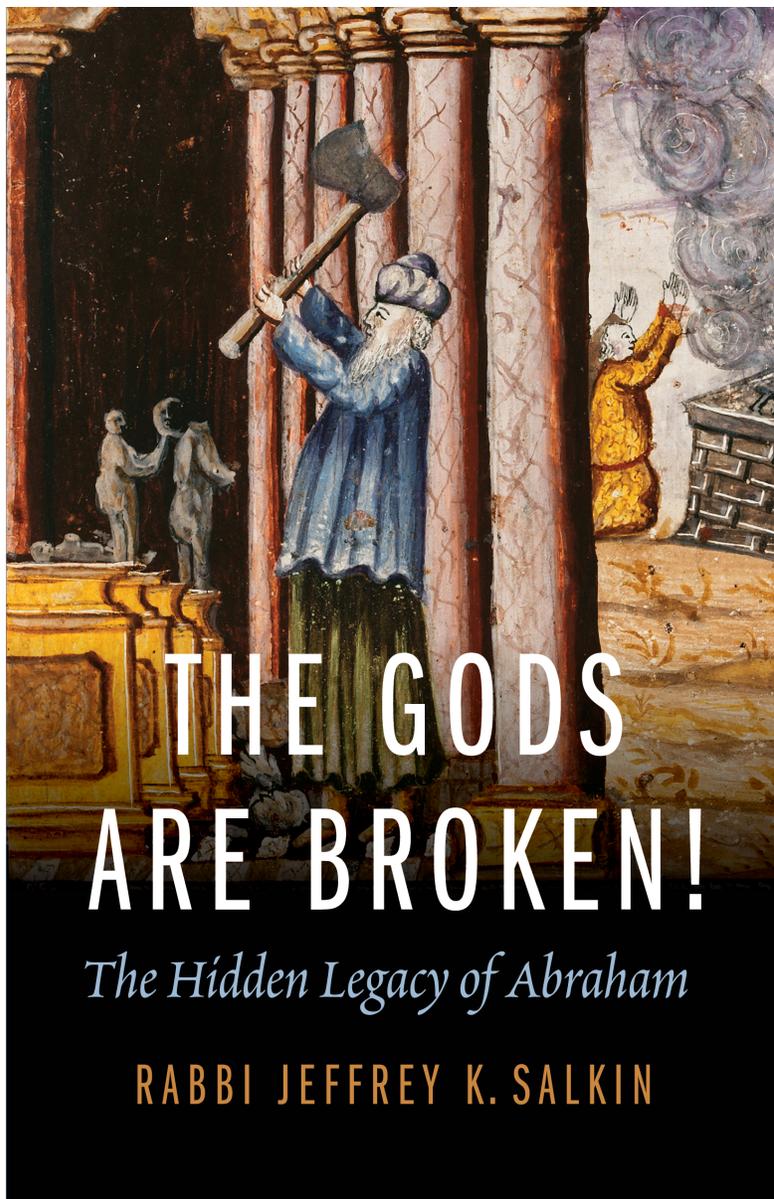


“Why Abraham? Why the Jews?” A learning resource

Based on *The Gods Are Broken! The Hidden Legacy of Abraham*  
by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin (The Jewish Publication Society)



The story of Abraham smashing his father's idols might be the most important Jewish story ever told and the key to how Jews define themselves. In a work at once deeply erudite and wonderfully accessible, Rabbi Salkin conducts readers through the life and legacy of this powerful story and explains how it has shaped Jewish consciousness.

Offering a radical view of Jewish existence, *The Gods Are Broken!* views the story of the young Abraham as the “primal trauma” of Jewish history, one critical to the development of a certain Jewish comfort with rebelliousness and one that, happening in every generation, has helped Jews develop a unique identity. Salkin shows how the story continues to reverberate through the ages, even in its connection to the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. His work—combining biblical text, archaeology, rabbinic insights, Hasidic texts (some never before translated), philosophy, history, poetry, contemporary Jewish thought, sociology, and popular culture—is nothing less than a journey through two thousand years of Jewish life and intellectual endeavor.

“Can a single story unfold the history of a nation and some of the deepest truths of tradition? Yes, if that story is the rabbis’ tale of Abraham and its interpreter is Rabbi Salkin. There is much to learn in this absorbing, important book.”—**David Wolpe, rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author of *Why Faith Matters***

“Jeffrey Salkin takes us on a magical journey through Jewish history and texts, showing us how a simple, ancient postbiblical tale is essential for our understanding of the totality of the Jewish experience. It is full of insights that will challenge how we as readers view modern society and the idolatries that are inherent in it.”—**Norman J. Cohen, rabbi and professor of Midrash at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, and author of *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves***

*The Gods Are Broken! The Hidden Legacy of Abraham* can serve as a departure point for an adult education series, book club discussion, Torah study material and sermon material.

## Chapter Outline and Study Guide (with relevant page numbers in the book)

**Introduction:** sets up the basic rationale of the book. Introduces the reader to the legend of Abraham breaking his father's idols, and what some of those implications could be.

### Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:

- What do you believe the role of religion should be in society?
- To what should contemporary Judaism say "no?" xv
- How does Islam use the classic midrash about Abraham (see texts #5 and #6 at the end of guide?) xiv-xv
- Who are some of the great rebels in Jewish history? What did they accomplish? xvi
- How have Jews refused to blend in with the rest of "undifferentiated humanity?" Does that refusal still exist? Is it still useful? xvi

**Chapter One: "Out of Ur."** Discusses biblical history before Abraham. Explores the historical context of Ur. Explores the origins of the term "Hebrew."

### Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:

- What were God's disappointments with humanity in the first chapters of Genesis? 1ff.
- What was God calling Abraham to do? Do you agree with that mission? To what extent is Abraham's life a model for contemporary Jews? 4
- In what ways was ancient Ur a "modern" city? 6-8
- Why do you think Terach left Ur? 8-9
- In what ways do contemporary Jews live up to their ancient appellation as "Hebrews?" In what ways do they not live up to that appellation? 12

**Chapter Two: "Abraham the Iconoclast."** Shows the origins of the classic Abraham legend (text #5 at end of guide). Asks critical questions about the origins of monotheism and bar mitzvah.

### Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:

- How does the author of Judith (see text #3 at the end of the guide) interpret ancient Jewish history? 18

- What do you think of the portrait of Abraham in *Jubilees* (see text #4 at the end of the guide)? 19
- How is bar (bat) mitzvah related to rebellion? How does Delmore Schwartz's poem (see text #6 at end of guide) relate to that act of rebellion? 27
- Which of Elon's visions of Abraham is most necessary today for the continuity of the Jewish people and Judaism (see text #7 at end of guide)? 29
- How do *riboni/rabbani* Jews influence contemporary Judaism (see text #7)? 31

**Chapter Three: “Which Gods Shall We Break Today?”** Unpacks the midrash and explores the implications of idolatry.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- What's wrong with worshiping innovation? 36
- How can affluence become a false god? 37
- Why do people like to surround themselves with material goods? 39
- How does Shabbat represent an act of rebellion against the world? 41
- Should there be sumptuary laws (laws restricting conspicuous consumption) in American Jewish communities today? 42
- To what extent has religion become consumer-driven? 43 ff.

**Chapter Four: “Three Paths To The Sacred.”** Describes the religious “styles” of Nimrod, Haran and Abraham.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- What is the Jewish attitude toward earthly rulers? How has that attitude played out in Jewish history? 51
- In what way is paganism "nicer" than monotheism? 54
- Is it true that the rituals that are most likely to survive are those that have been strengthened through suffering? What is your reaction to this analysis of Jewish ritual? 61
- Why do you believe that conservative churches are growing? 61

**Chapter Five: “The Primal Trauma of the Jewish People.”** Explores the idea that the midrash about Abraham shattering the idols, and its gory aftermath, “really” happened and that the memory was suppressed, only to have been restored in the midrash. Traces history of the relationship between Abraham and Lot. Traces

Abraham's "fascination" with fire." Examines the history of child sacrifice in Judaism.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- What aspects of Jewish history have we suppressed? Of American history? 66-68
- What kind of guilt feelings does Abraham have about Lot? 70-71
- How is Lot like his father Haran? 72
- What haunts Abraham? What haunts today's Jews? 76
- To what extent do family patterns play out over the generations? 78-79

**Chapter Six: "(Re)-Embracing Terach."** Examines the role of Terach in the Bible and the midrash and invites the reader to enter into a more sympathetic reading of his character. Shows how the act of spiritual rebellion has been a necessary part of Jewish history.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- What kind of man do you imagine Terach to have been? 82
- In what way is Terach's story the story of parents whose children convert to another faith? 82
- Why did Terach remain in the city of Haran? 83
- What paralyzes people when they are on a spiritual journey? 83
- What is the difference between the two notions of "dwelling" – *gur* and *yashav*? 83-85
- To what extent is contemporary Judaism the product of people who rebelled against their parents? 88
- What lessons can be learned from the stories of Gershom Scholem, Franz Kafka and Franz Rosenzweig? 88
- When does honoring one's parents interfere with one's spiritual journey? 94

**Chapter Seven. ""From Broken Idols To Broken Tablets."** Traces the image of shattering to the story of the Golden Calf. Demonstrates that the rabbinic tradition has sometimes found the breaking of the tablets to be meritorious.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- What was wrong with the building of the Golden Calf? 101
- What do you think of the explanations for Moses breaking the tablets? 103

- How can contemporary Jews participate in the task of *tikkun ha-mikra*? 105
- To what extent was the Shoah like the image of the broken tablets? What, in fact, had been broken? 106
- When does the Torah itself become an idol? 109ff.

**Chapter Eight. “The Sound of Broken Glass.”** Examines the history of the Jews as an iconoclastic people, and suggests that this might be one under-explored aspect of anti-Semitism.

**Questions for discussion/reflection/sermon sparks:**

- How does the destruction of the Egyptian gods relate to Pesach? 116-117
- What is the source of Haman’s Jew-hatred? To what extent is that kind of Jew-hatred still in existence today? 119
- To what does the Israeli poet U.Z. Greenberg (see text # 8 at end of guide) attribute anti-Semitism? What do you think of his notions? 121-122
- To what extent do you think that Father Flannery is correct that anti-Semitism is a disguised fear of Christ? 123
- Does anti-Semitism emerge from anger at the Jews for putting forth a difficult moral and spiritual ideal? 124ff.
- What are some examples of contemporary idolatry? 127ff.
- Is Amichai right – that the act of breaking idols sometimes becomes a “new religion?” (see text #9 at the end of the guide)

## Text Sheet

*These are the generations of Terach: Terach fathered Avram, Nachor, and Haran. Haran fathered Lot. And Haran died at p'nei/in the lifetime of Terach, his father, in the land of his birth, in Ur Kasdim. (Genesis 11:27-28)*

### 1. Koran, Sura 21: 51-71

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 [Terach] 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!"

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 ax and chopped the idols to pieces—all except the largest idol, the chief god of the people. And he tied the ax to the hand of that idol.

### 2. Rumi (Sufi poet)

I have carved idols enough to beguile every person; now I am drunk with Abraham; I am sated with Azar [Terach]

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!"

### 3. *Judith 5: 6-9*

This people, the Jews, is descended from the Chaldeans. At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they would not follow the gods of their fathers who were in Chaldea. For they had left the ways of their ancestors, and they worshiped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know; hence, the Chaldeans drove them out from the presence of their gods and they fled to Mesopotamia, and lived there for a long time. Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan.

### 4. *Jubilees 11, 12:12-15*

The child Abraham began to realize the errors of the land—that everyone was going astray after graven images and after impurity. Abraham separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him. And he began to pray to the Creator of all so that He might save him from the errors of mankind.

It came to pass that Abraham said to his father, "Oh father," and he said, "Yes, my son?"

Abraham asked: "What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? There is no spirit in them, because they are mute, and they are an error of the mind."

His father said to him, "I also know that, my son, but what shall I do to the people who have ordered me to serve before the idols? If I speak to them truthfully, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to the idols, so that they might worship them and praise them."

Abraham arose in the middle of the night and burnt down the house of idols and torched everything in the house, and no one knew.

Then the people awakened and tried to save their gods from the flames. Haran hurried to rescue the gods, and the fire burned him up and he died in Ur Kasdim [Ur of the Chaldeans] while his father Terach was still alive, and Terach buried him. Then Terach left Ur Kasdim with all his sons to head for Canaan.

### 5. *Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 38:13*

"And Haran died *al p'nei* his father Terach." (Genesis 11:28)

Rabbi Hiyya, the grandson of Rabbi Ada of Yaffo taught:

Terach was a maker of images. One day, he went to another place and appointed

Abraham to sell instead of him.

A man came to him and wanted to buy an idol.

Abraham asked him: “What kind of god do you wish to buy? How old are you?”

The man answered: “Fifty or sixty years old.”

Abraham said: “Woe to a man who is that old, yet bows down before this thing which was made only today.”

The man was ashamed and left.

Then an old woman came, carrying a bowl of fine flour and said: “Here, offer it to the gods.”

At that, Abraham seized a stick, smashed all the images, and placed the stick in the hand of the biggest of them.

When his father came, he asked: “Who did this to the gods?”

Abraham answered: “Would I hide anything from my father? A woman came with a bowl of fine flour and said: ‘Here, offer it up to them.’ When I offered it, one god said, ‘I will eat first,’ and another said, ‘No, I will eat first.’ Then the biggest of them rose up and smashed all the others.”

His father replied: “Are you making sport of me? They cannot do anything!”

Abraham answered: “You say they cannot. Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying!”

Terach took Abraham to the king, Nimrod.

Nimrod said to Abraham: “Let us worship fire.”

Abraham: “Let’s rather bow down to water, that quenches fire.”

Nimrod: “Very well, bow down to water.”

Abraham: “Let’s rather bow down to a cloud, that is filled with water.”

Nimrod: “Then bow down to a cloud.”

Abraham: “Perhaps I should bow down to the wind, which scatters the cloud.”

Nimrod: “Then bow down to the wind.”

Nimrod then said: "You are playing word games with me. I bow down to nothing but fire, and I am about to cast you into the midst of it -- let the God to whom you bow down come and save you!"

Haran, Abraham's brother, was standing there split [in his thinking].

If Abraham is victorious, he thought, I will say that I am on Abraham's side.

Should Nimrod win, I will say that I am on Nimrod's side.

So, after Abraham went down into the open fire and was saved, Haran was asked, "Whose side are you on?" he replied, "Abraham's."

He was immediately seized and thrown into the fire. His inward parts were burnt. He died in the presence of his father, as is said, "Haran died in the presence of his father Terach" (Gen. 11:28)

### ***6. Abraham by Delmore Schwartz***

I was a mere boy in a stone-cutter's shop  
When, early one evening, my raised hand  
Was halted and the soundless voice said:  
"Depart from your father and your country  
And the things to which you are accustomed.  
Go now into a country unknown and strange  
I will make of your children a great nation.  
Your generations will haunt every generation of all the nations,  
They will be like the stars at midnight, like the sand of the sea."  
Then I looked up at the infinite sky,  
Star-pointing and silent, and it was then, on that evening, that I  
Became a man: that evening of my manhood's birthday.

### ***7. Ari Elon, From Jerusalem To The Edge of Heaven (JPS)***

The monotheists among us see in our Avram the young and brave inventor of monotheism.

The rebels among us see in him the forefather of all young rebels and idol-breakers.

The revolutionaries among us see in him the young man that brought to the world the idea of building a new world.

The yeshiva boys among us see in him someone who left the vanities of this world for a life of learning Torah in the legendary beit midrash [study house, yeshiva] of Shem and Eber.

And the chalutzim [Israeli pioneers] among us see in him the first young Zionist who left his parents' home, a promising career and a homeland, and went to redeem with his own ten fingers the promised land.

Every so often I succeed in putting together a puzzle from the shards of my shattered Gods. The shards help me know myself and help me cope with my identity as a person and as a Jew. One of the most blessed of insights is that there is life after death – there is rich creative life after the death of my childhood God, and there is more depth and inspiration for the Torah and the other sources. There is much richness in a broken God; it is possible to make of Him endless beautiful and unexpected puzzles. There is no more complete God than a broken God.

*(Rabbani Jew vs. Ribboni Jew)*

The *ribboni* person is master of himself or herself. She has no other master in her world, and is not the master of the world or of other people.

The *ribboni* person cannot relate to this Torah as a source of authority, for this person is the source of authority for him or herself. So the *ribboni* person can approach the classical sources with great freedom and can claim them as her own. She can learn from them much about herself, her people, her collective memories; he can learn much about his passions, his repressed urges, etc. The *ribboni* finds in these sources an endless field of organic symbols. For the *ribbanim*, the Torah of Israel is only a source of inspiration.

On the day that the *ribboni* leadership succeeds in wrestling the Torah of Israel from the *rabbanim*, then each and every Jew will know the Torah has seventy faces. Seventy thousand myriads. From that day on, every single Jew will begin to treat the sources of his and her culture as private property. Then, for the first time, the Jews will begin to be a free people on their own land.

The *ribboni* Abraham, like his predecessors, rebelled against the tradition of his fathers...He went out of his homeland, his father's house, to the land shown to him by the god who spoke from within him. Abraham himself is the god who spoke from within him. The lord of himself. The master of himself. That self-direction that he seeks is his divinity. He broke the rabbinic God, the one external to him, into smithereens.

**8. Uri Zvi Greenberg, "Song of the Race of Abraham"**

...From the day that we broke the idols of wood and stone  
And we taught that there was a God Who created all that was created...  
And from the day of the pagans of the generation of Abraham  
Until the generation of the Crusaders  
Received from us knowledge of the One God  
Who cannot be imagined with the likeness of a body  
We never knew refuge from the anger of the nations  
Their blood cries out to their primordial gods  
They return to the gods of their primordial paths  
Covered with hyssop,  
And they bring our blood to them like a new sacrifice.

**9. Yehuda Amichai, Open Closed Open**

We are all children of Abraham  
But we are also the grandchildren of Terach  
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.