

Be thoughtful of the stranger, eyes for the blind, feet to the lame, care-takers of the poor.

Loving kindness should extend to animals as well.

In this Midrash, Abraham is working in an idol shop in the city of Ur. The Holy One mentioned at the beginning is God. Abraham and his wife Sarah turn from idol worship and teach others what they know about the one God.

The Holy One had for so long refused to look at the world. Now, hearing these words, he turned with interest toward the world, sending his gaze over Aram, over the city of Ur, and focusing on the idol shop. The angels, following his gaze, looked with him and watched Abraham rise from his stool to greet a customer.

"Peace be yours, Abraham," said the customer.

"And yours as well, my friend," Abraham said. "Is your planting over? Your cucumbers, are they in the ground?"

"They are," the farmer said. "I have done my part, but the goddess Asherah is not able to do hers."

"And why is that?" Abraham asked.

"The wind that came last night," the farmer said. "It knocked her down. She lies in pieces, strewn across my field."

"It is a sad story," Abraham said.

It was an odd response and the farmer looked at him. "I did not come for your sympathy, Abraham," he said. "I came for a new goddess."

"To keep the crows away?" Abraham said.

The farmer again looked at him strangely. "To worship, so she will grant me a good crop," he said.

Abraham went to the Asherahs lined up against the wall.

"Which of these would you like?"

The farmer pointed. "That one—"

"It was made this morning," Abraham said.

"This morning, last week, I don't care—" the farmer said, losing patience.

"My friend," Abraham said. "You have been growing cucumbers for fifty years. Woe to you, if you think this day-old idol can help you more than your own two hands."

The farmer became red in the face and left, and as he went out, Plonit the widow came in shaking her head.

"What is this world coming to?" she said. "While I was at the public baths, a thief entered my house and stole my god of protection. Give me a new one, Abraham."

Story of
Abraham

"Good Plonit," Abraham said, "if the god couldn't protect itself from thieves, how can it protect you?"

Plonit was silent.

"Your god is made of clay," Abraham said. "It has a mouth but cannot speak, feet that cannot move, eyes that do not see. It is a dead thing. How can it help you?"

"There are gods," Plonit said. "A person must appeal to them, rely on them—"

"There is only one God," Abraham said. "One God who made heaven and earth and everything in between."

The words entered Plonit's heart. She stood looking at him. "Speak to me of your God," she said after a moment.

Abraham told her of his thoughts, the understanding that had come to him. When he was through speaking, the widow Plonit left without an idol. Watching her go, Abraham saw his parents returning up the lane. Sarah, he knew, had gone home to their tent at the edge of the city. Quickly, Abraham took a stick and went about the shop smashing idols. He left one standing, a large Baal, and put the stick in its hand.

When Terah and Emtelai entered, they were speechless. They stood looking at the floor, covered from end to end with broken idol parts—noses, limbs, chests, arms, heads.

"What is this?" Terah said.

Abraham nodded toward the standing Baal. "He did it," he said. "The idols began arguing about who was the most powerful. To show them who he was, he took a stick and smashed them to bits."

His parents glared at him.

"You fool in the world!" Terah said. "Idols can't argue. They can't hold sticks!"

"They can't do anything," Emtelai said.

"Father, Mother," Abraham said. "Do your ears hear what your mouth is saying?"

The silence that filled the room indicated that Terah and Emtelai had heard. Suddenly, they understood what Abraham and Sarah had been telling them about the one God.

The attention of heaven remained on Ur as Terah and Emtelai closed the idol shop, as the widow Plonit sealed up her home, and as all three went to help Abraham and Sarah in their tent at the edge of the city.

And what was this tent? A place known to travelers as the Tent of the Servants of God. It was a shelter where visitors arriving thirsty and dusty from the road could receive food and water. When the visitors were refreshed and said, "Thank you," a conversation opened up. And Abraham and Sarah began teaching about God.

"Do not thank us, thank God," they said. "The bread and water are his, he made them."

"How do you know this?"

seal to close

"The garment you wear, who made it?" they said. "A weaver, of course."

"How do you know this?" they said.

The travelers, understanding their meaning, said nothing.

"Open your eyes and you will see for yourself," they said.

"Study the creatures, the fields and streams, the mountains and valleys, the woods and forests. They will help you see God. Ask the birds of the air, they will tell you. The plants of the earth, they will teach you."

The travelers, listening with interest, asked, "How do we thank him?"

"The food on your table comes from his earth. Thank him when you sit down to eat."

"Where is he, to hear us?"

"He is everywhere."

"No god can be everywhere."

"This God, the one God in heaven, can."

It was a hard thought. The travelers set it aside.

"What does he want of us?"

"He wants you to stop worshipping idols and to worship only him."

"The way we serve the idols, by animal sacrifice?"

"That is just a ceremony. He prefers another way."

"Which is?"

"Your actions. You worship him by being good."

"How does that serve him?"

"He wants to be in the world with us."

"If he can do all that you say, why can't he come down?"

"Our good deeds form an invisible ladder to heaven. On it, we rise up to meet him. On it, he comes down to meet us."

So it went, and so it went.

The amber rays of Glory sparkled merrily as the Holy One said to the angels, "These two are making me known on earth."

Further Reading

Angels, Prophets, Rabbis, and Kings from the Stories of the Jewish People. José Patterson. A collection of stories in the Bible, traditional Jewish legends from the earliest times, stories of the rabbis, and tales from the communities of medieval Europe.

Menorahs, Mezuzas, and Other Jewish Symbols. Miriam Chaikin. This book explains the history of many Jewish symbols and how they are used in holiday celebrations.

Miriam's Well: Stories About Women in the Bible. Alice Bach and J. Cheryl Exum. Thirteen stories give voices to some remarkable women.