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## 1 | Out of Ur

Why did the Jewish people need to exist in the first place? It's an odd question, mostly because Jews are the only ethnic group who would actually have the audacity to ask it about themselves. It is difficult to imagine Swedes, Bosnians, or Italians sitting around and pondering that question.

Jews have never been able to afford the luxury of that lack of introspection. The German liberal rabbi and theologian Leo Baeck put it this way: "The Jews have always been a minority. But a minority is compelled to think, and that is the blessing of being a minority." So, why does there need to be a Jewish people? It's quite simple: the Jews were God's last resort.

### **The Book of God's Disappointments**

For a supposedly "Jewish" book, the TANAKH (the Hebrew Bible) certainly takes its time in getting to the Jews. The first eleven chapters of the Bible have nothing to do with Jews or Judaism. There are no Jews. It is all mythical "prehistory" that tells the story of undifferentiated, pre-national, universal humanity.

These first stories are on the tip of everyone's tongue, largely because contemporary fundamentalists, by mistaking them for scientific truth, have helped make them controversial. We know the stories well: Creation, the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Ten generations later we get to Noah, and it takes another ten generations before we get to Abraham, the first Jew. The first chapters of Genesis are filled with people like Seth, Enoch, and Methuselah, tedious lists of "begats," characters whose names

occasionally appear in crossword puzzles and whose greatest achievements were living outrageously long (though curiously empty) lives of hundreds of years. We can blame those long genealogical lists for the fact that many smart and well-intentioned would-be readers of the Bible give up right around Genesis, chapter four.

The reader who looks beyond the literary tedium and mythology will detect a pattern of divine disappointment with a constantly erring humanity. God gave Adam and Eve one simple commandment: not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in the middle of the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:16). Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and they ate from the tree. God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The gates of Eden had barely slammed shut behind them when an insanely jealous Cain murdered his brother, Abel, and thereby introduced homicide into the world.

Then the wandering Cain had a son and (paradoxically, for a wanderer) founded a city (Gen. 4:17). Cain's descendants invented the rudimentary arts of civilization, such as metallurgy and the building of musical instruments. Several generations later, Lamech, overdosing on testosterone, boasted about the two wives that he had taken and the man that he had killed for the "crime" of simply wounding him (Gen. 4:23).

So we see that the introduction of the rudiments of civilization and technology did not lead to a utopia, but, rather, only accentuated the slide of humanity into greater debauchery. We are the inheritors of a world in which technology and science have utterly failed to guarantee morality and are, in fact, utterly value-free.

This is what Abraham Joshua Heschel meant when he noted that "philosophy cannot be the same since Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Certain assumptions about humanity have proved to be specious, have been smashed."<sup>1</sup> We might debate the strategic or ethical wisdom of the bombing of Hiroshima, but Heschel's point is that Auschwitz and Hiroshima were the bitter fruits of "industry-ism": creating, in the words of Holocaust scholar Franklin Littell, "technically competent barbarians."<sup>2</sup>

What about musical instruments? Aren't the arts, particularly the performing arts, weapons in the battles against barbarism? We would have hoped so, but that is not how history unfolded.

Consider the scene in the film *Schindler's List* when, in the midst of the liquidation of the Cracow ghetto, a Nazi soldier finds a piano that had belonged to a Jewish family. He sits down and starts playing it. A fellow soldier tries to identify the melody that he is playing, and in the midst of the mayhem they get into a small debate on the identity of the composer. The piano melody emerges from fingers that had, moments before, participated in human history's greatest act of mass state-sponsored violence.

Ever since the Enlightenment, modern people have entertained the conceit that there is a necessary connection between the fine arts, fine living, and respect for life. This is simply not true. For all of the grandeur of Picasso's epic painting *Guernica*, which depicts the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, the painting did nothing to stem the tide of the Holocaust that in fact was already at its nascent stage even as the paint was drying on Picasso's canvas in 1937.

We then come to one of the most bizarre and obscure passages in Genesis. Mythical divine beings (*b'nei ha-elohim*) descended to earth and copulated with earth's women (Gen. 6:1-2). Chaos erupts—a celestial visitation of the primordial chaos that preceded creation, the *tohu va-vohu* of Genesis 1, over which creation (and God) should have triumphed.

As a result of this rapacity and the blurring of boundaries between the divine and the human, God decreed that the human life span would become shortened (Gen. 6:3). God then condemned the earth and its wickedness to a massive flood, and only Noah was righteous enough to be able to save himself, his family, and two of each animal.

This should have been a new beginning, both for humanity and for God's need to create a perfect world. But Noah's first act after the Flood is to plant a vineyard; from its grapes he produced wine, and he then proceeded to get drunk. While he was in a stupor one of his sons, Ham, sexually humiliated him, while Ham's two broth-

ers, Shem and Japheth, took steps to protect their father's dignity (Gen. 9:20–24).

After the Flood, Noah's three sons became the progenitors of the seventy nations of classical antiquity (Gen. 10): Ham, the ancestor of the African peoples, as well as the Canaanites; Japheth, the ancestor of the Indo-European nations; and Shem, the ancestor of the so-called Semitic peoples, or, more accurately, those peoples who spoke Semitic languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic.

Considering the array of nations that have emerged from Noah's sons, it is clear that international diversity is part of the divine plan.<sup>3</sup> But the nations thwart the divine will by rewinding the diversity project, creating a single language and building a tower whose top would reach into the heavens.

Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard." Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world." The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built, and the Lord said, "If, as one people with one language for all, this is how they have begun to act, then nothing that they conspire to do will be out of their reach. Let us, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech." Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confounded the speech of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:1–9)

Thus, the first eleven chapters of the Bible consist of a series of God's disappointments: Adam and Eve break the only commandment entrusted to them; Cain kills Abel; generations devolve into

the depravity of Lamech's murderous rage; "sons of men" deflower human women; Noah gets drunk and opens the door to the lurid aftermath of the Flood; and the hubris of the Tower of Babel results.

### God Narrows the Focus to One Man's Family

In radical disappointment, God returned to the sons of Noah, in particular to Shem. The name Shem means precisely that: "name." It is as if the longings for a name for themselves by the builders of the Tower have, in fact, come true. Shem, along with Japheth, had refused to see his father naked. Shem had covered his father; he had understood the proper boundaries between a parent and a child. Perhaps God knew that the descendants of Shem would be those who would show the proper boundaries between themselves and the "Father God."

The ancient rabbis actually rewarded Shem in their own way, constructing for him a mythical academy of Shem and Eber, Shem's great-grandson and perhaps the eponymous ancestor of the *Ivrim* (Hebrews).<sup>4</sup> The academy of Shem and Eber was a proto-"yeshiva" in which the patriarchs were imagined to have studied the (not-yet-existent) Torah and Talmud.<sup>5</sup>

The "begats" roll on. We come to Naḥor, and then Teraḥ. At the end of Genesis 11, we find these words:

And Naḥor lived after he fathered Teraḥ a hundred and nineteen years, and fathered sons and daughters. And Teraḥ lived seventy years, and fathered Abram, Naḥor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Teraḥ; Teraḥ fathered Abram, Naḥor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father, Teraḥ in, the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldees.

The authors of Genesis knew what they were doing when they "gave" Teraḥ three sons. The biblical ear would have recognized the "three son" motif as having come from the three sons of Noah.

Naḥor is named for his grandfather, but he soon disappears from the text. Haran disappears as well. Then we find Abram, whose name will ultimately become Abraham (Gen. 17:5). With Abraham, God

“reboots” creation. The clue is already there, in Genesis 2:4: “Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created.” The word for “when they were created” is *b’hibraam*. If you rearrange the letters of *b’hibraam*, you get *b’Avraham*, or “through Abraham.”<sup>6</sup>

Creation happens, therefore, for the sake of Abraham. The creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 is the story of the creation of the natural world—the creation of “is.” Abraham ushers in a new creation story. Abraham comes into history to create the world of “ought.” In much the same way, the Ten Commandments will begin with the letter *alef*: *Anokhi Adonai eloheikha* (I am the Eternal, your God), in contrast to the *beit*, which initiates the creation story in Genesis: *Bereishit bara Elohim* (when God began to create). The Sinai moment is also a new creation—this time, of a moral world of laws.

History begins again because the so-called perfect God of our imagination has learned something valuable. God is no longer capable—if God was *ever* capable—of realizing a grand, universal scheme. Human beings, in their generic form, are not capable of realizing the divine plan. It is simply too big a project. Just as the shofar blower must blow into the narrow end of the instrument in order for there to be any sound, God must narrow down the divine vision.

God now has a new project. God will focus on one man, Shem, and his descendants: Terah, Terah’s sons, and, of them, most especially, Abraham, and then, on Abraham’s family and descendants. This time, God will not expect the entire world and broad humanity to be the agents of redemption. This time the focus is on one family, and one son of that family. That son will migrate to one land (Israel). Eventually the focus will narrow still further: to one city (Jerusalem), and to one mountain in that city (Zion), and then to one building on that mountain, the Temple. If you put them all together, they constitute both a blueprint and a vanguard for humanity.

### The Ur-Story of the Jewish People

Now that we know why God needed the Jews, we need to ask the ultimate question of Jewish geography: Where did the Jews come

from? Terah's "native land" was Ur Kasdim (Gen. 11:28) in what is now southern Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Though the exact details of its ancient history are beyond the scope of this work, that region has possessed a host of names, with each city-state and each empire applying its own label, at least temporarily, upon it. It has been (or has contained) Sumer, Akkad, Aram, Babylon, Assyria, Mesopotamia, and, ultimately, Iraq.

The region was the birthplace of Western civilization, going all the way back to the story of the Garden of Eden. "A river flows from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and become four branches . . . the name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates" (Gen. 2:10, 14, 15). Ur was located in the very vicinity of the fabled Garden of Eden. It is as if the biblical story has taken us back to Eden—and gives yet another example of God's attempt to restart human history.

By the third millennium BCE (before the common era), Ur had become one of the most powerful and cultured city-states in the region. It was a flourishing manufacturing and trade center and the site of a flowering of technology, architecture, sculpture, and literature. Archeologists digging in the ancient ruins of the region have found cookbooks, farmers' almanacs, and even pharmaceutical information. Certainly one of the major landmarks in Ur was its ziggurat (sacred tower), constructed during the reign of Ur-ammu, the founder of Ur's Third Dynasty (2111–2094 BCE).

As towers go, the tower in Ur was relatively short—only three stories high. It had monumental staircases, however, which are a reminder of the *sulam*, the staircase (or, as it is usually translated, the "ladder") that figured prominently in Jacob's famous dream (Gen. 28). It was constructed from raw bricks surrounded by baked bricks, which is remarkably similar to the biblical description of the Tower of Babel.

By 2000 BCE, the Akkadians had overrun and absorbed the Sumerians, creating history's first empire under King Sargon. A century later, peoples from north and east of Akkad destroyed the Akkadian empire. The most prominent among the successors to the



Akkadians were the Semitic Amorites from western Asia and the Elamites from the region southeast of Mesopotamia, a region corresponding approximately to modern-day Iran. The Amorites reached the apogee of their influence in Babylon and in Mari (near the modern Iraq-Syria border). Ancient Babylon's most famous and most powerful ruler was Hammurapi (or Hammurabi) of the famous ancient legal code.<sup>8</sup> When Hammurapi conquered great city-states like Ur, his forces would sack statues and carry them back to Babylon, then demand that his own craftsmen copy their artistry.

According to Sir Leonard Woolsey, who was in charge of a joint English and American archeological expedition that began its work in 1923, the very sophistication of Ur transformed our understanding of Abraham: "We must radically alter our view of the Hebrew Patriarch when we see that his earlier years were passed in such sophisticated surroundings. He was the citizen of a great city and inherited the traditions of an old and highly organized civilization."<sup>9</sup> Terah and his family were immersed in all the considerable grandeur of Ur and yet they left. Why?

### **Looking for Terah's Spiritual Road Map**

If we continue to assign Abraham's birth to the "historical" date of approximately 1800 BCE, then Terah's excursion makes perfect sense. The waves of invasion that occurred around 2000 BCE would have created lasting tremors and most likely a refugee population; the Terah clan would have been part of that mass of refugees.

Perhaps Terah was an artisan (as the later legends will imply). We can imagine that he simply didn't want to be part of Hammurapi's projects, which he might have found hopelessly derivative.<sup>10</sup> Or perhaps he had deeply personal reasons. Terah had witnessed—or, at the very least, had been alive during—the death of his son, Haran. In and of itself this may have been enough of a trauma to prompt Terah's desire to leave the place where his son had died.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Terah left Ur for religious reasons. Ur's official deities were the moon god Nanna and his family, his son, Utu (the sun), and his daughter, Inanna. Ur's famous ziggurat was dedicated to

the worship of Inanna, and at its summit was a chapel dedicated to worshipping her.

Teraḥ departed Ur for Ḥaran (not to be confused with the name of his son, Haran, which is spelled with a *hey*). The city of Ḥaran was also a site of ancient moon worship, an influence that can be seen in the names of Teraḥ's family. Teraḥ's name may be related to the word *yareah*, which means "moon." The name of Laban, the uncle and father-in-law of the patriarch, Jacob, who lived in Ḥaran, is related to the word *l'vanah*, another word for moon.

So, was Teraḥ simply moving from one moon worship place (Ur) to another (Ḥaran)? Was his departure from Ur a religious pilgrimage? Perhaps it was something even more radical. A mobile man needs a mobile god. How, Teraḥ may have wondered, can I have a religion that is based on the worship of purely physical gods that exist in material form?

Of course, Teraḥ would have had smaller, and therefore more portable, household idols. Archeologists have unearthed many examples of such deities. Two generations later, his great-grandniece Rachel will attempt to steal her father Laban's diminutive *terafim* (household gods). It would have been easy to simply pop those gods into a backpack, so to speak, and hit the road. But carrying the larger and heavier idols would have been a challenge. Was it time, therefore, for an invisible, nonphysical (and therefore eminently portable) god?

This issue of portability brings us back to the moon, which may have been at the core of Teraḥ's religious devotion. Granted, the moon is hardly portable, but it is always there when you need it. Granted, it waxes and wanes, but, then again, so does life. Why not have a god who imitates the rhythms and vicissitudes of our own lives?

Perhaps that ancient sense of moon worship still survives in the Jewish people's attachment to the moon. The Hebrew calendar is lunar. The Jews calculate the time of their major festivals by the shape of the moon. Even the fact that the moon is the smaller of the great lights of the heavens—the sun being the larger—becomes

a metaphor for Jewish history: Yes, the Jews are a small nation, but the nation's light is no less important than that of the sun.

So, it might be tempting to say that Teraḥ was simply giving up on moon worship.

But, perhaps he was making a bigger, albeit subtler point—a geo-political point—not only about Ur, but also about “Ur-ness.” Because even though the two words are spelled differently, “Ur” sounds very similar to the Hebrew word for city, “*ir*.”

### **A Critique of Urban Life?**

For slightly more than a thousand years the Jews have been largely an urban people. This is still true today: wherever they live, the overwhelming majority of Jews live in metropolitan areas. But, from the perspective of the Torah, this urban focus is “un-Jewish.”

After all, who built the first city? Cain, who also happened to be the first murderer (Genesis 4:17). Perhaps he had no choice. After all, the ground was to be cursed because of his horrific sin (Gen. 4:12)—making an agrarian lifestyle impossible. As the Catholic Church father St. Augustine wrote in *City of God*, because Cain is the founder of the earthly city, cities will forever be tainted by violence and corruption.

In the Torah, cities have a bad reputation. From ancient Babel (which is a foil for the city of Babylon) with its ego-driven tower, to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, to the city of Shechem (modern-day Nablus, on the West Bank), where Jacob's daughter Dinah is raped and where Joseph is sold into bondage, the city as a cultural institution is a problem.

That pattern continues through the rest of the Bible. The late political scientist Daniel Elazar said that the Bible “does not celebrate urban civilization in the manner of the Greeks and Romans. At the same time, it is not anti-city per se. As in all things, however, it is realistic about cities and does not romanticize them.” Elazar created a typology of cities: entirely evil with no hope for redemption (Sodom and Gomorrah); evil but with hope for redemption (Babylon); evil but repentant (Nineveh); or no need for repentance

(Jerusalem).<sup>12</sup> So, for Teraḥ and family to leave Ur is to make a statement. They are leaving the most sophisticated city of their time, complete with its dazzling high cultural achievements. It could not have been easy. In fact, it was a spiritually heroic act.

### **Teraḥ Migrates across the Fertile Crescent**

Whatever the reason for their departure from Ur, Teraḥ's family migrated northwest to Ḥaran, located at the very apex of the Fertile Crescent in contemporary Turkey, ten miles south of the Syrian border. Ḥaran was a major hub city of the Fertile Crescent. It lay at the confluence of several trade routes, some of which led north to Anatolia and others south into Canaan.

At Ḥaran God spoke to Abraham and Sarah: *Lech lecha me-artz'kha umi-molad'kha umi-beit avikha* (Go now from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house. You shall become a blessing) (Genesis 12:1-2).

Even after Abraham leaves, Teraḥ and Naḥor remain in Ḥaran. There Teraḥ will die. Ḥaran will become the "old family homestead," the place to which the patriarchs will go in order to find their wives, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. Jacob will flee to Ḥaran after he deceives his brother Esau and his father, Isaac. For Jacob, his time in Ḥaran is the very symbol of *galut* (exile). There he will sojourn with his wily uncle and father-in-law, Laban. From there he will flee with his family in a literary "dress rehearsal" for the Exodus from Egypt.

But why did Teraḥ and Naḥor remain behind in Ḥaran? Why didn't they just keep going into the land of Israel with Abraham? The biblical text does not tell us but, as shall be seen later, the midrash offers its own suggestions.

### **Abraham Becomes a Hebrew**

Abram became Abraham. But Abraham got more than simply a new name. He got a new designation, a new ethnic label. He became *ha-Ivri*, the Hebrew. The term might be related to his ancestor Eber. More likely it is related to the ancient nomadic Hab-

iru or Hapiru. It might have come from the word *ever*, “the opposite.” It might have meant “someone from the other side” of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. But the implications of what it means to be a Hebrew are far deeper than a linguistic detective story.

There was a time in American Jewish history when Jews preferred the term “Hebrew” to “Jew.” It is an artifact of the nineteenth century. American Jews—specifically, American Jews of German descent—were simultaneously eager to assimilate and to assert the respectable antiquity of their faith. “Hebrew” just seemed more respectable than “Jew.”

That preference survives in the names of venerable institutions such as Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Reform Judaism’s institution of higher learning; the old name of Reform Judaism’s congregational body, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism); as well as in the names of numerous “Hebrew” congregations in cities such as Indianapolis, Baltimore, Washington DC, and Atlanta. It wasn’t only Reform congregations and institutions that bore the name “Hebrew”; there were Conservative and even Orthodox ones as well, in addition to numerous secular organizations like the Young Men and Women’s Hebrew Association and various “Hebrew colleges” of higher learning.

Nineteenth-century American Jews preferred “Hebrew” to “Jew” because they imagined that it sounded more sophisticated. It heralded back to an ancient and honored biblical past—a past they imagined they shared with their Christian neighbors. Most important, it helped them shed the imagined historical, mythical, and linguistic baggage of the term “Jew.”

Here’s the irony: in its original historical context, “Hebrew” meant the very opposite of assimilation and acculturation. It meant the Other, the ultimate stranger, the person who was prepared and even eager to be different. The midrash suggests that *Avraham ha-ivri* means that Abraham stood on one side while the rest of the world stood on the other. Abraham would become the ultimate oppositionist.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, when the reluctant prophet Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew (*Ivri*) to the gentile sailors as he fled from his mission to Nineveh, he was not only giving his ethnic origin. He was making a sophisticated theological statement.

Jonah called himself an *Ivri*, which told them who he was. He then hastened to tell the sailors what he believed. He respectfully but firmly informed them: “I worship the LORD, the God of heaven who made both sea and land” (Jonah 1:9). In other words: “You may think that there are gods who have dominion over the sea, and over the heavens and over the land. That’s not the God I worship. No, the God I worship is an ‘all in one’ God Who rules over all of creation.”

Jonah emphasized his otherness, both ethnic and theological. This was to be the pattern of Jewish history. Judaism would become a faith that contains an elaborate social code obsessed with the twin questions: “What does it mean for us to be Others?” and “How do we translate our historical ‘otherness’ into teachings that will take care of other ‘Others?’”

### **Can We Ever, Really, Get Out of Ur?**

In Aryeh Lev Stollman’s haunting coming-of-age novel, *The Far Euphrates*, a rabbi muses with this son about the origins of the Jewish people:

Our forefathers, strangely enough—and this I believe is the real root of mankind’s problem—originally came not from Canaan, not from an earthly Jerusalem, but from the far Euphrates with its source in Eden, from an impossibly remote and primordial home. We cannot forget it, or ever find it again. I believe this fact has afflicted us to the present day.<sup>14</sup>

The Jews come from that “impossibly remote and primordial home,” a home that is simultaneously repellent and attractive. The Jews can never really get out of there—or at least, not for long. It seems that the people of Israel is always returning to Babylon.

Abraham sends his servant back to H̄aran to find a wife for Isaac:

Rebekah (Genesis 24). A generation later, Jacob will flee to there, and there he will find his wives, Rachel and Leah.

Generations later, as we just read, the prophet Jonah will rebel against God's demand that he go to Nineveh, which was then the capital of Assyria (and the modern city of Mosul). But it is also Babylon.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar will wage war against Judea, and will carry off the Judeans into Babylonian exile.

On the one hand, the experience of going into exile was brutal; that's why Psalm 137 ends with the rather unfriendly exhortation, "O daughter of Babylon, happy is the one who shatters your little ones against the rocks!" On the other hand, the Babylonian exile is also a paradigm of comfort and even acquiescence; that's why the prophet Jeremiah, in the ultimate affirmation of the validity of diaspora, could advise his fellow Judean exiles to "build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit . . . and seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper" (Jeremiah 29:6-7).

The exiles carried with them various fragments of stories, laws, and genealogies. By the time the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon and invited the Jews (literally, the Judeans) to return to the land of Israel, they had stitched those textual fragments together, and the resulting document became the Torah.

So the Torah is itself a product of Babylon. So the Babylonian Talmud, the most authoritative understanding of rabbinic law and lore. The discussions that will become the Babylonian Talmud emerged out of the great academies of Sura and Pumpeditha, which is modern-day Faluja.

Jewish history consists of countless U-turns. The Jews are constantly reversing their footsteps and going back to the old country of Babylon—which, when you get right down to it, is actually Ur, the Jewish people's "hometown." When our lives are over, the Jewish funeral liturgy affirms that our souls live on in the Garden of Eden—making the ultimate U-turn, back from wherever we were living, across the oceans and the deserts, back to the rivers.

The Jews are always “by the waters of Babylon” (Psalm 137), wondering how to “sing the LORD’s song in a strange land.” Jewish history is an ongoing music lesson through which Jews are constantly trying to figure out what it means to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land” of exile. It began with Abraham, and it has never stopped.