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Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

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THE GODS ARE BROKEN!

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The Gods Are Broken!

The Hidden Legacy of Abraham

RABBI JEFFREY K. SALKIN

The Jewish Publication Society • Philadelphia

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Introduction

A few years ago, I had a long cup of coffee with a Jewish man who was in his eighties. He was telling me about his life—about his loves, his losses, his successes and regrets. At a certain point in the conversation, he told me about the few unhappy years of his Jewish education. Those experiences had occurred in a *heder* (Hebrew school) that was located in a synagogue basement in Brooklyn—a synagogue which had, long ago, lost all of its members and had turned into a bodega. His Jewish education had been brief, joyless, and, judging from his avowed secularity, not too successful. His stories were sadly typical of Jewish education in the 1930s and 1940s: bad teachers, bad textbooks, and great spitball fights.

"It couldn't have been all bad," I suggested. "Is there any lesson, in particular, that you remember?"

Without a moment of hesitation, he responded: "Of course. I remember the first sentence we learned how to recite in Hebrew."

"What was it?" I asked.

He closed his eyes, and he reached back in his mind to a memory that was more than seventy years old: "*Avraham lo he'emin ba-p'silim*" (Abraham did not believe in the idols).

That was, essentially, all that he remembered from his Jewish education. No other texts, no other stories, no other prayers.

He's not alone.

Ask any Jew to tell you a Jewish story that he or she learned as a child, and that story will pop up. There's almost a statistical certainty to it. Most Jews can probably recite the story from memory. It would go something like this:

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> Abraham's father, Teraḥ, was an idol-maker and merchant in Ur.[1] Teraḥ went away on a journey, and he left Abraham in charge of the store. Abraham took a stick and shattered all the idols in the store, and then he placed the stick in the hand of the largest idol.
>
> When Teraḥ returned from his journey, he found his merchandise in pieces on the floor. "What happened?" he demanded to know.
>
> "Oh, father, it was terrible," Abraham said. "The small idols got hungry and they started fighting for food, and finally the large idol got angry and he broke them into little pieces."
>
> "Idols don't get hungry, said Teraḥ. "They don't get angry, they don't speak—they're just idols."
>
> Upon hearing this, Abraham smiled and said: "Oh, father, if only your ears could hear what your mouth is saying. Why, then, do you worship them?"

With that, Abraham broke with idolatry, and in our way of telling the story, that's how both monotheism and Jewish history began.

Let's understand, right from the beginning, that this was not *really* when monotheism started. As religious historians are quick to point out, it took the ancient Israelites approximately a thousand years to journey from their shadowy pagan roots to henotheism (the belief that "my" God is the best god among many possible gods) and ultimately to monotheism.

Let's also understand that the "Abraham breaking idols" story is actually a distortion of ancient paganism. In the ancient Near East, pagans didn't pray to idols, though they did deify the forces of nature. The idols that existed were, most likely, merely visual representations of the gods, just as icons have historically functioned in certain Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions.

But historical truth and anthropological accuracy doesn't really matter. Stories have their own kind of power. Because we should also admit, that when Abraham shattered the idols, the shattering never stopped. It has continued to reverberate down through the ages.

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If we dared to imagine this as a movie, we would see the shattered pieces of the idols morph into the shattered pieces of the tablets of the Law that Moses broke at the Golden Calf. Then they would become the pieces of the shattered altars of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Then, they would become the shattered primordial vessels of creation as the medieval mystic, Isaac Luria, imagined them.

We would see pieces of broken glass on the streets of Germany and Austria, the remnants of homes, businesses, and synagogues that were destroyed on Kristallnacht, "the night of broken glass," in November 1938.

Finally, those pieces of glass would magically become the pieces of countless crystal glasses that Jewish grooms crush beneath their heels at every Jewish wedding—which is one of the rare times (besides the reaction of restaurant patrons when a member of the wait staff drops a tray) that an act of breaking elicits applause.[2]

There was a time in the history of religions when religious people thought a lot about the meaning and the implications of idolatry: its meaning, how to avoid it, and how to solve the practical and intellectual problems that arose from it. We might call that bygone era the era of "hard" religion, in which religionists expected that their faith systems would offer a countercultural truth to the world.[3] It was a time in religious history in which serious religionists could paraphrase the social critic H. L. Mencken: the role of religion should be to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

By contrast, we might characterize contemporary mainstream (by which we mean, non-orthodox Judaism, non-fundamentalist/non-evangelical Christianity, and non-Muslim) American religion as "soft" religion. It is the religion of what Aryeh Tepper calls "the pale god": "A grandfatherly figure, kind but, truth be told, somewhat out of it, sitting in a corner, tolerant of the various paths his children have chosen, content when surrounded by his grandchildren, desiring only to be recognized and see his offspring stay connected. It would take an outrageous sin for him to get up out of his chair and say something that might cause even slight discomfort."[4]

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It is a religious culture that has essentially deified healing, wholeness and comfort—what Philip Rieff, prophetically in 1966, called "the triumph of the therapeutic."[5] The entire idea of breaking idols is broken, with a contemporary reputation that is decidedly less-than-savory. There often seems to be a straight line from iconoclasm to religious violence; think of how the Taliban destroyed the massive statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan.

Why, of all Jewish stories, is the "idol-breaking story" the one that everyone knows? Many, if not most, Jewish folk tales and midrashim have fallen by the side of the road, or sit unvisited in dusty books. The survival of this story is rather miraculous, and its survival says something about the Jews and about Judaism.

First of all, unlike most popular Jewish stories, this one cannot be found in the Bible. Try to find it there, as generations of Jewish children have done, and you will be disappointed. That tale "should" be somewhere around Genesis 11:26: "When Teraḥ had lived seventy years, he begat Abram, Naḥor, and Haran." Or, it might have been at the beginning of Genesis 12, somewhere between when we first meet Abram/Abraham and when God tells him: *Lekh l'kha me-artz'cha umimolad'tkha umibeit avikha*" (Go forth from your native land and from your father's house) (Gen. 12:1).

But, the story is not in its expected place in the Torah narrative. It is a post-biblical midrash—perhaps one of the most famous midrashim in the world. Midrash was the way that the ancient sages expanded biblical texts in order to elucidate their meanings and implications, from the first few centuries of the Common Era (though the process of interpretation goes back much further, even to the Bible itself) to approximately the sixteenth century (though the process and the art form continues to this day). Midrash is that literary place "where exegesis turns into literature and comes to possess its own language and voice."[6]

These were not merely charming *mayses* (stories). Midrash was the quintessential manifestation of the Jewish imaginative facility. Michael Fishbane puts it this way:

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> One of the great and most characteristic features of the history of religion is the ongoing reinterpretation of sacred utterances which are believed to be foundational for each culture . . . we may overlook the peculiar type of imagination which it has sponsored and continues to nurture: an imagination whose creativity is never entirely a new creation, but one founded upon older and authoritative words and images.[7]

Second, the way we have traditionally told the story is incomplete.

True, we love the tale of the rebellious Abraham smashing his father's idols. It testifies to his strength of character and it offers us a memorable answer to the question: "Why did God choose Abraham?"

But that is only about one-third of the entire story, as you'll soon find out. Most people know only the idol-shattering part. They don't realize that there is also a back story to the idol-smashing, and it is both amusing and, for a fifteen-hundred-year-old midrash, remarkably modern. There is a sequel to the midrash as well, and that sequel is deeply disturbing and haunting, and for a fifteen-hundred-year-old midrash, it, too, is remarkably modern.

Which leads to our third observation. While generations of Jewish children have heard this story, as the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim understood about fairy tales, a "children's" story is often definitely *not* a children's story.

Young people like the story of the rebellious Abraham because they can relate to it. They may even wish they could emulate Abraham. The ancient sages knew what they were talking about when they surmised that Abraham was thirteen years old when he shattered the idols, which is the primary aggadic (Jewish lore) source of the age of bar mitzvah.[8]

But in its larger implications, Abraham's story is *not* a children's story. Far from it; it might just be the most important Jewish story ever told.

The midrash about Abraham smashing his father's idols is an essential part of Jewish communal memory. It is part of the way

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that Jews define themselves: as the children of an iconoclast. In the words of writer Cynthia Ozick: "The single most useful, and possibly the most usefully succinct, description of a Jew—as defined theologically—can best be rendered negatively: a Jew is someone who shuns idols, who least of all would wish to become like Teraḥ, the father of Abraham, the maker of idols."[9] Ozick was on solid ground, for the Talmud states that "anyone who rejects idolatry is called a Jew" (*Megillah* 13a). So deep and pervasive was the Jewish obsession with idolatry that the ancient sages devoted *Avodah Zarah*, a tractate of the Mishnah and the Talmud, to elucidating the implications of "strange worship," including an exploration of how to deal with both idolatry and idolaters.

That sense of iconoclasm produced a certain Jewish comfort with rebelliousness, as well as an ambivalent relationship with the heretics and rebels who found homes within the Jewish historical and literary tradition.

In the book of Numbers, Koraḥ leads a rebellion against the authority of Moses. That rebellion ends on a gruesome note: the earth swallows Koraḥ and his band of conspirators (Num. 16:31).

And yet, Koraḥ's story did not wind up on an ancient, scribal cutting-room floor, subject to the whims of an ancient editor who might have found the entire affair to be somewhat scandalous. Not only did Koraḥ's sons not die in the aftermath of the rebellion, no less than ten psalms (42, 44–49, 84–85, and 87–88) are ascribed to the "sons of Koraḥ," presumably still writing rebellious religious poetry in the World to Come.

When Abraham broke his father's idols, he also broke with something larger: everything that his society and culture thought was "real" and holy. That act of breaking gave birth to the prophetic temperament. Jewish theologian and social activist Abraham Joshua Heschel would write: "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions."[10]

Abraham's act of idol shattering has echoes in Christianity. In

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the early centuries of Christianity, major controversies arose over the appropriateness of visual depictions of Jesus. The early Christians maintained the Second Commandment's unequivocal rejection of the creation of physical and visual images of God. Within centuries of the Church's founding, however, Christians began to ignore this prohibition and they made icons of Jesus an integral part of Christian devotion. The use of such images, predominant in the Eastern churches, only became an issue in the sixth century when visual depictions of Jesus supplanted narratives about his life and teaching.[11]

During the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (685–741), full-scale opposition to image-worship broke out. When he undertook his crusade against images, Leo III nicknamed himself "the second Josiah" (after the Judean king who had instituted an anti-idolatry campaign). Eventually, this iconoclastic controversy led to a division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Rite churches. The icon supporters knew the Jewish propensity for rejecting idolatry, and they would often accuse the iconoclasts of being "like the Jews."[12]

The story of the idol-shattering even shows up in Muslim traditions. The story appears in the Koran—almost verbatim from the midrash:

> In the days of mighty King Nimrod, there lived in Mesopotamia a young man named Abraham. Now, Abraham's father was an idol maker named Azar [Teraḥ], who carved the wooden gods worshiped by his people. But Abraham was a believer in the one God, and not in the gods made by hand.
>
> Azar would send Abraham and his other sons to sell his idols in the marketplace. But Abraham would call to the passersby, "Who'll buy my idols? They won't help you and they can't hurt you! Who'll buy my idols?"
>
> Then Abraham would mock the gods of wood. He would take them to the river, push their faces into the water, and command them, "Drink! Drink!"

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> At last Abraham said to his father, "How can you worship what doesn't see or hear or do you any good?"
>
> Azar replied, "Dare you deny the gods of our people? Get out of my sight!"
>
> "May God forgive you," said Abraham. "No more will I live with you and your idols." And he left the house of his father . . .
>
> Then Abraham took an axe and chopped the idols to pieces—all except the largest idol, the chief god of the people. And he tied the axe to the hand of that idol.[13]

Let us not be surprised at Islam's appropriation of this tale. Like Judaism, Islam is uncompromisingly monotheistic. Because the Arabs of Mohammed's time worshiped idols, this legend about monotheism's origins "works" for Islam as well. Mohammed was no stranger to Jews and to their lore, and there was ample cross-pollination between Jews and Muslims in the seventh through tenth centuries CE (the common era), and even beyond.

Following that literary trend, the medieval Sufi (Muslim mystic) poet Rumi romanticized Abraham, who spoke against the faith of Nimrod, whom he portrays as the epitome of the infidel:

> I have carved idols enough to beguile every person; now I am drunk with Abraham; I am sated with Azar [Teraḥ];
> An idol without color and scent arrived; my hand was put out of action by him. Seek another master for the shop of idol making.
> I have cleared the shop of myself, I have thrown away the idols; having realized the worth of madness, I have become free of thoughts.
> If an image enters my heart I say, "Depart, you who lead astray!"[14]

And:

> I used to want buyers for my words.
> Now I wish someone would buy me away from words.

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I've made a lot of charmingly profound images,
scenes with Abraham, and Abraham's father, Azar,
who was also famous for icons.

I'm so tired of what I've been doing.

Then one image without form came,
and I quit.

Look for someone else to tend the shop.
I'm out of the image-making business.

Finally I know the freedom
of madness.

A random image arrives. I scream,
"Get out!" It disintegrates.

Only love.
Only the holder the flag fits into,
and wind.

So the story of Abraham's iconoclasm is a large story. It points to something much larger than being a mere story. Its perennial popularity bears witness to the fact that, for many, it seems to embody and encapsulate Judaism.

Over the centuries, the Jews have developed a finely honed talent for saying "no." In the words of the public intellectual Leon Kass, Judaism began as a separation from the ways of "the heaven-gazing and heaven-worshiping Babylonians, the earth-worshiping and licentious Canaanites, and the technologically sophisticated and masterful Egyptians."[15]

"No" to child sacrifice; to cultures of cruelty and cynical disregard for the poor; to the Persian idea of a god of light and good and of darkness and evil; to the Hellenistic worship of the body and of aesthetics; to the idea that a man can become a god, to a messiah who comes to redeem the world from the mitzvot. "No" to the worship of the state, the Reich, the race, and the social class.

The millennial Jewish struggle has been the struggle against the many "isms" of history. When necessary, the Jew typically rebelled

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against the world's values, and sought to change them. The secret of Judaism has always been that it has been the embodiment of *creative maladjustment*.[16] That is the Jewish job description: to teach, to encourage, to discourage, to persuade, to cajole and influence. Judaism stands for that which is more than simply easy and convenient. It is not the Jewish goal to make the world Jewish, but it is the Jewish goal to make the world different.

Again, Heschel:

> Religion is critique of all satisfaction. Its end is joy, but its beginning is discontent, detesting boasts, smashing idols. It began in Ur Kasdim in the seat of a magnificent civilization. Yet Abraham said, "No," breaking the idols, breaking away. And so every one of us must begin saying no to all visible, definable entities pretending to be triumphant, ultimate.[17]

One might easily argue that modernity itself is the child of three Jews who lived in varying degrees of intimacy and alienation from Judaism, and whose life work constituted a critique of the world and a shattering of society's idols: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein.

Sigmund Freud had a particular fascination, even obsession, with idols. He had a large idol collection, which he prominently displayed in his office. One of Freud's colleagues reminisced that the master would take one of his objects from its place and look at it and almost caress it while he was talking. "My grubby old gods take part in my work as paperweights," he noted.[18] It was an appropriate hobby for someone whose life work had become an iconoclastic reimagination of the inner life of the individual.

Idol-smashing reverberates as a theme in modern Jewish culture. In music, Arnold Schoenberg created the twelve-tone scale, and thus shattered the "idol" of traditional tonality. In literature, Philip Roth shattered the idols of Jewish middle-class sensibilities. Jewish comedy has always been iconoclastic—going back to the late Lenny Bruce and forward to Sascha Baron Cohen—and to Sarah Silverman, who invoked the Abraham legend when she quipped,

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"Remember the guy who smashed all the idols in the idol store? His mother had a heart attack when she saw the mess, but I'm sure she bragged about it later. That's us. That's me. I am Jewish."[19]

Sarah Silverman has never described herself as being a particularly religious or observant Jew. But the lesson that she remembers from her Jewish education is this story about Abraham, "the guy" whose name she could not remember but whose life lesson she has imitated in her work.

Ask thoughtful gentiles what they appreciate and admire the most in Jews and in Judaism, and you'll find that it's the Jewish ability to stand apart from the culture and to be idol-smashers. Years ago, the biblical scholar, Leander Keck of Yale Divinity School, confessed to me that, "I've always admired the Jewish ability to not simply blend in with the rest of undifferentiated humanity."

In the book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, contemporary Protestant theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell a story about visiting with a rabbi in a small Southern town. At one point at dinner, the rabbi's children got involved in some kind of mischief that the rabbi thought was over the top and clearly inappropriate.

Hauerwas notes that the rabbi reprimanded his children with these words: "What you're doing might be fine for everyone else, but it's not fine for you. You are special. You are different. You have a different story. You have a different set of values. You are Jews."

The authors walked away from that encounter, amazed and inspired. The significant thing, they reflected, is that serious Christians in American society experience themselves as being in spiritual exile. In fact, they are actually looking to Jews to be role models for spiritual integrity. "Now our churches are free to embrace our roots, to resemble more closely the synagogue—a faith community that does not ask the world to do what it can only do for itself."[20]

The Gods Are Broken! is an exploration of the story of Abraham's shattering of the idols. It is not a scientific or critical study of all the textual sources that are contained in that particular literary motif. Neither is it intended to be an extensive or exhaustive phil-

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osophical inquiry into the nature of ancient idolatry, or an anthropological study of how the ancients worshiped. There are other books on those worthy topics.[21]

The Gods Are Broken! has one basic idea: all of Jewish history is a commentary on the legend of Abraham shattering the idols. We will enter the life and legacy of one midrash and explore how that midrash shaped Jewish consciousness over the millennia. We will look at that legend from every angle, and through the eyes of all its characters. We will see how the legend developed over time, what this story says about the problem of idolatry, how this story might have been the "primal trauma" of Jewish history, how this legend continues to reverberate, and even how this legend is connected to the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. This story is not only big. It is also subversive; perhaps, even dangerous.

Understand this famous legend, and you will understand the Jews and all of subsequent Jewish history. We offer the tantalizing possibility that all Jewish history is a midrash on this midrash, which itself exists for only one reason—to help us answer the question, "Why did God choose Abraham?" If we can discern why God chose Abraham, then we can discern why God chose the Jews. And, if we can discern why God chose the Jews, we can figure out why Jewish existence is crucial to the spiritual survival of the world.

The late Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, put it this way:

> We are all children of Abraham
> But we are also the grandchildren of Teraḥ
> And now perhaps, it's the time for the grandchildren to do
> To their father what he did to his father
> Who broke his household gods and idols, his religion and his belief.
> But that will also be the beginning of a new faith.[22]

Amichai believed that Judaism requires a constant act of iconoclasm, a repeat performance of the pattern that Abraham first initiated millennia ago. Are the Jews still idol-smashers? We can only hope so. The future of Judaism, and of the world, depends on it.

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