

Will the Real First Jew Please Stand Up?

Parashat *Hayyei Sarah* 5774

Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

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With all due respect to all of the collective Jewish educational experience in this room; and in deference to all of the rabbis and educators who have taught you and have stood in this place prior to me, I want to say something that you may find rather provocative, if not in total contradiction to everything you have previously learned. What I am about to say conflicts even with what I myself have said and taught in the past, and it is this: ***I do not believe that Abraham was really the first Jew.*** Now please don't get me wrong...I have the highest admiration for Abraham. Abraham is an adventurer. Abraham is a risk taker. He's ready to pack his bags and follow an invisible God who speaks to him out of the clear blue sky, but whom he cannot see. Abraham is the great iconoclast who repudiates his entire surrounding culture of idol worshippers, taking a mallet in his hand to smash and shatter them. Abraham shakes his fist at God and with legendary gumption, and in what is perhaps the first expression chutzpah in recorded history, argues that God must not destroy depraved cities that might have innocent citizens within them. And Abraham is so completely self-confident, so convinced of the truth of this God whose voice and promises he heeds that he takes his precious son to a mountain top and binds him to an altar, nearly sacrificing him at the command of that God. Either that or he is totally insane! But either way, Abraham is truly one of a kind. You can't emulate Abraham...please do not attempt to sacrifice your children, no matter how much they aggravate you! In fact the only ways in which we modern Jews endeavor to resemble Abraham is in our commitment to monotheism, our ritual of *brit milah*—circumcising our sons on the eighth day, and being hospitable and welcoming to others in our tents. But most of us are not responding to heavenly voices, moving our families to promised lands, or lashing out at the idols of today. Abraham is no more the first Jew than Theodor Herzl is the first Israeli. Herzl, the Austrian playwright and journalist, who only set foot in the land of Israel once in his life, was—like Abraham—an extraordinary visionary, and a famously successful promoter of Zionism. He corralled hundreds of thousands of Jews around a plan for Jewish political sovereignty in our ancestral homeland. No small feat! But an Israeli he was not. He didn't even speak Hebrew...and the State of Israel wasn't founded until 44 years after his death! It has been up to his descendants to grapple with the various meanings of Zionism and to live out the dreams he articulated so

famously as the father of the Zionist movement. So too with Abraham. Abraham is a paragon, a hero figure; he is mythic, he is legendary, and he is too much of a spiritual superman to truly be the first Jew.

Now before the board of directors runs me off the bimah, let me tell you who I do think is the first Jew. I am certainly not the first one to say this,¹ but the more I think about it, the more I believe it. The first Jew doesn't acquire his faith in a blast from heaven, but has to figure a lot of it out for himself. The first Jew doesn't learn about his tradition directly from the lips of the Creator of the Universe, but has to understand for himself why his parents' faith should mean anything to him...Why something that appealed to one generation should mean anything to the next. The first Jew has to struggle a bit, put in some effort, and personalize Jewish identity for himself. That's why the first Jew, in my opinion, cannot be Abraham, but instead is Isaac. Now I know that Isaac is the most understated of the three patriarchs. He doesn't have a lot of monumental accomplishments associated with him. He is understated, contemplative, and quiet. He was the only patriarch to remain in the Land of Israel for his entire lifetime, the only patriarch who was monogamous, the only patriarch who doesn't undergo a name change. When his wife Rebekkah first lays eyes on him, he is, in the Torah's words, *lasuach ba'sadeh*, he was out walking in the fields toward evening. The rabbis imagined that he was praying, *minh̄a* to be specific. Whatever he was doing, Rebekkah nearly falls off her camel and immediately covers her face with a veil. She could tell that he was special. Before she even knew that he was her husband to be, she had a sense that he was unique. And here is how: Isaac was the first Jew to be born Jewish...the first Jew to inherit a Jewish identity, and then to consider what it means to pass that identity on to his own children. He is the first of many, many Jews throughout history and up until this very moment to worry about whether his own grandchildren would be Jewish. He is the first Jew to know the tension that is expressed in the Amidah...the tension between *Eloheinu veilohei Avoteinu*, between my God or our God, and the God of our ancestors. In what ways is the God my grandparents and great grandparents addressed in prayer the same God that I am speaking to, or the same God I believe in today? Isaac is the first Jew to have to confront these challenges; Isaac is the first Jew to answer these questions; to grapple with a Jewish identity that wasn't invented for him, and that he has to make his own.

¹ I first encountered this idea in the writings of Rabbi Ed Feinstein, and have seen the claim made in various other places since.

One more thing about the Amidah...the language of the very first part of that prayer is rather cumbersome. A language teacher would never let you get away with writing a paragraph that repeats the same word seven times. Why do we say *Elohei Avraham, E. Yitzhak, Veilohei Ya'akov; E. Sarah, E. Rivkah, E. Rachel, V'elohei. Leah*...There have to be a dozen or so *amidot* in this prayer book, imagine how much ink could have been saved, maybe even a few pages shaved off if we just said, *Elohei Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya'akov, Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, v'Leah*. But no: Instead it is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and so on. The Ba'al Shem Tov famously explained that the God of Isaac was not exactly the same as the God his son Jacob encountered or as his father Abraham encountered. And each one of us have to cultivate our own unique relationship with God, our own comprehension of what God is asking of us. It's not enough to be exactly the same kind of Jew as your parents; To do exactly the same mitzvot as they do and not do exactly the same mitzvot they don't do! We certainly learn deeply important ideas about faith, religion, and tradition from our parents, but at some point Judaism has to become our own! I'll never forget the day in high school when I decided to experiment with wearing *tzitzit*, the undergarment with fringes attached that observant Jews wear under their shirts. My mother caught site of me getting dressed one day, and she said "Oh no, you're wearing those now!" fearing that I was one step away from falling off the cliff into religious fanaticism. But before too long my parents came to understand that my Jewish practice, while different from theirs, did not imply judgment or insult, but was my own way of forging a relationship with the tradition. Before I knew it there was a set of kosher pots and pans waiting for me when I came home from college to visit.

About 2,300 years after Isaac lived, the biblical prophet Amos referred to the Jewish people in a most unusual way. He calls them *Beit Yitzhak*, the House of Isaac. Did the prophet believe as I do that Isaac really had more of a foundational role in Judaism than he is typically given credit for? Why call the Jewish people the House of Isaac, instead of the House of Israel or the House of Jacob, his son? Why not call the Jewish people by one of the many other biblical namesakes we are so often associated with...Perhaps it's because the prophet Amos realized what I am relating to you now...That Judaism can never be a passive experience. A Judaism that is simply inherited is inert. Isaac was the first Jew to make this tradition his own. And as members of the House of Isaac, if we want our Judaism to be full of life, full of personal meaning and relevance, a vibrant part of our identity and something we are deeply proud of then we have to do what he

did; what the true first Jew did; We are not just links in a chain. Judaism is not like a hot potato, to be received and then quickly passed on to the next generation. It is a gift to you and to me. Cherish it; love it; make it your own. In that way we continue the precious legacy of the very first Jew, *Yitzhack Avinu*, Isaac our patriarch.