



CCAR JOURNAL

A REFORM JEWISH QUARTERLY

SPRING 2000

Published by the Central Conference
of American Rabbis

Why God Doesn't Try to Talk to Us Directly Anymore

A Modern Midrash

Mark Kaiserman

Monday Evening

"Yes, Lot," said Abe to his nephew on his state-of-the-art 900-megahertz two-line cordless phone. "Times have been rough for me, too, since we split the business." ("Not!" thought Abe, who was having his best year ever.) "It must be hard since your wife's..." he searched for the right word, "untimely passing to go it alone. But you have your girls.... Right.... Right.... I know exactly what you mean."

~~-Beep-~~

"Oh, darn it. It's the call waiting," muttered Abraham. "Let me see who it is."

He looked down at the small caller ID box. "Private" was all the screen revealed.

"I better take it," he sighed. "It's probably Hagar calling to complain about my being late with Manny's tuition. I'll talk to you later, *est.* Bye."

Abe clicked the flash button to pick up the other call.

"Hello?"

Abraham.

"Here I am."

This is God. Take your...

"Who is it? Rod?"

No. This is God. I have a test for you. Take your...

"Well, when I want a religious test, buddy, I'll call my rabbi.

Okay?"

Mark Kaiserman (C 97) is a rabbi at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas.

Abe clicked off the line and angrily returned the phone to the cradle. At least it got him off the phone with Lot. His nephew could rub salt on his wounds all night.

"I wonder what religious group that was?" Abe thought as he flipped on the television. "I suppose I could have been nicer," he admitted to himself as the ESPN SportsCenter logo flashed on. "But some things just can't wait."

He watched the baseball highlights leading off the show, but the brief conversation replayed in his head. "There was something familiar about the whole thing," he mused. "Oh, well." The evening's events quickly left his mind as the Mets-Dodgers recap came on screen.

Tuesday Morning

"Morning, Eli!" Abraham called, mid-slurp of his coffee.

"Morning, Boss!" Eli replied. Eliezer had been Abe's assistant for as long as he could remember. Abe could never have run the business without him.

"Busy this morning?" Abe asked.

"Nah," said Eli, "just the usual."

One of their trucks rolled into the garage. It was blue with large white letters. Abraham and Nephew Plumbing. Abe hadn't changed the name after buying Lot out of the business several years back. It was then already a brand name around Hoboken. The largest plumbing firm on this side of the Hudson. If people asked, Abe told them that Eliezer was his nephew.

Abraham walked through the hallway as he finished his coffee, greeting with a warm hello each staff person whom he passed. His secretary, Keturah, was talking into her phone headset as he approached his office. She gave a broad smile and friendly wave. He responded with a simple nod. After his affair with his secretary Hagar many years ago, Abe was wary about being too friendly anymore. Sarah was so suspicious, and he didn't want that *tzuris* all over again.

"There are some faxes on your desk," Keturah told him as he dropped into his office chair.

Abe picked up the pile of papers. Part orders. Job contracts. Nothing that couldn't wait. Except the last one, which caught his eye. It consisted of only one sentence. He stopped to read it.

Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice there on the heights that I will show you.

Abe dropped the paper. "What the heck is this?" He quickly rifled through the other papers. "Keturah!" he yelled.

His secretary came running in. "Yes, sir?"

"Where is the cover page for this fax?" he demanded, shaking the paper.

"Th-There was none," Keturah stammered. "It was there by itself this morning."

Abraham looked at the fax more carefully. There was no header on the top indicating a fax number. Then he noticed for the first time three more letters: *G-O-D*.

"Eliezer, get in here!" Abe barked into the phone intercom.

"What do you make of this?" he asked his trusted assistant a few moments later, thrusting the fax into his hands.

"Sounds like a threat. Against Isaac," Eli responded with some doubt. "From a religious nut."

"Just what I thought. This psycho called me at home last night, but I hung up on him."

"Where's Moriah?" asked Keturah.

"I think it's in Pennsylvania," said Eli.

"That's Bethlehem," Abe corrected him.

"Who would want to hurt Isaac?" Eli asked.

"I don't know. Maybe one of those upstart plumbing companies is trying to scare me. Maybe . . . wait a minute. *G-O-D* . . . Hmmm. . . . You know that new firm across town, Delancy Plumbing?"

"Sure," said Eliezer. "They think they are God's gift to plumbing. Gary Delancy and his brother Otto . . . Oh! I get it. Gary Otto Delancy. *G-O-D*. That's sick."

"Exactly," said Abe, calming down for the first time. "Well, no one should play hardball with me and expect me to give in. Four Kings Plumbing learned that the hard way a few years ago and so will this *G-O-D*. See about getting Isaac some protection."

Eliezer nodded and left the room.

Abe shook his head in disbelief. Hurt Isaac. He wouldn't let it happen. By anyone. That had been his mistake thirteen years ago. Just after Isaac was born, when Sarah had found out that Abe was seeing Hagar again. It got so ugly. The fighting, the lawyers, the threat of divorce. Abe had to relocate Hagar across the country. But it was Manny who took the brunt of the fight. Ishmael, his then thirteen-year-old son from his affair with Hagar. Everyone called him "Manny." Manny suffered the most, and Abe had done a lousy job of protecting him from the pain or being there for him. Well, not this

time. "Keturah," Abe called into the intercom. "Get me two tickets to tomorrow's Mets-Dodgers game for me and Isaac." Then he went back to work.

Wednesday Evening

"No batter, no batter!" Isaac was yelling at the Dodgers' hitter. They were sitting along the first base line at Shea Stadium in the fourth inning. Isaac was balancing two hot dogs, a scorecard, a soda, and his relentless badgering of the Dodgers' players all at once. Abe smiled at his son. "This should happen more often," Abe thought. "I really need to spend more time with Isaac."

-Beep Beep Beep-

Abraham smacked his beeper with his right hand. Who would be beeping him now? He looked at the readout: 800-CALL-GOD. Call God? Enough was enough.

"I'll be right back."

Isaac rolled his eyes to signify that he didn't care and returned to his harassment of the opposing batter. The bodyguard to Isaac's left grunted in acknowledgment.

As he reached the top of the stadium stairs, Abraham flipped open his cellular phone and dialed the number. A voice answered on the first ring.

This is God.

"Listen, buddy," Abe shouted into the phone. "You stop bothering me. You stop threatening my son. If you ever come near him, you'll regret it. Understand? You stay away!"

Abe slammed his phone shut and returned to his seat. Isaac had finished his two hot dogs and now wanted a pretzel. "Yeah, of course," Abe nodded, sending the bodyguard to the concession line.

As Isaac updated his scorecard, Abe looked at his innocent face. "He's still as beautiful as when he was a miracle baby," he thought. Abe and Sarah never expected to have a child. They were an older couple, fertility treatments had all failed, and then Abe had gotten his secretary, Hagar, pregnant.

But Abe could remember that miraculous day so clearly. He and Sarah were playing gin rummy one hot afternoon when the doorbell rang. To their surprise, it was three of their doctors. Dr. Gabriel was Sarah's OB/GYN. Dr. Michaels was their fertility specialist. And Dr.

Raphael was the family's general practitioner. They were all part of the same medical group, but Abe was quite surprised to see them together at his front door. He quickly invited them in.

They got to the point right away. They had confirmed all the tests. They knew, given both of their ages, Sarah's medical history, and everything else, that it was impossible. But it was true. Sarah was pregnant. At this news Sarah burst into laughter, thinking it was a cruel joke. But after the doctors showed the shocked couple their findings, they weren't laughing. They cried with joy. "A child of our own!" exclaimed Sarah. "It truly is a miracle from God." Abraham embraced his wife and they held each other for a long time.

"No one's gonna hurt my miracle," Abe thought to himself as the bottom of the fourth inning began.

Thursday Evening

"You've Got Mail!" the computer cried out to Abe.

Immediately, one e-mail captured his attention. How could he miss it? Abe clicked on it.

To: AbePlumber@aol.com
From: G0D@Eternity.net
Subject: Misunderstanding about previous messages

Abraham,

I think you might not have heard my previous messages. I simply want you to take Isaac to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice there on the heights that I will show you.
More to follow.
God

The instant-message screen suddenly flashed on. Someone online was sending him a message. That someone had the screen name G-O-D.

G0D: I see you got my e-mail.

AbePlumber: Stay away from my son!

G0D: Just do as I ask, Abraham.

AbePlumber: And why should I?

G0D: Don't you remember all those promises? How I

will bless those who will bless you and curse those who will curse you?

AbePlumber: Well, buddy, I am about to curse you.

GOD: Don't you remember how you got the message to move to where you are now?

Abe stopped typing. Sure he remembered. He was at a crossroads in his life. Suffering under his father's shadow in their plumbing business in Utica. Sarah was unhappy. Lot was unhappy. Abe had called that radio call-in show, Dr. Yahweh. The doctor immediately sized up his problem and told him to start his own life. Abe had waffled about when he should move on. The doctor tried to end the call, telling him that the show needed to wrap up, but Abe had remained on the line. The doctor said, "Well, Abe, it really has been nice chatting with you. But I gotta get going."

"What?" Abe asked him, momentarily lost in his own thoughts.

"Get going! Get going!" Doctor Yahweh had shouted at him and hung up.

Abe was out of Utica by the week's end. Another message came across the screen.

GOD: So you see?

AbePlumber: I don't know who you are, but if you ever come near my wife, my son, or me, I'll kill you. Right now I am going to call the police.

Abe signed offline and placed a call to his local precinct.

Friday Evening

The rabbi's sermon was somewhat interesting, but Abe's mind kept wandering. He hadn't been to services since the High Holy Days, but something made him want to go. Sarah was thrilled. Isaac was not. But they went, and it calmed Abe down. Isaac didn't understand why his dad was spending so much time with him lately, but secretly he was glad. The rabbi was starting a new point in the sermon.

-Ring-

Oh, God! His cell phone. He had forgotten to turn it off. The rabbi stopped mid-sentence, distracted by the jarring, inappropriate sound.

Every head in the congregation turned toward Abe with a nasty look.

-Ring-

People began to whisper and Abe quickly moved down the aisle toward the door.

-Ri...

Abe made it to the foyer in time to catch the phone mid-third ring.

"Hello?"

Abraham, don't hang up.

"You just don't get it," Abe told the voice. "I don't know who you are, but you are sick. And, wait a minute, if you're God, why would you call and interrupt a rabbi's sermon?"

I've heard this one before. He gave it a couple of years ago.

It only goes downhill from here.

"Hey!" Abe interrupted. "I recognize your voice now. I knew it sounded familiar. Now it all comes clear. About ten, fifteen years ago, I called that religious psychic line, 1-900-ASK-LORD. I was having those problems with Sarah and Hagar. And I spoke to you."

That's right.

"You made all those ridiculous predictions about my having lots of children, and giving me a promised land, and so on. Well, I have only two kids, one house, and a business, so there go those predictions, Nostradamus! And you encouraged that painful elective surgery, too. I mean, on an eight-day-old it's one thing, but I'm not a young guy."

Those promises will all come true.

"Well, true or not, my son means everything to me, and I won't have some religious 900-number psychic ordering around my life. Look, the Mourner's Kaddish is about to begin. Might I go and pray that... God?"

Saturday Afternoon

The message light on the answering machine was blinking just once as Sarah, Isaac, and Abe came back from their spontaneous picnic in the park.

Abraham, this is God. This is the last time you'll hear from Me. There's no use in My trying to reach you anymore. I used to find ways, and you used to hear Me. But now, despite all the means of communication and technology, so many things seem to get in the way. Something seems to keep you from hearing Me, believing Me, trusting Me. I will still talk to you, Abraham, as I do to all My children, but from now on you'll have to go looking for My messages. You'll have to try and hear My voice. And it won't be easy.

Enjoy your time with Sarah and Isaac. And hey, give Ishmael a call too. There I go again, trying to send you messages when you won't let yourself hear.

Take care, Abraham. And I hope you'll try and hear My voice again one day.

The message light stopped blinking.