

Vayera

Three times daily, we speak of *elohei Avraham* – the “God of Abraham.” Abraham is featured in four of the Torah portions in Genesis: *Noah*, *Lech Lecha*, *Vayera*, and *Chayei Sarah*. We learn about the bulk of Abraham’s life in *Lech Lecha* and *Vayera*. What I’d like to do with you today is share with you the key information about Abraham and his life so that you can more thoroughly know about the founder of our religion, Judaism. I will refer to Abraham throughout as Abraham even though he is know as Avram for a significant portion of his life.

Abraham lived 175 years, but the portion of his life that we learn about in the Torah is primarily from the age of 75 (12:4) until 100 (21:5). Born in Babylonia, he traveled with his father Terah to the Land of Canaan. Terah was unable to continue the journey, and Abraham continued onward with his wife and nephew. The places in the land of Canaan that Abraham inhabited were Beth El, the Negev, Hebron, Gerar, the land of Moriah, and Beer-Sheba.

God made a promise to Abraham, which contained two components: 1) That he would have offspring as numerous as the sands of the sea and 2) that he would inherit the land of Canaan. By the close of his life, Abraham made headway toward the fulfillment of both of these promises. For most of his life, Abraham was a sojourner in the Land, moving from place to place even leaving the Land for periods of time. He was also without child for a significant portion of the 25 years that are covered in the Torah. These are two important points that must be recalled when we recite the words *elohei Avraham*. The promises that God made to Abraham were unfulfilled for most of the period that we follow his life. Right there, we can learn an abundant amount about religion. Religion is about promises and it’s about fulfillment, but the time scheme for the fulfillment of promises is significantly longer than any of us is usually prepared to endure.

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The hallmarks of Abraham remain with us to this day: trust, yearning, and endurance. These are the three qualities that we seek to embody every time that we recite the words *elohei Avraham*.

How Abraham came to father offspring is better known than the process by which he gained a foothold in the Land of Canaan. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael when Abraham was 86 years old, ten years into his sojourn in Canaan. Sarah gave birth to Isaac when Abraham was 100. Both Ishmael and Isaac fulfill some part of Abraham's legacy, but the primary recipient of Abraham's covenant with God is Isaac.

The phrase that recurs throughout the narratives about Abraham is and Abraham "moved his tent." The tent is a portable home and is conducive to an unsettled life. Despite God's promise, Abraham spent most of his sojourn in the Land as a wanderer. The first moment when Abraham truly establishes a foothold is during his first encounter with Abimelech, which occurs in this week's *parsha Vayera*. In explaining to Abimelech why he told him that Sarah was his sister not his wife, Abraham says, "God made me wander from my father's house" (20:13). Wandering has been the predominant experience for Abraham in the Land.

Abimelech, however, says to him, "Here, my land is before you; settle wherever you please" (v. 15). While this can hardly be considered independence, it is the first time that Abraham has the opportunity to cease his wandering.

The next time, the Torah mentions Abimelech, it is in the context of the theft of a "well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized" (21:25). This incident occurs after the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael and before the binding of Isaac. It highlights that while Abraham has "settled" in the Land, he suffers from insecurity. Abraham's response, however, is

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remarkable. Rather than displaying obeisance to Abimelech, he responds to him as an equal. He overlooks Abimelech's feigned ignorance of the theft of Abraham's wells.

The Torah states, "Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a pact" (v. 27). He then gives a gift to Abimelech in spite of the discrepancy in power between them, in which Abraham is the weaker party. Abraham stands by the truth of the work of his hands, which dug the wells, stating, "You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well" (v. 30). The Torah continues, "[Abraham] planted a tamarisk at Beer-Sheba, and invoked there the name of the Lord...And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time" (v. 34)

The final act of securing a foothold in the land for Abraham is his purchase of the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron from the Hittites, which he will use to bury his deceased wife Sarah. The Hittites insist on giving it to him free, but showing the same streak of independence that compelled him to reject the possessions gained by war offered to him by the King of Sodom after the rescue of Lot, Abraham rejects their offer and insists on paying.

David Ben Gurion said, "The Bible is our mandate." Ben Gurion was not a religious Jew, but he was devoted to the Bible. He knew about international law and understood the importance of the British Mandate, which enabled Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel during the 1920s and, to a lesser extent, in the 1930s. Nonetheless, Ben-Gurion also recognized that without the Bible, the Jewish people's claim to the Land of Israel was meaningless.

What I have tried to guide you through today is the process by which Abraham enjoyed the fulfillment of the second part of God's promise to him – that he would inherit the Land of Canaan. Indeed, that fulfillment was a promise. For most of his life, Abraham wandered. Nonetheless, the definition of God is a being who is good to His word.

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As Jews – as supporters of Israel – as Zionists – we should recall Ben Gurion’s words and familiarize ourselves with the process by which the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob came to realize the promises of the Holy One Blessed Be He. We do not see the Bible as a substitute for international law, but it is the cornerstone of why international law becomes relevant at all.

American Jews – who are largely secular – are often uncomfortable talking about religion in the public space, but that needs to change. We need to take ownership of our Bible and learn its details not just its broad contours. With that in mind, I provided you today as a dvar a detailed presentation of how Abraham came to enjoy the realization of God’s promise that he would inherit the Land of Israel.

Clearly, such knowledge is important in discussions with evangelical Christians, for whom the Bible is God’s word, but it is also important for the general public. While not everything in the Bible may be historically verifiable, it is a series of books that does capture the reality of at least the first millennium before the Common Era and parts of the second millennium as well.

We should never discount the importance of the narratives about Abraham and his inheritance of the Land. As we learn about Isaac and Jacob, I will be sure to point out other aspects of those narratives that speak to this important promise that God made to the Jewish people, one that He has kept and will keep for all time.