What did Avraham Avinu stand for?

What were the core principles he instituted that formed the authentic blueprint for Judaism and the spiritual mission of the Jewish people?

Let us examine this question from three different vantage points:

1. **Spiritual.** Avraham is the consummate ambassador of faith and man of G-d. We are first introduced to him as G-d commands him to leave his country, his land of birth and his father’s house, and we are privy to many more Divine commands and conversations throughout his life.

   We see a man deeply connected to G-d, commanded by G-d and absolutely obedient to Him. Nowhere is this obedience clearer than in the perplexing command to sacrifice his beloved son Yitzchak, an impossible task in itself, yet made even more challenging by G-d’s earlier promise that Yitzchak would be the forebear of a great nation. Nevertheless, Avraham does not deviate in his adherence to what he perceives as the will of Heaven. A man of incomparable religious fervor, dedication and commitment.

2. **National.** Avraham is also the epitome of nationalism. His entire life revolves around journeying to the specific land G-d showed him, the Land of Canaan, settling in different parts of that Land and being repeatedly promised that G-d will bless him with a גּוֹי גָּדוֹל, a great people, with a particular task, in this very Land. Nowhere is this nationalist impulse clearer than in his desire to save his errant nephew Lot. As soon as he hears Lot has been taken captive, Avraham springs into action, takes up arms and is prepared to fight against regional powers to do whatever it takes to rescue him.

   Although not commanded by G-d, he is prepared to sacrifice everything – his life and the lives of his followers – to save one lost soul. All for one [member of the tribe] and one for all.

3. **Universal.** Avraham is also the humanist par excellence. His הַכְנָסַת אוֹרְהִים, his hospitality, is unmatched. In great pain after his circumcision, he runs to welcome pagan guests – later to be revealed as angels – into his home and treats them like noblemen. Although these people were the ideological antithesis of everything he stood for – he was teaching monotheism and belief in a purposeful and personal G-d and they were espousing paganism and idol worship and the belief in many impersonal gods – he had no hesitation in welcoming them into his home.

   He washed the dust of idolatry off their feet and found a way to bridge the boundaries and sit together. Furthermore, when G-d informed him of His plan to destroy Sodom, Avraham did everything in his power to prevent it. Although their actions were abhorrent, he loved all of humanity and impassioned G-d not to destroy His creatures.

   The more Avraham searched for G-d, the more he found his fellow man.

   So Avraham Avinu is a blend of all three – the staunch advocate of faith, the proud nationalist, and the ardent humanist devoted to all people created in the image of G-d.

In his own groundbreaking way, he was able to blend the religious, the national and the universal into one complete whole. The founder of the Jewish faith laid the foundations that make Judaism so wholesome, meaningful and life-enhancing.

Unsurprisingly, it is precisely these three elements at the core of Jewish being that Rav Kook writes about when describing the ideological battles raging in the early 1900s in pre-State Palestine. He described the three ideological camps in the Jewish world – the religious, the nationalist and the universalist (perhaps religious parties, right-wing parties and left-wing parties in today’s parlance).

Rav Kook explains how each one represents part of the whole truth of what Judaism is about and that a complete understanding of the Jewish mission must incorporate all three weaved into one seamless whole.

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Of course, Jewish life is rooted in our belief in G-d and His Torah. Without belief in G-d and acceptance of the moral and spiritual laws revealed at Sinai, we miss the mark of Jewish destiny. It defines who we are and what G-d wants from us. At the same time, the G-dliness revealed to Avraham very clearly and profoundly includes both a national and a universal ethos.

The principle of Am Yisrael, our collective responsibility and destiny, is critical to the Jewish story.

Yes, G-d revealed himself to one man, who became the founder of a singular people given a particular land and a distinct set of laws to fulfill their purpose in this world.

Yes, Jewish particularism and peoplehood is at the heart of Judaism. One cannot separate Judaism from the Jewish people.

Yet at the same time, G-d demanded that Avraham be a source of blessing to all people. Jews are part of the family of nations because G-d wants us to be a source of spiritual blessing and moral light to all. To love and respect all those created in the image of G-d and be a proactive force in a universal mission for the greater good of all of humanity.

Hence there is no comprehensive definition of Judaism without integrating all three elements into one harmonious whole.

Interestingly, these same three prisms shape the way exponents of different ideologies tend to relate to the story of Chanukah.

Religious people tend to interpret Chanukah exclusively as a fight for the primacy of Torah and Mesorah, our Jewish beliefs and traditions. People from a national-religious background tend to agree with this basic premise but laud the additional component of the political and military leadership role adopted by the Hasmoneans and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty.\(^3\)

People from the nationalist camp view the Hasmoneans as the military-oriented Maccabees who stood up to defend their people and fight for independence, while liberals read the story as a fight for religious tolerance. The oppressive Hellenist regime was discriminating against the Jews and so they had the right to fight for their freedom.

Whose reading of history is correct? Undoubtedly, all have an element of truth. All capture a part of what the Chanukah legacy is and how the flames of the rekindled Menorah represent the contrasting yet complementary torches of our collective Jewish mission.

Is there anyone in our generation who has embodied these three Abrahamic values more than Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l?\(^3\)

Is there anyone else who has integrated so holistically a deep and unwavering commitment to Jewish faith and Torah while simultaneously being a great lover of the Jewish people (and a great believer in every individual Jew), and a defender of Israel while conveying Torah values in the broadest, most inspiring, universal and engaging way?

Rabbi Sacks had the Avraham-like ability to uplift the hearts and minds of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs and political affiliations. He was a giant of a man encapsulating – as only he could – the three-pronged essence of Judaism – spiritual, national and universal.

We are therefore humbled and honored to dedicate our HaMizrachi Chanukah Edition to the life, teachings and legacy of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l, who made a beautiful and vibrant Judaism so accessible and inspiring for us all.

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1 See Rashi, Bereishit 18:4.
2 See Orot HaTechiya, 18.
3 Indeed, the Rambam (Laws of Chanukah, 1:1) mentions both these achievements of the Hasmoneans. Salvation from the Greek regime at the time reversed the oppressive decree against Torah observance and restored Jewish sovereignty for over 200 years until the destruction of the Second Temple.

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