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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And the Lord said: shall I hide from Abraham that which I am doing; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him? For I have known of him that he will command his children and his household after him, that they will keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice…” (Bereishith 18:17-19).

Rabbi Hayyim Angel has pointed out that Abraham was not the first monotheist. Adam and Eve, Hanokh, Noah and others also recognized one God. Abraham was not the first “Jew,” since there were no Jews (Israelites) until generations later. Rather, Abraham’s distinction is that he is the first figure in the Bible to be identified as a teacher. God describes him as one who conveys the ideals of righteousness and justice to his family and followers.

In Jewish tradition, Abraham is generally known as Avraham Avinu, Abraham our father. He and Sarah—through Isaac, Jacob and succeeding generations—were the founders of the extended family that ultimately became the people of Israel. Abraham’s role was not merely as the biological progenitor of the people but as their teacher of righteousness and justice.

Over the centuries, all converts to Judaism have been designated as children of Abraham. They have become members of Abraham’s family. In his famous letter to the proselyte Obadia, Maimonides assured the convert that he was a son of Abraham, as fully Jewish and fully a member of the Jewish family as any Jew born into the Jewish People.

While Abraham is known as Avraham Avinu, Moses is known as Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our rabbi. Abraham is the father of our People; Moses is the conveyer of Torah to our People. Abraham is the founder of our family; Moses is the founding rabbi of our religion.

All Jews are members of Abraham’s family by birth or conversion. All Jews are bound by the religious teachings of Moses as reflected in Torah and halakha. Jewish identity sometimes seems confusing because it entails both Abraham our father and Moses our rabbi.

Ultimately, though, tradition links our identity to our father Abraham. Even Jews who do not observe the Torah of Moses, or even those who repudiate it, are still Jewish by virtue of being in the family of Abraham. All Jews—religious or not—are members of the same family even if they strongly disagree with each other or even dislike each other.

It is significant that converts are named as children of Abraham, not Moses. Although converts are expected to study and observe Torah, their conversion is actually their way of joining the family of our

People.

Abraham our father taught us “to keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice.” Generations later, Moses our rabbi taught us the Torah, expanding on the foundations set by Abraham. We are blessed to be heirs of spiritual greatness of the highest order.