had nothing, yet was as though possessing everything.

This of course is not a new struggle, but it is more widespread and visible than it has ever been. Nor is this sense alien to the biblical promise of faith. The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place. Indeed, the Bible promises precisely what the modern world denies. It will be the premise of the following discussion that *land* is a major concern of contemporary persons.[5] In what follows, "land" will be used to refer to *actual earthly turf* where people can be safe and secure, where meaning and well-being are enjoyed without pressure or coercion. "Land" will also be used in a *symbolic* sense, as the Bible itself uses it, to express the wholeness of joy and well-being characterized by social coherence and personal ease in prosperity, security, and freedom. It will be important to recognize, both in biblical usage and in contemporary usage as well, that "land" continually moves back and forth between literal and symbolic intentions. And in any particular use it is likely that we shall not be clear on the term, simply because it is symbol-laden with dimensions of meaning which cannot be separated from each other.

A symbolic sense of the term affirms that land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience. A literal sense of the term will protect us from excessive spiritualization, so that we recognize that the yearning for land is always a serious historical enterprise concerned with historical power and belonging. Such a dimension is clearly played upon by the suburban and exurban real estate ads which appeal to that rapacious hunger. Land is always fully historical but always bearer of over-pluses of meaning known only to those who lose and yearn for it. The current loss of and hunger for place participate in those plus dimensions—at once a concern for actual historical placement, but at the same time a hunger for an over-plus of place meaning. This dialectic belongs to our humanness. Our humanness is always about historical placement in the earth, but that historical placement always includes excess meanings both rooted in and moving beyond literalism.

Only now, with the new yearning in our culture and with the exhaustion of such motifs as fruitful lines of interpretative pursuit, is another perspective possible. No doubt the existential binge of contextless decision as a stance of interpretation has run its course, and we are having to look again at the privatizing, a-historical character of such an approach. No doubt fresh awareness of land as a central Jewish category in relation to the state of Israel has alerted even Christians to new interpretative possibilities.[7] But most of all it has been the failure of an urban promise which has reopened the question. That promise concerned human persons who could lead detached, unrooted lives of endless choice and no commitment.[8] It was glamorized around the virtues of mobility and anonymity which seemed so full of promise for freedom and self-actualization. But it has failed, as chronicled in distinctive ways by Vance Packard and Peter Berger among others. It is now clear that a *sense of place* is a human hunger which the urban promise has not met. And a fresh look at the Bible suggests that a sense of place is a primary category of faith.

This discussion is an attempt to bring together that primary category of faith and that urgent hunger among us. What follows is a sober judgment that the quest for meaning as it has been interpreted is not first on our agenda, precisely because it is *rootlessness* and not *meaninglessness* which characterizes the current crisis. There are no meanings apart from roots. And such rootage is a primary concern of Israel and a central promise of God to his people. This sense of place is a primary concern of this God who refused a house and sojourned with his people (2 Sam. 7:5–6) and of the crucified one who "has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

A sense of place is to be sharply distinguished from a sense of space as has been recently stressed.[9] "Space" means an arena of freedom, without coercion or accountability, free of pressures and void of authority. Space may be imaged as week-end, holiday, avocation, and is characterized by a kind of neutrality or emptiness waiting to be filled by our choosing. Such a concern appeals to a desire to get out from under meaningless routine and subjection. But "place" is a very different matter. Place is space which has historical meanings,[10] where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken which have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.[11]

Whereas pursuit of space may be a flight from history,[12] a yearning for a place is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage. Humanness, as biblical faith promises it, will be found in belonging to and referring to that locus in which the peculiar historicity of a community has been expressed and to which recourse is made for purposes of orientation, assurance, and empowerment. The land for which Israel yearns and which it remembers is never unclaimed space but is always *a place with Yahweh,* a place well filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him. It is land that provides the central assurance to Israel of its historicality, that it will be and always must be concerned with actual rootage in a place which is a repository for commit-

ment and therefore identity. Biblical faith is surely about the life of a people with God as has been shown by all the current and recent emphases on covenant in an historical place. And if God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as an historical place in a special way. It will no longer do to talk about Yahweh and his people but we must speak about Yahweh and his people *and his land.* Preoccupation with existentialist *decisions* and transforming *events* has distracted us from seeing that this God is committed to this land and that his promise for his people is always his land. In what follows, we will explore ways in which this focus shaped Israel's faith and ways it may speak to our own sense of displacement and our yearning to belong. Israel is that strange people who pursued a sense of place with all the hope and demands that belong to its peculiar historicality.[13]

ISRAEL AS GOD'S HOMELESS PEOPLE

The Bible will here be considered as Israel's reflection on what it means to belong with the land and indeed to the land before God. Israel is a landless people as we meet it earliest and most often in biblical faith. Although it is without place, it has a sense of being on the way to a promised place. Israel is a people on the way because of a promise, and the substance of all its promises from Yahweh is to be in the land, to be placed, and secured where Yahweh is yet to lead it. Its whole history and life are understood in terms of that hope and in response to that promise. As landless folk, yearning for land, Israel is presented under several images derived from several experiences. Each such image presents the *land as promise* to the *landless:*

1. Israel is embodied in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the earliest presentations as *sojourners* on the way to a land whose name it does not know. It is en route in response to the call of a God who tells it very little about himself and asks of Israel a blind trust. The Genesis narratives in a stark way present the radical demand of God that the way of faith requires leaving a land and accepting landlessness as a posture of faith:

> Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house. . . . (Gen. 12:1)

> I am Yahweh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans. . . . (Gen. 15:7)

The sojourn is freely chosen, not imposed. It is a choice made by those who could have chosen not to leave. The choice means to throw one's self totally on Yahweh, not in order to live in some nonhistorical relation with God but to be led to a better place, one characterized by promises not known either in Ur or in one's father's house.

They are the people of sojourn. "Sojourner" is a technical word usually described as "resident alien." It means to be in a place, perhaps for an extended time, to live there and take some roots, but always to be an outsider, never belonging, always without rights, title, or voice in decisions that matter. Such a one is on turf but without title to the turf, having nothing sure but trusting in words spoken that will lead to a place. The theme of "resident alien" is not remote from contemporary experience. People in our time know what it means to live waiting always for the notice of transfer, or for notice of "urban redevelopment," or for any of the irresistible and unidentified forces of urban life devoted to displacement.

In English translation, the "sojourn" is occasionally called pilgrimage (Gen. 47:9; Ex. 6:4 in KJV), which may sound a bit more noble and heroic. It certainly affirms more clearly being on the way somewhere. But the image does not change. It is being where one does not belong and cannot settle in and having to survive there, all because of promise. To an observer, the sojourner-pilgrim is just there, coping and surviving. Perhaps only the insider can know that he is not just "being there," but is on his way toward a promise. He can be observed as placeless, but he knows of a promised place, and that changes his sojourn.

2. During the period when Israel had left the slavery of Egypt and was not yet in the land of promise (forty years' worth!) it remembered itself as *wanderer.* In wilderness traditions (Ex. 16–18; Num. 10:10ff.), the buoyant faith of the fathers is much less in evidence. Now the stress is upon being without resources

13. Powerfully articulated by Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 78.

move toward fulfillment: from promise to the security of *slavery*, from desert to the destructive power of *kingship*, from exile to the weariness of *moral management*.

But the relation to the land changes. It is also, in reverse order, from fulfillment to emptiness: from flesh-pots to *wilderness*, from control in the land to *weeping* in Babylon, from moral passion to *dislocation*. Israel is always on the move from land to landlessness, from landlessness to land, from life to death, from death to life. Its historical character derives from its questing for promises seemingly so rich and fulsome, but so burdened with ambiguity and loss.[22]

Israel's faith is essentially a journeying in and out of land, and its faith can be organized around these focuses. This subject is worth our attention because contemporary problems are quite parallel. We know in our time about the hunger for rootage and the yearning for turf. We know about the destructive power of coveting and the anxiety of displacement. And we know from time to time about gifts given and promises kept. In ancient Israel and now persons and communities have been consumed by problems most of which are about land. And so we may ask about the power of the promise which is also mostly about land, a promise both glorious and problematic.

CHAPTER 2

"To the Land I Will Show You"

The book of Genesis presents two histories, both concerned with land. One, presented in Genesis 1–11, is about people fully rooted in land living toward expulsion and loss of land. Successively, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and his family, and finally the folks at Babel do everything they can to lose the land, and they eventually do.[1] That history is about presuming upon the land and as a result losing it. The Bible ponders the folly and carelessness that cause people securely landed to give it up.

The other history of Genesis is in chapters 12–50. It features Abraham and his family, and is about not having land but being on the way toward it and living in confident expectation of it. The Bible considers at length that people without land have the resources and stamina to live toward a land they do not possess.

These two histories set the parameters of land theology in the Bible: presuming upon the land and being *expelled* from it; trusting toward a land not yet possessed, but empowered by *anticipation* of it. Our lives are set between expulsion and *anticipation*, of losing and expecting, of being uprooted and

rerooted, of being dislocated because of impertinence and being relocated in trust. Clearly these stories are not remote from the contemporary experience of Western culture.

The two histories are never far from each other, either in the Bible or in modern experience. The history of anticipation, as soon as it is satisfied, lives at the brink of the history of expulsion. But the Bible is clearly interested in anticipation. The Bible is not concerned with expulsion and dislocation even though theological interpreters are often preoccupied with it. Rather, the Bible focuses insistently upon anticipation and relocation. It does not look back in remorse or bitterness but it looks ahead with confident hope. In these stories of the early fathers (Gen. 12–50), the dominant themes of biblical faith are announced. The stories of Abraham and his family present a sharp break with the other history of Genesis 1–11. As Gerhard von Rad has shown, Gen. 12:1 expresses a radical breaking off of the other history and a lack of sustained interest.[2] The abrupt statement of 12:1 unexpectedly seizes people out of the history of expulsion and initiates them into the history of anticipation. The human community need no longer live away from the land, always departing and being driven out, but can live toward the land, always on the way in joy.

Biblical faith begins with the radical announcement of discontinuity which intends to initiate us into a new history of anticipation. It challenges and contradicts a consciousness of land loss and expulsion as false consciousness. That is not the way life is intended to be or can finally be, because the power of anticipation rooted in the speech of God overwhelms the power of expulsion. A new history begins in that discontinuity and initiation. The remainder of biblical faith is the history of those who have broken off the old life of expulsion and have walked the risky way of anticipation.

ABRAHAM AND THE HISTORY OF LANDLESSNESS

The new history begins as history always begins, in a word spoken. "Now the lord said to Abraham." How else could history begin? That is the way with individual histories when

persons are addressed and called into being, into a new consciousness. Such a word spoken gives identity and personhood, and we could not have invented it. It is the voice of the prophet —or the poet if you wish—who calls a name, bestows a vision, summons a pilgrimage. This is not the detached prattle of a computer; not the empty language of a quota or a formula or a rule; but it is a word spoken which lets one not be the same again. Land-expelling history could live by coercive language but land-anticipating history can only begin with One who in his speaking makes all things new. That is what Gen. 12:1 does in the Bible. It makes all things new when all things had become old and weary and hopeless. Creation begins anew, as a history of anticipation of the land.

The word which begins history anew is received by Israel immediately as a voice of compelling authority: ". . . and he went." In contrast to some other traditions in the Bible, in this one the speaker is known by name and he is immediately acknowledged. His voice is recognized as one that is authoritative, that can author a new history among us. His voice is known to be laden with power. This is where the history of anticipation is grounded. His word which compels is known in its hearing to be reliable, and never doubted. His voice is such a contrast to that of the serpent which was shrewd in its capacity to manipulate to death (Gen. 3:1–5). Or such a contrast to the voices of the tower which wrecked the whole thing. Here there is no shrewd manipulation or destructive confusion. Here there is only the simple, clear, unambiguous invitation to begin a new history. And in the very moment of address he is acknowledged to be the One who would do what he said he would do.

Abraham entered a new history. The new history is without link to the old. The new history begins with a call to repentance, a summons to leave and go somewhere we are not, a radical breaking off and departure, to become someone whom we have not been. We know nothing about the place Abraham left.[3] The text is constructed to suggest that it also is a place of coercion and hopelessness. Abraham shares the futility of the others

in that old history: "Sarah was barren" (Gen. 11:30)! And Abraham and his family are invited to leave presumably secure barrenness for the sake of a risky future which promises more. But without an heir, Abraham and Sarah are to be as landless as Adam and Eve, either early or lately expelled from the land.

But this new history requires a wrenching departure, an abandonment of what is, for that which is not, but which is promised by the One who will do what he says. "And he went!" Yahweh spoke and he went, and in so doing a new historical alternative began, alternative to the history of expulsion and dislocation. Sarah was barren! No way to the future. No heir to receive all the riches. Nothing, future closed off, everything as good as over and done with. And he spoke and there was newness. He is the Lord of all things new, and his partners in history are pilgrims who believe he will do what he says. The barren one went on a pilgrimage with the Lord of barrenness and birth, the Ruler of hopelessness and hope. The pilgrimage was the antithesis of expulsion. The family of Abraham left the history of expulsion and began the pilgrimage of promise.

This history-beginning word is announced three times to the barren one who will embrace an alternative history. It is announced in Gen. 12:1–3, with the promise, "I will make of you a great nation . . . make your name great."[4] Nobody has a great name in the history of dislocation.[5] And surely nobody is a great nation if expulsion is the order of the day. In the old history they tried for the great name and nothing happened (Gen. 11:4). Surely only such an improbable announcement could energize such a radical, risky history to a land, a new land where barrenness is overcome. Nothing is known or said here of the land. No description or identification, no geographical reference. For now the land exists only as an intention of the promiser. It is a new land and that is enough, not like any of the old land, tired, sterile, unproductive, filled with thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18).

Peter Pitzele - Abraham is Called to his Vocation,
from *Our Father's Wells*

~~nates with~~ Abraham.

In the Tales of the Ancestral Family we first learn that God seeks to enlist a chosen son in the accomplishment of a great collaborative enterprise. This God is the Great Father, a divine identity only hinted at previously, and in his terrible encounters with Him Abraham will wander into a landscape of complex moral choices and terrible spiritual demands. In the course of his wandering Abraham will be asked to sacrifice what he cherishes most to this God.

Abraham is the father par excellence; in him and through him is first constellated the myth of the father. On the one hand, he embodies the values of a social order that insisted on and sanctified the rule of the fathers. On the other hand, he is also the first mythic father in the Western tradition who is not defined by his concerns of wealth, warfare, kingship, and material power. Abraham is a man who has an inner life and vocation. He is a figure through whom patriarchy attempts to transcend the narrow, culturally constructed definition of man. Abraham's biography is told in the stages and stations of spiritual—rather than heroic or romantic—initiations. The very idea of spiritual initiation as a repeated, renewed, and increasingly demanding series of self-surrenders is first articulated in his story. According to the patriarchal imagination, the wisdom and power that finally come to a man or woman through these initiations promote not status in the world but the stature of a soul. The story of this patriarch molds for the first time in the West the myth of soul-making.

It is tempting to call Abraham a hero; he has a quest and a mission; he sires two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, the mythic forebears through whom are established the sibling religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. If we compare Abraham with a character like Homer's Odysseus, however, who stands at the beginning of the Western heroic tradition, we can see just how different a figure Abraham is and how poorly the word *hero* sits on his shoulders.

Odysseus has the goddess Athena for his sponsor. The arena of his actions is a world of raw power; he labors to win a war and after many adventures to return to Ithaca, his home, now an occupied country, and to reclaim it. He is a man of the world, a picaresque explorer, supremely "skilled in all ways of contending," willful, wily, curious, crafty, a poseur and improviser, a storyteller, and master of disguises. Though Odysseus suffers in his travels and travails, in the end he gains all he has set out to win: wife, home, son, wealth, kingship. In the poem's closing lines even his youth has been restored, his father's too, and Ithaca seems finally a version of that utopia where one can say, though Homer never does, "They lived happily ever after."

Odysseus is a prototype of the economic man. His values are, despite his promiscuous diversions, the values of hearth, home, and history. He meets the world on the world's terms. There is no spiritual realm into which he travels, and even his descent into the underworld moves him neither to spiritual insight nor to a sense of his own mortality. In Hades he gains only information, data useful to abet the practical task of coming home and securing his place in the annals of his people.

Economic in a more modern sense, Odysseus is the trader, the mercantile explorer, the exploiter and looter whose honor rests on the booty with which he can enrich himself. Guileful and shrewd, his intelligence is put in the service of a fiercely competitive temper. His dreams are as concrete (and as limited) as the dreams of the creative entrepreneur. To his son he passes on reputation and riches. He seeks to create a dynasty. Odysseus is the godfather of all godfathers, the father king who lives by a ruthless code, a law unto himself. For all his extraordinary charm, Odysseus is consumed by events, possessed by his possessions, driven always to master his surroundings.

I have met him everywhere and in myself. He is the part of me that wants fame and privilege, reputation and reward. He sits beside me as I write this book and talks to me about the *New York Times* bestseller list. He envies successful men and competes with them; he wants to drive a black BMW, and to catch the eye of any woman who catches his. He is not my wildness but my wish to be special, to be one for whom the usual rules do not apply. I dreamed with him in lotusland; he was there when I dallied with Calypso in Jamaica, drinking rum punches till the sun went down. Like him I leave my family to seek my own ambitions, to satisfy my appetite in the world. He is my hedonism. Like him I know how to dissimulate until I am not sure who I really am, or until I think I am only roles, contexts, responses, improvisations. The Odysseus who wrestled with Proteus, the shape shifter, is himself the ultimate protean postmodern man.

What a different figure I meet in Abraham, and what a different aspect of myself he constellates. If one at all, he is a hero of silences, a man who listens and attends. Will and action, passion and ambition, community and romance, conquest and fame do not consume him. These are not the sources of his power either as protagonist or prototype. In the land into which he wanders, he is not concerned with the indomitable self and its valiant encounters with ordeals and obstacles, dragons, witches, knights, or evil forces. Evil itself, so clearly marked in the world of Odysseus, is shadowy in Abraham's; it is complex and located within as well as without. Indeed, most of Abraham's ordeals are ordeals of imagination that take place between the lines and behind

the words of his story. If I am to reach him, I have to breach the silence in which he moves. A son of Imagination, Abraham demands imagination to apprehend him.

Abraham seems marginal to history; yet by his emptiness, he generates history. This emptiness of action, this suspension of the heroic or individual will, gives him access to a different kind of power, one for which he becomes an instrument. He cannot create a dynasty, for when he dies, his hands are empty. What is most vital in his experience—his wisdom, his faith, the knowledge he has gained of the Father's mysteries—cannot be handed down. He can only attest to a power that his offspring and then their generations—and which I myself—must experience directly, if at all. Though known through the millennia as the man of faith, he is also witness to incontestable revelations.

Abraham is the aheroic man. He does not oppose heroism, but to him that set of values does not adequately apply, as heroic values do not adequately apply, for example, to the artist, the poet, the musician, the rabbi or priest, the therapist, the healer, the contemplative. Though such people live in a real world where Odyssean concerns cannot be ignored, they live, too, in the domain of Abraham. Abraham is that part of us that asks: What does a life *mean?* What—after all the acquisitions, mergers, promotions, and deals—*matters?* What gives us the deepest sense of significance, value, and purpose in our life? For these questions Abraham is the Western tradition's first guide and emissary. When we ask these questions, we enter an inscape of thought and feeling, and he was there before us.

It was Abraham who first understood that spiritual light comes to the one who goes by way of darkness, power to the one who has given up power, victory to the one who has surrendered, and that life is given to the one who has died. These spiritual paradoxes are given imaginative life in the story of the first patriarch. He speaks to the part of me that wanders; speaks to those times in my life when I have felt adrift in a universe that is haunted by mystery and that bears strange, elusive meanings for me.

We do not have a complete life of Abraham. We have fragments that form images of a life, scenes in which we see Abraham as son, husband, kinsman, and father. He is mentioned first as a member of Terah's clan. He is Abram, one of those who travel with his father, Terah, in a westward passage from his original dwelling place in the heartland of Mesopotamia toward the land of Canaan, which borders the Mediterranean Sea.

> *Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father, Terah, in his native land of Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.*
>
> *Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran. (11:27–32)*

We do not know the motive for Terah's migration, but we know he reached only the western border of his homeland. There he and his clan and kin settled in Haran; there Terah died.

Immediately after the words "Terah died in Haran" comes the following:

> *Then the Lord called Abram and said, "Leave your native land and your father's house and go to the land I will point out to you." (12:1)*

In this moment a beam of light picks Abram out from a jumble of figures. The bustle of life in Haran recedes suddenly into deep shadow. A man, apparently no one special, is arrested in the middle of things; the flow of his life is interrupted by a voice. Insubstantial, it addresses him. No context. No preparation. No proof. Just a man hearing a voice—demon, daimon, God—which calls to him, summons him, directs him: "Leave . . . and go."

The summons follows immediately after the mention of his father's settling and death. The sequence suggests that the sudden release of a powerful psychic energy hurtling Abram into a new life comes after his father's life force settles and dies. Terah's dream to reach Canaan has gone unfulfilled; Abram is called to complete it, but in a way his father could never have imagined.[1]

Is there some connection between the death of the father and this release of force and direction in the son? Does the death of the father make possible some work for the son, some freeing that is at the same time a kind of continuing, a deepening, a surpassing of the father's dream? I think so, but I need to say again that the formulation "father-son" is metaphoric, not gender-bound or absolute. As a man I can see these patterns in my life with my father and in the lives of men I know. But the paradigm is really parent-child, the relationship of one generation to the next.

When my best friend, Larry, lost his father, I wrote him a poem. Looking back on it now, and knowing what has happened to him in the years since his father died, I see the dynamics of loss and release at work in his life.

A Father's Death

Shagged with moss, choked at last
by vines, and one night smit
by a lightning stroke,
the gnarled old elm—
that grew beside the boyhood house
in whose shade a boy once played
and in whose limbs one spring dawn
an eagle landed, so near it seemed
he could almost touch the dangerous beak
and unruffled feathers—
fell at last
grazing the eaves
shaking the ground
and letting in suddenly
a gaping hole of sky.
So it seems to me your father dies
and I, your friend,
with whom talk of fathers and fathering
goes back along our own strong trunks
to the first days of friendship
think of you as one who goes
before into the loneliness
that follows the father's death.
Mine too one day will fall,
and then it seems to me
all the unsaid and unsayable things
will rend my heart.
The bond that runs between the father and the son
is mute and dark as the roots of trees.

Rereading the poem now I think the eagle in the elm represents the father's dream. The son catches glimpses of it; it speaks to him of a wildness in the father, a vision. In the wake of his father's death I have seen my best friend's dreams call him out into a new life. He is following the eagle. The biblical myth speaks to me of the connection between the father's death and the son's readiness to be called, of the way the dreams of one generation are inherited by the next, renewed, and handed on.

The Lord called to Abram and said, "Leave your native land and your father's house and go to a land I will point out to you."

Terah, we are told, reached the very border of his native land but was unable to cross over into a new country. Terah settled within the familiar confines of the Motherland; there he built his house; there he raised his children; there he died. Now his son Abram is called to exceed him, to leave behind the family and the familiar and to enter that country into which the Father of All Things calls him.

I think of Abram's venture as a journey on the Road of Excess, a phrase borrowed from William Blake. "The Road of Excess leads to the palace of wisdom," he wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* I think Blake meant Excess as a kind of surpassing, not as a superfluity or luxury. Only by exceeding the conventional limits of what one has inherited and received does a man or woman achieve wisdom. Blake is a poet of true patriarchy.

Excess breaks out of the conventional. It appears mad, foolish, extreme, and dangerous. The excessive man, as Thoreau has described him, marches to "the beat of a different drummer"; man or woman, this is the one who breaks away either to be forgotten or to make a new world. Such a person reaches the palace of wisdom because he or she has learned directly what serves the soul. Abraham will become a man of faith because his faith will constantly be tried.

The wisdom of excess is a patriarchal wisdom, and excess is arduous and frightening because it asks the sons and daughters to face the unfamiliar, the unfathered parts of themselves. It also means facing the father's limitations, the limits of the forebears, perhaps even becoming the means through which the previous generation faces those limitations, those settlings, and those deaths.

For the soul that chooses to "leave . . . and go," the destination is unknown. The journey of excess, not of his own design nor within his control to reach, takes Abram out of ordinary time and pitches him into the Dreamtime.[2] Terah journeyed on solid ground, but Abram steps out into a space in which his only guide is what he apprehends through his imagination. In his imagination it is the ungraspable, unpredictable Great Father who has summoned him. Like Adam, Cain, Noah, and the scattered souls of Babel, Abram is another in the line of those marked figures who go out into the wilderness

and into solitude, who must make a new world, and whose life is in the deepest sense a sojourning. He will, as we shall see presently, live the life of a stranger. Unlike Adam, Cain, and Noah, however, Abram is not expelled or exiled. He becomes "a stranger in a strange land" willingly. There is work for Abram to do, an enterprise in which he is enlisted and that will give meaning to his life. For its sake he will be asked to make extraordinary sacrifices.

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This moment in the myth when the soul begins its journey from native land and father's house marks the true genesis of the patriarchal enterprise. This enterprise is a progress, progress as something moving forward and thus moving on, not as amelioration. (In Latin the word *pro-gredior,* from which our "pro-gress" comes, is used specifically to mark the leaving of the father's house.) In the Terah-Abram story this generational pro-gress begins as the dream of Terah for Canaan; it is renewed in the son and recast, spiritualized, and empowered by a force greater than anything Terah knew. Abram will become Abraham and pass the dream on, unfulfilled, to his son Isaac; then Isaac to his son Jacob, and still the dream is unfulfilled. Each generation renews the dream in its own terms.

This generational enterprise remains alive and potent precisely and paradoxically because it is never completely fulfilled. In the Book of Genesis the journey toward the "land I will point out to you," which comes in time to be known as the Promised Land, is never realized. The descendants of Abraham end up as slaves in Egypt. Later in the Bible Joshua exceeds Moses and leads the children of Israel into the Promised Land, but in time they are exiled; they return to the land only to be exiled again. The land is buried under the movements of history. Zion seems a dreamland; its occupation belongs to Dreamtime. Even the messiah who comes to usher in a universal peace must come again. Jews and Christians live in expectancy, travel as sojourners toward a land that is never reached, toward a time that will never be.

It is the message of patriarchy that each generation must be recalled to the journey; each soul must leave the Motherland and the father's house to re-experience a wandering. Sons or daughters must live as strangers, find their meaning, their link with the past, their sense of purpose. Each one's call is also a recollection, a recalling of previous calls. The dream outlives the dreamers. It asks to be remembered in every generation, but every generation must dream anew. Whenever the father has settled and died, the child must set out again into a wilderness to live a dream.

This linking of parent with sons and daughters in a generational enterprise, in dream-bearing, forms what is rightly to be understood as the patriarchal tradition; *this* is what is handed down. Paradoxically, as I have said, what is handed down cannot always be handled or touched or reached. Abraham's hands will be empty when he dies. This tradition, mystical and visionary—in short the tradition of imagination—passes from the "father" as something as intangible as a story or a song, given and taken as a matter of faith.

In the heroic myths of the Greeks and Romans there is no such notion of a progress through generations, of a family passing on a vision that moves in each generation and toward which the generations move. The hero achieves conquest; his quest ends in marriage and mother making. The hero settles in the end, and this repose is a long-sought reward. Dynasty is his symbolic immortality. The hero is often ruthless in his attempt to pass on his power to his sons and heirs. But no vision of a new or a better world ever captures the Greek heroic imagination and links the generations.

Such a vision is central, however, to patriarchy. Here the imagination proposes a unique enterprise—one involving covenant, community, and the family of humankind—that binds the generations in a shared endeavor of the soul. This endeavor is the heart of patriarchal myth-theology, and in the light of it a generational bond is forged. When men and women are part of this work, they feel they have found their true work, their soul-making. In the world of patriarchy, true soul-making goes by a special name: vocation.

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It is one real measure of our poverty as men and women that we have lost this sense of a vital spiritual tradition and the vocation of soul-making. It is not merely that the industrial revolution separated people from a life of significant toil or that the father in the factory works hidden from his child, comes home at night bleak from his alienated labors; not merely that the child grows up never seeing the father use his hands or mind. It's not just that. What we have lost is the generational figure—father or mother—who dreams and dares to listen to voices; the one whom society calls a fool.

Our world is full of folly, but where are the holy fools? Abram belongs to the paradigm of the fool. His brother Nahor would call him one. Sarai, his wife, may look at him askance, wondering if he's lost his mind, yet she, too, is called; she, too, is a model of exceeding. But most of all Abram himself, in his own heart, wonders what he is doing. This must be crazy, he says; I must be crazy. Am I being a fool? Is the voice that calls me also fooling me, tricking

me? Can I trust my voices, can I believe my ears? These questions are asked by a man who cannot look outside himself for answers. Who outside himself can possibly advise him? He must act; he is free to choose. He must pay attention to everything, listen deeply to the clamor of himself, but in the end he acts. If he obeys the call and answers the summons with his life, withholding nothing, then his life in the world becomes a "gesture of folly"[3] sustained only by his faith. No one really knows what he is about, nor does he have words to explain himself, for he operates in a realm where explanations fail. He can only bear witness to his own experience. And trust. To find a vocation often means being a failure in the eyes of the material world.

The best we do in the material world is risk ourselves materially. We even risk our lives. But for what? A thrill, for Uncle Sam, but rarely for a dream that bears healing for our fellow human beings, for our earth. What dreams we have we too often turn into entrepreneurial maneuvers designed in the end to secure us a living, to secure our lives. We aim for success. To be sure, such Odyssean enterprises take courage, require a risk of capital. But patriarchy is not about building Babels. It is about encountering God, or being encountered by Him. It insists that God is a real category of human experience, and that God, however conceived, can interrupt our lives with a call that will alter completely our relationship to our past, present, and future. After such an interruption we live in the moment, for only in the moment are we going to hear what we need to hear to move on. So the values of patience, silence, inwardness, and solitariness become the necessary field of practice a person cultivates in order to hear the words of the Father. Vocation is life lived in the service of imagination; it is a life of obedience.

History has given obedience a bad name; too many docile lambs led to slaughter; too many obedient functionaries murdering the lambs. Whenever we hear talk of obedience, we are likely to feel ambivalence and fear. And a personal revulsion curdles the word as well. The forced submissions of our childhoods, the suppressed rages of our own impotence, compel us to reject obedience. We obeyed once. We had no choice, but obedience shames us. We have vowed we will never again obey. Obedience is for children, or the trained animal. The servant, or worse the slave, obeys the master; the soldier obeys his commanding officer. Obedience is a giving over of one's personal power; it is a loss of control.

Yet according to the soul-tradition of patriarchy, there is another kind of obedience. The word *obey* in English comes from the Latin word meaning "to listen," "to hear." Abram *listens to* the call to leave his native land and his father's house. He obeys. He experiences this call as something coming from a God

who is felt to be Other and outside him. But this God is also inside him. Deep speaks to deep; Imagination speaks to imagination, and something is kindled in Abram. The imagination is the capacity of the inner ear to hear the call of the inner voice; imagination is a receptive power as well as a shaping one.

Abram is not being obedient to some external dictate, to some chain of command. On the contrary, he breaks with customary conventions, the duties of inheritance and maintaining his father's estate. What Abram obeys flashes upon him like a beacon, points a way, and then disappears. His obedience is a loyalty to what was first disclosed to him in a moment of revelation. He has no way of knowing what this loyalty will exact of him. On each step of his journey he must renew with himself his commitment to his task, for his obedience is voluntary, not compelled.

One night many years ago I heard a call, and I could not find in myself the courage to obey it. It was at the end of winter at a time when my first marriage had ended, and I was a few months short of finishing my Ph.D. I had come down to New York and was staying at my father's apartment on the West Side of the city. Earlier that week I had run into Carolyn, an old college flame, and she had invited me to come to her place for dinner later that week. On that particular night, despite the blustery chill of early March, I decided to walk the dozen blocks to her place. I was in a state of pleasant expectation. I rounded a corner onto her street and had to pull up my collar against a wind that was driving east from the river. It was already dark, and had I not heard a strange mutter from the edge of the sidewalk, I might have missed him.

A man lay half on the sidewalk and half in the gutter. He was mumbling repeatedly, "I'm cold . . . I'm cold." I am sure he was unaware of any passersby, and I was only half aware of him. Conditioned by the city to blinker my awareness of poverty and homelessness, I was already walking past him intent on my destination and polishing a romantic preamble. But his voice lodged in my ear, and before I had gone too far beyond him, I remembered the parable of the good Samaritan. Somehow that story and his voice caught my conscience. I turned back to him and, reaching down, I helped him, hauled him, to a doorway. "I'm cold," he said, his voice rising to my nostrils on the fumes of cheap wine. I told him I was on my way to a friend's house and that I would see if I could find something to wrap him in. "I'll be back," I promised.

I went to Carolyn's apartment and, standing at her door, explained what had just happened. She looked at me askance, but she found an old blanket and gave it to me. I took it to him, feeling virtuous. When I got back to that corner, he was still in the doorway where I'd left him. I laid the blanket around his shoulders, heard his mumbled thanks, and turned back toward Carolyn's. But