

ROSH HASHANAH MORNING
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The figure of Abraham is essential to understand the relationship among Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Our Abrahamic religions, as they are called, trace their origins to this mythical and iconic personality.

Abraham combines in one person the ideal type of a religion's founder. And as the founder of Judaism, he represents all of the myths that are attached to almost every founder of every religion throughout history. The details that are left out of the Torah are provided by Jewish legend and midrash. These have been compiled by Bialik and Ravnitski in their 1951 work *Sefer HaAgadah*. Here are collected the myriad of stories, midrashim, *bubba meisas* that have been spun by Jewish preachers and teachers through the centuries.

Abraham here emerges as the Jewish prototype of every hero who existed. His birth is mysterious; his many deeds miraculous. There are interesting and essential similarities in his life with those of Jesus and Buddha. He displays the characteristics of what psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung called an "archetype." Abraham emerges as a Jewish reflection of this collective unconscious. Abraham is the first Jew, and for some Jews, Abraham represents the first Zionist.

ABRAHAM AS THE “FIRST ZIONIST”

I don't know if you watched the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court. In the persistent questioning by the Senate Republicans, questions arose about the “real meaning” or the “original meaning” of the constitution, and what Judge Sotomayor would bring to our understanding of that meaning. Would she bring her background as a Latina woman who grew up in the Bronx to her understanding of the true meaning? She replied that she would bring fidelity to the law, whatever that may mean.

It is hard to image what these Senators were all about. Was this “payback” for the rough time Democratic Senators gave to nominations in the previous administrations? Was this Senator Sessions of Alabama seeking revenge for being turned down as a federal judge by the very committee in which he is the ranking Republican?

Whatever the motivations, I was struck by the sanctity in which every word of the constitution was held. It reminded me of the way in which some people hold every word of the Bible. While the constitution was not ratified until 1789, less than 250 years ago, we still are arguing about its true meaning, and what the Founders of our country had in mind. If we cannot really know what people who lived 250 years ago had in mind, how much the more so the editors of the Bible.

While we have in front of us the exact words of the Constitution as it was

ratified in 1789, the biblical text is corrupted by generations of scribes whose errors in copying might be legion. How much tinkering of the biblical text went on intentionally, if not unintentionally by scribes.

No one knows what the text means when God is quoted as saying to Abraham “You and your offspring shall inherit the land of Canaan.” But we should know that this text does not justify the establishment of new settlements throughout the West Bank of the Jordan River.

The use of biblical texts to validate currently held ideology is not a Jewish peculiarity alone. Creationists deny science by holding folk traditions speculating on the origins of the world as recorded in the Bible. Slavery in the South was justified by biblical text, as are abortions opposed and homosexuality denied.

In fact, to assign the term Zionist to Abraham is contrary to everything that we know about the history of Zionism, and its development as an phenomenon of the post Enlightenment era. Not only is it anachronistic, but it defies logic.

Let's examine the development of Zionism.

HOW ZIONISM CAME TO BE

The French Revolution in 1789 had its impact on all of Western history and politics. The French Revolution was the result of Enlightenment thinking which developed in the mid-18th century as a result of the work of Voltaire, Hume and Rousseau and others.

The goal of the Enlightenment was personal emancipation - emancipation from the domination of the Church or Royalty. Not only did Emancipation thinking change the ways of France, the American Revolution of 1776 was a direct result of the Enlightenment.

Scholars are still debating how and why a philosophical movement had such an extraordinary effect on the Western world.

One of the clearest results of the Enlightenment was the development of Non-Orthodox Judaism in Germany. The first Reform congregation was established in Seesen, Germany in 1810. The idea that there could be a Judaism that allowed Judaism to develop in newly freed Europe and America was shocking. But Liberal Judaism caught on. We are the American Jewish inheritors of the French Revolution.

In Eastern Europe, there were different currents and different issues. The Enlightenment thinking of the West was slower to come, and manifested itself in different ways. The personal freedom that marked the Enlightenment in Europe

and America manifested itself in nationalism throughout Eastern Europe.

Eastern Europe was replete with nationalist groups, many of which now have their independent countries as a result of the breakup of the former Soviet Union. There were those in 19th century and early 20th century Russia who wanted a Jewish nation, bringing all Jews from all over Russia under one flag in Uzbekistan.

This effort was a failure, and the energies became focused on the messianic dreams as articulated in the traditional prayer. The restoration of the Temple destroyed in the year 70 and the rebirth of a Jewish homeland in ancient Palestine were ways of bringing hope to the downtrodden Jews of the East.

Zionism is a political movement which came into being as another result of the Enlightenment. Its origins are not biblical. Its origins are in Eastern Europe as a salvation from pogroms. While many Jews emigrated to the United States and Western Europe, some hoped for a Jewish state within Russia.

God did not dictate the establishment of Zionism; it was Eastern European nationalism!!

Therefore, it is very hard for some of us to accept the idea that Israel was given by God to the Jews to fulfill messianic speculation. It is difficult for many of us to grasp the idea that some Christians articulate: That the return of Jews to Israel is a foreshadowing of the Second Coming of the Messiah!

THE ALLIANCE OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

We have seen here in America some of the dismaying results of the alliance of religion and politics.

The murders of doctors who perform abortions are justified by religion. Discrimination against people of color, against homosexual men - all these are justified by the Bible. Politicians catering to these views can be a deadly combination.

In Israel, settlers justify their presence on the West Bank in illegal villages by quoting from the Bible. They say that they are fulfilling the promise which God made to Abraham, the first Jew and the first Zionist. They quote dozens of biblical verses which may or may not refer to ancient understandings of messianic fulfillment. All of this is ironic, but many Orthodox Jews believe that only the messiah can bring about a Jewish state. Therefore, they do not even recognize Israel.

Of course, the settlers are entitled to believe anything that they wish. However, when politicians, seeking votes, further validate their biblical claims, we are getting into real trouble. Any flexibility in negotiations is stymied by biblical authority.

Even worse is the case of some American Jewish organizations and some of their members. Some American Jewish organizations feel the need to commit

themselves, in lockstep, to the positions of every new Israeli administration. Attitudes taken by the Israeli government can change or be modified at will. Having American Jews serve as an echo chamber does not help Israel or the organizations themselves.

Even worse, if American Jews working in Washington, D.C. do not spout the current party line, they are called “self-hating” Jews. The outrageousness of this notion can barely be contemplated.

Israel does not need American Jews to always agree with its government. Israelis are more open and flexible than that. Israelis don’t always agree with their government. Israel is a democracy. Administrations come and go.

What Israel needs from American Jews are honest analysis of the impact of what they say. Israel needs thoughtful critics. This is my understanding of friendship for Israel.

CONCLUSION

God told Abraham. Well, allegedly God told Abraham that the land of Canaan will belong to his descendants. Whatever that did mean, or what it may mean today, is one more example of how biblical texts are misused.

The story of Abraham and the early adventures of the Jewish people are clouded in myth. Or perhaps it is all myth. The details of the story have been tinkered with by a thousand hands. Each generation has tried to understand the story in its own way.

Each generation brings its own understanding of the archetype. Each age has its own problems and solutions.

Biblical texts can be inspiring. They return us to core values. They can remind us of the travails of our ancestors. They can remind us of their will to overcome the problems of their age.

When the Bible is used to validate current political stances or ideologies, we enter into dangerous waters.

Abraham is the first Jew. From him, Jews, Christians and Muslims are descended. They are our brothers and sisters. This is the message of Abraham. Let us not forget it.