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## Chapter One

# Unlocking the Riddle of Abraham the Iconoclast: A Study in the Intertextuality of *Peshat* and *Derash*<sup>1</sup>

### I. THE PROBLEM

One of the most well-known and foundational rabbinic *aggadot* about the youth of Abraham is the story of the smashing of his father's idols. This story appears in a number of midrashic sources, with the most famous one recorded in *Bereshit Raba*:

Terah was an idolater. Once he went to a certain place and left Abraham to sell [his idols] in his stead... A woman once came

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1. "Biblical Intertextuality" refers to the notion that the Bible contains many inner references; it is often self-referential in order to convey meaning. Many verses and episodes can only be fully appreciated by uncovering both the explicit as well as hidden and implicit references to verses and episodes that precede and foreshadow the passage or that make use in subsequent passages of the language and themes of the verses or verses at hand.

and brought a plate of fine flour. She said to him: “Here it is, offer it as a sacrifice to the idols.” [Abraham] rose, took a hammer, and smashed all the idols. He placed the hammer in the hands of the largest idol. When his father returned, he asked [Abraham] who did this to them. Abraham responded: “A woman came and brought fine flour and told me to offer it before them. I put it before them. One idol said, ‘I will eat first,’ while another one [insisted], ‘I will eat first.’ The biggest one amongst them arose, took a hammer, and smashed the other ones.” Terah said to him: “Why are you saying foolish things to me – do they [the idols] have knowledge [i.e., are they alive]?” Said Abraham to him: “Should not your ears hear what your mouth is saying?” Terah took him and delivered him to Nimrod. [At Nimrod’s palace, Abraham is in danger of losing his life for his beliefs and is miraculously saved from the fiery furnace.]<sup>2</sup>

This exciting and dramatic scene shapes and colors the perception of Abraham our father in all subsequent Jewish literature, and leads to a view of Abraham as the great iconoclast in Jewish history. Yet from the perspective of understanding the enterprise of the rabbis, the narrative is puzzling. This episode is entirely missing from the biblical text both explicitly and implicitly. From where did the rabbis glean any hint or indication of such an event in Abraham’s life?<sup>3</sup> This is especially troubling given that in the entire narrative of Abraham’s life in the text of Genesis (as opposed to, for example, that of Jacob in Genesis chapter

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2. *Genesis Raba* 38:13. A similar version of this story appears in the *Book of Jubilees* 12:12. The striking difference is that in that account, in the sections prior to the actual destruction of the idols, Terah is presented as agreeing with his son that the idols are false and have no power. He is afraid to confront the local people about this because of fear for his life.
  3. This essay proceeds from the assumption, dominant in most of Jewish thought from the *Geonim* through the *Aḥaronim*, that in the non-halakhic sections of the Bible, the rabbis of the Midrash were not presenting traditions dating back to Sinai. Rather, they were engaging in exegetical, homiletical, and at times even polemical interpretation of the text, interpretation that does not always reflect the plain sense of the verses. See the introductory essay in this volume for a more elaborate discussion of this topic and for numerous citations in classical sources reflecting that position.

35), there is no discussion of Abraham ever confronting idolatry or having any conflict with idolatry or its philosophies.<sup>4</sup>

An initial discussion of this topic might raise the possibility that the rabbis of the Midrash were addressing two problems that brought up philosophical and exegetical questions for them. The first problem is the utter silence of the text regarding the pre-history of the hero of the narrative. As opposed to other heroes of Tanakh, such as Moses and Joseph, the text does not tell us anything about the young Abraham, leaving us with a gaping chasm in understanding his development and his achievement of the status of “father” of our people. The rabbis had certain expectations of the origins of a heroic figure such as Abraham; they assumed that the father of our nation must not have been a regular child, but rather was imbued with a unique and perceptive soul at an early age.

The rabbis’ philosophical question may be coupled with the theological problem of the seemingly unmotivated nature of God’s choice of Abraham to lead a people and be the bearer of God’s mission and message to the world. To the simple reader, there is no explanation given for the choice of Abraham over and above anyone else in that generation. The rabbis’ exquisite and powerful narrative of Abraham’s faith, courage, and conviction fits perfectly as a back-story of a hero of these proportions.

Yet the question still remains: Why, of all possible stories and back-stories, did the rabbis feel that this one fit best with Abraham, and what drove them in that direction?<sup>5</sup>

## II. THE STORY IN JUDGES 6

We indicated above that there is no hint of the narrative of the smashing of the idols in the entire Abraham cycle in the Torah. This is certainly true. However, while this story does not appear in Genesis, a similar story to this one *does* appear elsewhere in the Bible. It takes place in

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4. This is in sharp contrast to the stress on this theme in many midrashim and subsequent rabbinic treatments of Abraham’s life, including the celebrated description in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara*, chap. 1.

5. For a different explanation of the genesis of this midrash than the one outlined here, see Yitzchak Etshalom, *Between the Lines of the Bible* (Brooklyn, 2006), 232–47.

the middle of the Book of Judges and in relation to another hero in his early stages of development – Gideon the Judge.<sup>6</sup>

In the story of young Gideon's commission as a judge, Judges 6:25–32 describes a scene in which the angel of the Lord directs Gideon to destroy the altar his father had dedicated to an idolatrous god, *Ba'al*, and to destroy the *asherah* idol that was on top of it. Gideon is afraid of destroying the altar in broad daylight, and thus takes ten loyal men under the cloak of darkness, destroying it and the idols upon it. In the morning, the townspeople awake and inquire as to who perpetrated this heinous act of deicide. Upon discovering that it was Gideon, they attempt to extract him from his father's house and put him to death. Gideon is defended by his father, who mocks the idol and their adherents by stating, "Do you have to contend for the *Ba'al*? Do you have to vindicate him? If he is a god, let him fight his own battles, since it is his own altar that has been destroyed!" (6:31). Gideon is renamed *Yeruba'al*, meaning, "Let the *Ba'al* contend with him" (6:32).<sup>7</sup>

This story contains a number of elements that clearly serve as the template for the midrashic narrative considering the early history of Abraham:<sup>8</sup>

1. There is a father and son, with the father an adherent in practice (if not in total internal commitment) to the idolatrous worship, and the son acting as the opposition to this worship.

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6. Rabbi Yaaqov Medan and Rabbi Amnon Bazak have noted this parallel as well in some of their lectures. See the Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion, *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, for the years 2002 and 2003, respectively.

7. The name Gideon, I believe, also alludes to the destruction of idols. The root of the word is G-D-A, which means to cut down or destroy. In the Torah, and especially in the book of Deuteronomy, forms of this word are used to describe what the Israelites are commanded to do to the idols and altars they find upon entry into the land of Israel. The phrase, "*ufesilei eloheihem tegaddei'un*" is a constant refrain in the anti-idolatry passages in the Torah; see, for example, Deuteronomy 7:5, 12:3. After completing this essay, I discovered that Yair Zakovitch develops a similar idea in his most recent work, *Tzevet BeTzevet Asuyah* (Tel Aviv, 2009), 204.

8. In the version of the Abraham story in the *Book of Jubilees* cited above, Abraham burns the idols at night, which is an even more direct patterning of the events from the Gideon story.



2. The son destroys the idols/idolatrous altars of his father.
3. There is a short scene of an attempt to find out who exactly committed the vandalism, and the son is identified.
4. The son is in harm's way because of his actions, threatened with imminent death, and he emerges unharmed.
5. The story includes a mocking comment directed at the idols and their power in light of the destruction that has been visited upon them.

While the parallel to the Gideon story seems clear, our basic question remains unanswered. Why, of all stories in the Bible, did the rabbis choose to turn to the Gideon narrative in order to extract a scene and re-envision it in the life of Abraham? They did not choose to connect the youth of Moses or Joseph or David in fashioning our portrait of Abraham. What connections did they see between Abraham and Gideon that led them down this path? I believe that a careful and close reading of the Gideon narratives will illuminate this riddle and shed light on the exquisite intertextuality at the heart of this issue.

### III. GIDEON AS MODELED ON ABRAHAM IN THE TEXT

When we look carefully at the Gideon narratives in the book of Judges, it becomes apparent that many of the scenes, as well as the language used by the text, echo the life and experiences of Abraham:<sup>9</sup>

1. In contrast to all the other judges mentioned in the book, Gideon has a direct revelation from God through a *malakh*, an angel who comes and sits under a **tree** (Judges 6:11). This immediately reminds the reader of the opening of *Parashat Vayera* (Genesis 19), in which Abraham receives a delegation of angels to whom he offers hospitality while they sit under a **tree**.
2. Gideon offers food to the angel: a kid later simply termed *basar* (meat), *eifat kemaḥ matzot* (unleavened bread made of flour), and

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9. Rabbi Hayyim Angel noted many of these parallels in an essay in the December 1993 issue of *Hamevaser*, in an essay entitled “*Gideon Avinu: Comparing Gideon to Abraham.*”

- marak* (a broth) – solid food of meat and bread coupled with a liquid (Judges 6:19). This echoes the wonderful repast that Abraham and Sarah offer the angels, which consists of meat and bread made from *kemah*, and curds and milk (Genesis 19:6–8).<sup>10</sup>
3. After receiving the message that God will “be with him,” Gideon challenges the angel, asking, “And where are all of God’s miracles?” Subsequently, he plaintively asks the angel, “*Bameh oshia et Yisrael?*” “How will I deliver Israel?” (Judges 6:15). This scene is an exact replica of the one in Genesis 15, in which Abraham challenges God’s assertion that He will protect Abraham and give him the land of Israel. At that point, Abraham turns to God and asks “*Bameh eda ki irashenna?*” “How will I know that I shall inherit it?” (Genesis 15:8). A request asking God for some proof or reassurance and introduced with the term “*bameh*” only appears in these two instances in the Bible.
  4. At the close of the scene we are discussing, God promises Gideon: “*Shalom lekha, al tira,*” “It will be peaceful for you, do not be afraid” (Judges 6:23). This language is the exact one used by God in opening and closing His discussion with Abraham in the parallel scene in Genesis mentioned above: “*Al tira... ve’atta tavo el avotekha beshalom,*” “Do not be afraid...and you will go in peace to your grave” (Genesis 15:1, 15).
  5. At the end of Judges 6, after God has given Gideon a sign to prove His commitment to him and the success of his mission, Gideon asks for a second sign. He opens his request with the following words: “*Al yihar appekha bi, va’adabbera akh hapa’am, anasseh na rak hapa’am* – Do not be angry with me if I speak just once more. Let me make just one more test” (6:39). This unique formulation of terms, in a scene asking God for one more chance after a previous stage in which one had interacted with God, reminds us of the language used in Abraham’s entreaties to God after earlier stages of interaction on behalf of Sodom: “*Al*

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10. Significantly, the midrash claims that both of these events occurred on *Pesah*; see *Seder Olam* 5; *Yalkut Shimoni* 62 from *Yelammedenu*.

- na yihar laAdonai, va'adabbera akh hapa'am*," "Let not my Lord be angry with me if I speak just this one time" (Genesis 18:32).
6. Gideon is the only judge in the book who receives another name, *Yeruba'al*, in addition to his given name at birth. This unique feature, of course, dovetails nicely with the narrative arc of the life of Abraham, who receives a name change from God upon receiving the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17.
  7. Gideon and the Jewish People are faced with a major battle against a coalition of kings and nations from the surrounding areas of the land of Israel, including the forces of Midian, Amalek, and the armies of *Benei Kedem* – nations from the east, Mesopotamia (Judges 6:33). As the narrative unfolds, Gideon is instructed to pare down his forces, so that in the end he only has **three hundred soldiers** that go into battle (7:6). Gideon further divides his forces into three units, and his forces launch a strike under the cover of night. They are extremely successful in defeating the coalition of kings, causing them to flee, and finally killing their generals: "*Vayirdefu el Midian* (7:25). At the close of the battle, the reader discovers that part of the motivation for Gideon's ire and decision to go to war was that the Midianites had captured some of his half-brothers, "*ahai, benei immi*," and had put them to death (8:18–19). Upon his triumphant return, Gideon is offered the kingship by the local population, the children of Israel, which he forcefully turns down (8:22–24). This entire narrative echoes the entirety of chapter 14 in the book of Genesis: A coalition of Mesopotamian kings comes from the east and conquers both the east bank of the Jordan and the land of Canaan and the Canaanite city-states. Among those captured are Lot and his family, Lot being termed Abraham's "*ahiv*," i.e., kinsman. Abraham gathers together a small force of **318** soldiers, who rout the coalition of kings, with the text indicating that they separated into distinct units – *vayehalek* – to chase down the various enemy combatants, *vayirdefem* (Genesis 14:15). At the end of the campaign, the Canaanite kings, represented by the king of Sodom, come out to greet Abraham at "*emek shavei, hu Emek HaMelekh*" (14:17). At the same time, the king of Shalem/

Jerusalem also comes out and blesses Abraham, offering him bread and wine. This incident is understood by the rabbis in the Midrash and many modern readers as reflecting the desire of the Canaanites to crown Abraham king over all of their territories,<sup>11</sup> an offer that Abraham refuses.

8. At the conclusion of chapter 8, after the Bible informs us that Gideon had many wives and many children, we are told that he had also had a concubine, *pilegesh*, with whom he fathered a son (Judges 8:30–31). After that information is presented, Gideon dies and is described as having expired “*beseiva tova*” – at a ripe old age. A similar scene is presented at the close of Abraham’s life. The Bible tells us that Abraham took another wife, Ketura, and describes the large number of children he had with her (Genesis 25:1–4).<sup>12</sup> The text later speaks of these (or possibly other children) as *benei hapilagshim*, the children of the concubines (25:6). After this scene, we are told that Abraham passes away “*beseiva tova*” – at a ripe old age (25:8). Indeed, in the entire Torah and Prophets, the only two people described as having died *beseiva tova* are Abraham and Gideon.<sup>13</sup>
9. Finally, it is fascinating to note that in the episode in which Gideon destroys the altar of his father, the Bible chooses to report the seemingly insignificant detail that he took with him “ten men” (Judges 6:27) to do the job. Given all the other allusions to the Abraham narrative we have seen, it may be that the text here is once again playing off previous type-scenes. Abraham famously argues that Sodom should be saved if at least ten righteous people can be found in its midst, but even that small number cannot be found. In contrast, in the city of Ofra, there are at least ten

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11. See, for example, *Genesis Raba* 43:5 and Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, *Pirkei HaAvot* (Alon Shvut, 2003), 55.

12. It is interesting to note that one of those children of Abraham is Midian, the main enemy of Israel in the Gideon narrative! Moreover, the text informs us that Abraham sends these children away to the “east,” to the land of Kedem, the very territory from which the coalition of kings comes to attack the Israelites in the time of Gideon.

13. David is described as having died *beseiva tova* in 1 Chronicles 29:28, but he is not described that way in the Book of Kings or any other pre-Second Temple work.

righteous people willing to side with Gideon. In Ofra, there is a redeeming remnant that can ensure the future of the city and the future of the Israelite people at large.

#### **IV. INTERTEXTUALITY IN REVERSE**

Given the deep and rich connections between the Gideon and Abraham narratives, we are now able to resolve the original dilemma described at the outset of the essay. It appears that the rabbis of the Midrash, in their close reading of the text, recognized that the book of Judges clearly presents Gideon in the image of Abraham. The language, type-scenes, and imagery are meant to evoke in the reader the sense that this great hero is following in the footsteps of his great ancestor. Gideon, in effect, is presented as “Abraham redux.” Given this reading, I believe the rabbis engaged in simple intertextual logic. If the text compares Gideon to Abraham, that means that there is an intimate connection between the two figures. Thus, if Abraham can teach us about Gideon, then Gideon can, in turn, teach us about the figure of Abraham, especially in areas where our text is silent.

In short, intertextuality is a two-way street through which each narrative can and should shed light on the other. In this reading, the early life and youth of Abraham is illuminated by his later echo, Gideon the judge. Thus, Abraham the iconoclast is a derivative of Gideon the iconoclast, who himself is derivative of Abraham the warrior, patriarch, and man of *hesed*.

Despite what I believe is the direction in which to understand the development of this midrashic tradition, I concede that the midrashim themselves, whether in *Bereshit Raba* or elsewhere, never make the explicit connection between the figures of Abraham and Gideon. The theory we have presented has been arrived at through deduction and comparison. An explicit comparison of the two figures in a rabbinic text would, of course, strongly support the argument. Such a text has not yet been unearthed.

This lacuna leaves open the possibility that our reading of the genesis of this midrash may be incorrect. In fact, one might argue that the exact opposite of our thesis is true. Ancient oral traditions about Abraham as iconoclast existed and were well known. Thus, the book of

Judges possibly shaped its textual presentation of the Gideon narrative in light of the oral traditions received about Abraham, the great hero and founder of the Jewish People.<sup>14</sup>

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14. This possibility was raised to me by my esteemed teacher and friend, Rabbi Shalom Carmy.