

8th Conference of Abrahamic Faiths

Keynote Address – Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence

About ten years ago I got into a lift at the Auckland Hospital. I was joined in it by a priest and a young nun. I felt in an instant that here was joke come to life. As if the Almighty sought to reprimand my irreverence, the lift juddered to halt between two floors and we were trapped together for a few minutes.

After a while, the nun asked the priest, “Should we pray?”

I couldn’t resist commenting, “How will we know whose prayers were answered?”

The priest questioned what it would signify if we then went up or down.

After a short while, down we went. The doors open. We were greeted by a smiling Sikh mechanic; a spanner in his hand, in overalls and a turban!

It is hard for us to predict with certainty the mechanics of redemption.

I am delighted to be a part of this Forum and to sharing this afternoon’s platform with eloquent and published theologians: Dr Salih Yucel and Professor Neil Ormerod.

Psalms 133 opens with the statement – *Hinay ma tov u ma nayim shevet achim gam yachad*. How good and pleasant it is when brothers sit together. The word ‘together’ in Hebrew is Yachad. In the Psalm the expression is ‘Gam Yachad’ The word ‘Gam’ means also – but it is hard to translate in this context. Our commentaries ponder the word Gam – why Gam?

They explain that the ‘Gam’ strengthens the togetherness. Also me and also you...

Interfaith dialogue is not without its doubters and detractors. Over the years I have encountered many who feel that there is only value in intra-faith – strengthening internal bonds and reinforcing the particular narrative. Some see Abrahamic dialogue as a threat to the Judeo-Christian tradition; an infiltration of the Prophet and the Quran into a cosy alliance built around the Old Testament and Revelation at Sinai. Yet others deny that such a Judeo-Christian tradition really exists.

From my own experience in New Zealand, an annual highlight was the CCJ-CCM intermeeting. There, every year, it was the Jewish and the Moslem communities and speakers who found we shared the most; our dietary regimes, a day built around prayer services, strict codes of living that regulate and sanctify all of our day and all of our deeds.

It is good when brothers and indeed sisters can sit together and share.

The Book of Genesis charts sibling rivalries; Cain and Abel; Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his 11 siblings. It is Moses and Aaron, separated so early in Moses’ life, who first come together and collaborate as brothers. “See,” says God to Moses at the Burning Bush, “Is not your brother,

Aaron the Levite coming to meet you? And when he sees you he will rejoice in his heart.” Aaron had room in his heart for Moses’ success and election. Moses, for his part, was desperate that he not bear the responsibility for Israel’s redemption alone.

In the Torah, we are told that Moses stuttered. The Hebrew word for a stutter is ‘Gamgem’. The repetition of the syllable gam-gem is stutteringly onomatopoeic. Separate the syllables and Gam gem means also, also. Like the Gam in Gam Yachad. Also me, also you. Mosaic success was about a partnership of brothers.

How did God introduce himself to Moses? He said “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

So who was Abraham?

The name Abraham means the father of many nations. A father of multitudes, indeed. Today about 2.2 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims and 13 million Jews comprise about a half of all humanity. We are siblings from a common parent. Let us reflect upon and see how we honour our father.

In the narrative of the Tanach, Abraham was not born into a great dynasty. He did not inherit great wealth. He did not perform great miracles and we record no great orations.

Abraham was an itinerant family man before he became a tribal leader and founder of nations. Abraham abandoned idolatry and he found God. Then he followed God. He took a small family with him and he grew it – a family and entourage. From following God, we are told that he walked *before* God. This is a step up or a step ahead of Noah, who the Bible records merely walked *with* God.

The great medieval sage Moses Maimonides begins his Mishneh Torah, his code of Jewish law with the words *Yesod hayesodot ve-amud hachochma* – Underpinning the foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is to *know* (or to believe or to accept) that there is a prima causa; that the universe emanates and depends on God. Maimonides, like many of our commentators, records that Abraham is distinguished for having identified God and dismissing idolatrous alternatives. Abraham established that it is the same God in Ur of the Chaldees as Egypt, as Beer Sheva, as Hebron. God is identifiable, and certainly in the eyes of Maimonides’, philosophy, Abraham could demonstrate or prove that which we know and we accept through tradition, experience and faith.

The first enduring teaching of the Abrahamic tradition is there is a God, a single God; God who is great and universal. I know that this is upsetting to Richard Dawkins and co who see no God, no maker, no purpose to life beyond instinctive reproduction of new life. The Jewish world, the Abrahamic legacy, is that there is a God and He imbues our life with meaning.

As the Bible proclaims, our God is not a private divinity. He is “*koneh shamayim ve-aretz*”, the maker of heaven and the earth.

This expression, which was used by Abraham in an oath of ethical rectitude, was used first by the king of Salem, Melchizedek. To me, this carries a significant message. While Abraham is the

covenantal father, and while Abraham has the revelation and Abraham establishes the tradition from which we derive, the recognition of good and the recognition of God *can* exist outside our particular framework.

It is for us to live our lives *our* way; and it is for us to establish and nurture our beliefs within *our* families and *our* communities; but it is for us also to recognise that, like Melchizedek, others might also find our God and bless in His name.

As for the oath of ethical rectitude, though victorious in conflict against the king of Sodom, Abraham states that he does not want to take any booty or be seen by others as a profiteer. Abraham commits to living a life where he is clean in the eyes of God. Not only that – he must be *seen* by humanity to be clean in the eyes of God.

Seen to be clean.

Abraham protests that he does not want there to be any suggestion that he had taken even a bootstrap to which he was not entitled. When he comes to buy the burial site for his family in Hebron, he makes it clear that it is a purchase and that he has fairly acquired title. Later, when Moses is challenged by his kinsmen that he has assumed too much power and must be in it for the gain, he is swift to counter that he hasn't taken even a single donkey for his pains. The commentators on this ask what donkey? Where? How did a donkey enter this particular discussion? And they explain, that when Moses was sent by God from the burning bush in Midian back to the Israelites in Egypt, he didn't even claim his donkey ride expenses. Moses, like Abraham was transparent in his rectitude. No salary-cap violations nor expense account sleaze for them!

Mindful that not every servant of God has the same virtuous disposition, the Talmud records that the priests who brought communal dues to the Temple treasury were routinely searched on their way out. This was not a matter of targeted scrutiny for Kohen-conmen or Levites living above their allocated means; rather by searching every priest a message was sent out to the wider community that religious leaders must be seen to be clean.

Abraham must behave justly because his God is a God of justice. From Abraham and through our tradition we learn that religious leaders are publicly accountable and must practice what they preach.

Of course that level of accountability strikes us as self-evident. However, this aspect of Abraham's teaching of ethical probity is part of a far more radical lesson.

Not only does Abraham demand that we are seen to be clean, Abraham has a similar expectation of God.

The Torah tells us that God revealed his intention to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gemorrah to Abraham. "Shall I withhold my intention?" asks God. He invited and He engaged him in debate. As Abraham bargains with God over the destruction of life in Sodom and Gemorrah, he demands that the God of Justice shall himself be seen to be just. One might well ask, how dare a man question God?

While we are not Abrahams, Abraham himself was a man and not an angel. Abraham was a mortal prophet and not a demi-god. Nonetheless the Bible records for us that Abraham challenged God. He called Him to account. He called God to consider the way that others would interpret God's actions. Can you imagine remonstrating with a pagan divinity? Counselling Jupiter on his thunderbolt abuse or Poseidon on PR? From this encounter, we learn that our critical appraisal of godly action is of significance; that God puts some stock, dare I say it, some faith, in the conscious or conscience of man.

Though the Bible sometimes directs us in ways we feel are harsh and which we cannot fathom, I think that the Bible really wants us to think and to question.

Abraham was not unique. After the Golden Calf, Moses interceded with God against the destruction of a sinful population. And he succeeds. The Bible records subsequent prophets challenging God to live up to His attributes.

For me, one of the most profound ideas that the Torah has imparted must be that humankind's native assessment of what is right and wrong has real value. God has endowed us with questing minds and with wisdom. That doesn't mean that our assessment is always right or our judgement always good – far from it. All too often self-interest and temptation lead us astray. These must be curtailed and censored. Nonetheless, one of the potent messages we bring to civilised society is that even if we have to accept God's will, and though we may not always understand it, we should not blindly follow divine imperative without attempting to learn its moral lesson.

God wants us to think and to question. Religion is not a suspension of our intellect. Religion calls upon us to find God and know His ways.

We learn from God's example. Our God is a teacher of values. We are worthy students of a caring teacher and not worthless subjects of a capricious king.

We are worthy students of a caring teacher.

Abraham himself was a perfect model of the caring teacher. Whenever I am consulted about spreading the word of God and how best to achieve it, Abraham's example is my archetype.

In the closing verse of Genesis Chapter 21 we are told that Abraham planted an *Eshel*, translated as 'tamarisk' at his home in Beer-Sheva. One wonders about the significance of a tamarisk. What is it? Why did he do such a thing? Had Abraham seen the latest episode of Masterchef and realised that everyone who was anyone was cooking with tamarisk and you just couldn't get fresh tamarisk or *Eshel* from Coles.

What is a tamarisk or *Eshel*?

The question is addressed in the Talmud as the Rabbis grapple with the term.

According to Rabbi Judah, an *Eshel* is an orchard. In Hebrew, *Pardes*. The word *Pardes* or orchard has a very clear meaning to the scholar. While the *Pardes* certainly does have connotations of apple groves, when it is used in the Talmud it is a metaphor for an academy of higher spiritual learning. In

this context, when Abraham was given the chance to rest, he started teaching, cultivating souls. To the highest level. Just as he, Abraham, could fathom the proofs and ways of God, he would train others to do the same.

The word *Pardes* is specifically used to denote the multifaceted world of Kaballah. Not in the Madonna-esque sense – but in the authentic Jewish teaching that every word in the Torah can be understood on many levels.

Of these we categorise four, and *Pardes* itself is the acronym or mnemonic. First, every phrase of God's revelation can be seen as *Peshat* – carrying a straightforward translation. The Bible must make sense to its reader. Secondly, every expression also is a *Remez* – it hints at something deeper. Our bible is replete with metaphor and allegory. Third, and beyond that, there is *Derash*, a homiletic exegesis as use of language is cross-referenced from one verse or instance to another. And finally, there is the world of *Sod*. The word *Sod* means secret. In the world of *Sod*, the kabbalist is able to evince profound truths about the nature of God.

According to Rabbi Judah, Abraham established a *Pardes* – an orchard cultivating students with a profound knowledge of God. Rabbi Judah, himself would have taught this idea in a Beit Midrash – an academy of *Derash* of Jewish textual and legal study. A Beit Midrash is a study hall. It is a *Madrassa*. We study, challenge, dispute, resolve, refine. And we study more.

Judaism has always prized literacy and scholarship. Rabbi Judah himself, defined a system of universal education in every hamlet, village and city. The Talmud regulates the wages of teachers and punishes the truant. It mandates that parents give their children a grounding in the scriptures and teach a productive trade. Every individual must learn that he or she has a place in God's world and every individual must learn so that he or she can better that world for all humanity.

Judaism established education as a duty and as a right. Josephus asserted that if any one of our nation is asked about our laws, he would repeat them as readily as his own name; that Jewish education was engraved on our souls. In the third century, the Rabbis had declared that any community which failed to establish a school should be excommunicated. The word Rabbi, itself, connotes teachers not priests. Centuries before the first printing presses brought books into the richest houses, the Jewish world was literate and learned.

“At five”, says the Mishna, “a child should study the Scriptures, at ten, the Oral Law; at thirteen he is obligated in the commandments. At fifteen he should study the Talmud.” Written by Rabbi Judah in the second century, such was Rabbi Judah's understanding of Abraham's Tamarisk or Eshel. It was this *Pardes*.

Rabbi Nechemia was in the Beit Midrash with Rabbi Judah. He had another view. “What is an *Eshel*?” asked Rabbi Nechemia. It is a Pundak. It is a tavern. Rabbi Judah presents Abraham as scholar and teacher. Rabbi Nechemia presents Abraham the Innkeeper.

The Bible highlights Abraham's hospitality. He rushed to invite strangers into his tent. Rabbi Nechemia looks at the word *Eshel* and he identifies an acronym.

Eshel, notes Rabbi Nechemia is made up of three Hebrew letters, *Alef*, *Shin* and *Lamed*. They represent *Achila*, which means eating; *Shtiya*, which means drinking, and *Levaya*, which means escort.

When Abraham brought strangers into his tent, he would feed them. As they ate he would engage them. When they appreciated his food or Sarah's cuisine, he would encourage them to recognise the provenance of the bread. It comes from the grain. It comes from God. "Look at the world around you and appreciate God's blessings," Abraham would say. "Show your thanks and bless God for our lives and our livelihoods."

Their hunger assuaged, Abraham would engage their thirst for understanding. Now he would introduce the ethical and moral teachings. God was not just a one-off remote creator. He was legislator and a regulator.

Abraham initiated discourse to make God relevant in their lives. How we live, how we love, how we deal with business and society... How do we make the mundane holy? In our daily prayers, we say that God's word should be with us when we rise up, when we lie down and when we walk by the way. We bless him before we eat and once we have finished. We have blessings for when we hear thunder, see lightning, when we go to the bathroom and when our body functions as we need it. We have blessings for seeing scholars and rulers – both Jewish and gentile – recognising God's manifest presence in the world around Him. God's teaching defines my every encounter. Abraham's tavern took the wayfarer and made him a disciple.

I have been privileged to say the blessings on some of the world's great scholars and rulers. In 2006 I was a guest of Her Majesty, the Queen.

It was her 80th birthday trip to Australia. Mandy and I were two of the 500 or so invited to the banquet at Parliament house in Canberra. "Did we have any specific dietary requirements?" The invitation enquired. "Kosher" I responded – and I was assured that this would be taken in hand.

The word Kosher means fitting, correct or appropriate. In the context of food, it denotes a meal which has been prepared according to all the requirements of Jewish law. It means no pig. It means that animals have been slaughtered and salted according to the Torah and Talmudic legislation. It means no milk mixed with meat – even down to a dairy desert after a meaty meal – no milk in a coffee after a steak. In a world of highly processed consumables, every ingredient in a kosher meal, the additives and e-numbers, the starches, colourings and anti-oxidants – each must conform.

It was a truly sumptuous affair and memorable affair. Our table couldn't help but notice that while 498 other guests were served delicately plated portions, Mandy and I needed to play pass the parcel to liberate our foiled meals. Each course was imprisoned behind multiple layers of foil or Glad wrap. For 498 guests the fish was a small square, carefully garnished. Mandy and I received a plate dwarfed by its salmon steak. 498 guests received a couple of scoops of melon and sherbet. Mandy and I, a large bowl of melon balls and a tub of ice-cream. When 498 guests were given their beautifully presented lamb chops with a neat circle of jus, the whole table imagined that under our copious levels of foil there would be an entire lamb... The portion was huge and swam in a sea of

overflowing brown sauce! The starched white linen tablecloths clearly betrayed where the kosher diners were seated!

We are told that man does not live by bread alone; rather, he lives from that which emanates from the mouth of God. Whether it is me at the sumptuous luxury of a royal banquet in Canberra, or my great-grandparents, on starvation rations before they were gassed at Auschwitz, or the generation fed by Manna in the wilderness, or the guests at Abraham's table; Judaism requires us to reflect upon our food and its provenance.

To take nothing for granted. Judaism requires us to realise that our most basic needs are not to be addressed through instinctive behaviour – a see-food diet – I see food and I eat it. Rather, we sanctify consumption.

Of course, the bemused guests at our table asked why we couldn't simply eat what everyone else was eating – and of course Mandy and I explained, within limits, the theory and the implications of kosher cuisine. In the twenty-first century we have come to live in a world where many people are blind to the continuum between production and consumption. Most of our children haven't seen farms. They know that bread, beef, butter, broccoli and even boxer shorts and lightbulbs come from the supermarket. What do they know of our primary industries?

As I eat and acknowledge the sovereign king of the universe, I am aware and I seek to share the message that kosher slaughter is required to be humane; that my beef, my lamb and chicken are farmed with humanity. I bring to my table a code of animal welfare which regulates how animals are fed and maintained; how beasts of burden are worked and harnessed; how they are loaded and unloaded.

Lest that which should go without saying be considered overlooked, the Torah teaches that I must treat my ox and my ass with compassion. It teaches that I must treat my neighbour's ox and his ass with compassion. How much moreso, must I ensure fair conditions for my staff and fair trade in production!

In the idealised world of Abraham's table, the questions asked and answered inspired a recognition: that the act of eating *should* make us reflect on the food we eat; where it comes from and how it came to us. It is of course possible that the memory the other diners took away of sitting with the rabbi was the heaped portions of food, trapped in foil and glad wrap; a pristine tablecloth with an ugly stain from brown sauce.

From Parliament Hall in Canberra back to Abraham's tavern in Beer Sheva.

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Unlike Rabbi Judah's orchard or academy, a place of scholarship, Rabbi Nechemia's tavern-model highlights hospitality. Being outgoing and responding to the travellers' need. Slowly and charismatically introducing godliness and divine instruction into social circumstance. It is rounded off with the third element, the idea of escort.

Escort. Literally, Abraham would take his travellers out and accompany them as they resumed their way. He wanted to direct them onto the right path and make sure they were secure.

Metaphorically, Abraham sought to ensure that his teaching went beyond the table. When his visitors left him, they knew he cared for them beyond that encounter. He gave them something for the way. He wanted an enduring impact and not just a magical moment.

Escort adds action to interaction. It is follow-through and it says, "I care."

Judaism identifies Abraham with the characteristic of Chessed – or lovingkindness. It is seen in his hospitality; it is seen in his compassion for others. We are taught that the world stands on three things; upon the Torah, upon prayer and upon acts of lovingkindness.

There is no ideal which is more emphasised among all the Torah's commandments. The commandment to show love is prime.

At the heart of this teaching is the instruction in Leviticus 19 that "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." This is described by the sage Rabbi Akiva as the Torah's great principle.

While that commandment is found but once, in over thirty places are we told that we should love the stranger; that God loves the stranger; that we should protect and have regard for the stranger. For you know, reminds God, what it is to be a stranger, yourselves.

We can love our neighbour like ourselves precisely because our neighbour is alike; the very point of the stranger is that he or she is different. Nonetheless, we must love the stranger. Despite the differences; perhaps *because* of the differences, the Torah establishes a regime of compassion and equality for the stranger in our midst. This is predicated on a shared humanity and a shared respect for the rule of law.

Religious literature expands the biblical examples which talk about gleaning in the fields to the obligation to be welcoming in the neighbourhood, the school and the workplace. There is an obligation to provide food, shelter and clothing.

The Torah realises these ideals in one of its most significant stories – and that is the Book of Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite. There was a biblical prohibition on marrying Moabites because the tribe had been inhospitable. Nonetheless, Ruth had married an Israelite who had fled famine in Bethlehem. After he, his father and brother died, Ruth does not abandon her widowed mother in law Naomi. Rather, she accompanies her back to Israel.

Ruth is truly a stranger. However, Ruth's chessed and her devotion are noted by Boaz. He offers her gleanings, food, shelter and cover. He goes on to marry her and from their union comes Obed, then Jesse then King David.

David will unify Israel, establish a sovereign nation; he is author of our Psalms and founder of our ruling dynasty. His son will build the Temple, and realise God's promises to Abraham and the patriarchs; to Moses and the generation at Sinai. Though the monarchy, the Temple and the sovereign nation will all be lost; we are told that from David will come the Messiah.

Boaz was a descendant of Jacob's son Judah. Jacob's deathbed blessing of Judah already established him as father of kings. So what does the tale of Ruth, the Moabitess add to our understanding? The book of Ruth is a story of loving-kindness, rehabilitation and redemption. There is no coincidence

that it is the foundation stone of our ultimate redemptive prophecy; a redemption which remains central to our prayers.

Significantly, the Jewish story has continued despite the destruction of two temples and two millennia in exile. The Jewish contribution to society is substantially a contribution that it has made in the aftermath of destruction, in the absence of sovereignty and in the throes of persecution. Even without the Temple, devotion to one God, the primacy of education, and these, translated into a compassionate caring society are pillars on which our world stands. Just as being strangers in a strange land framed Jewish biblical teaching; exile and hope have continued to define modern Jewish philosophy and maintain its relevance.

Jewish commitment to the Torah as the basis of our covenant remains unabated. The experience of exile and the need to engage with the non-Jewish world has factored into Jewish religious literature critical concepts which are worthy of note. The Mishna instructs us to pray for the welfare of the government as this underpins civil order. Accordingly in synagogue every week, ask that God protect the Queen, the Governor General and the Prime Minister along with their officers and advisors.

Though the Queen is the proclaimed head of the Church and the Prime Minister is an avowed atheist, we ask that God grant them wisdom and understanding and bless them with good counsel to uphold the peace, harmony and prosperity of the nation ; to promote the happiness and well-being of every citizen. We pray that He bless the Australian people, enabling all of us to live in amity and mutual respect, honouring our nation's history and diverse cultural heritage.

The respect for the State is manifest in a critical Jewish doctrine that the country's civil law is binding upon its Jewish populace. While the Talmud sets out Jewish laws of contract and sale, employment and banking; for the sake of certainty and orderly society, Jewish communities conform to the civil and criminal codes of the countries where they live.

Of course as good citizens, we do this quite unthinkingly and who could imagine otherwise? What is significant is that the doctrine is part of a *religious* code, which has been developed through religious debate and dialectic. While it is substantially a pragmatic concession to exile, it establishes itself on quite a noble principle. That principle is that we make certain accommodations in our practices *mipnay darchei shalom* – to advance the paths of peace.

Chessed is more than the love of a stranger or an individual. It is more than a gesture to one needy person or unfortunate refugee. Chessed is the pursuit of a better and more compassionate society. This begins with the harmonious cooperation and interaction between all citizens of all faiths.

In the words of former Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, "The love for people must be alive in the heart and the soul; a love for all people and a love for all nations, expressing itself in a desire for their spiritual and material advancement..."

How beautiful are these words! How completely they capture a religious universalism true to the enduring message of Abraham. The sanctity and the responsibility of each individual for the betterment of all. In our daily prayers we aspire to the day when we will see *Tikkun Olam beMalchut Shaddai* – the perfection of the world under the dominion of the Almighty. Rabbi Kook is enjoining us to participate in that perfection; an improved and a healed world for all.

God promised Abraham as many children as there were grains of dust underfoot and stars above. Did Abraham the Chaldean understand that these promises would be discussed almost 4,000 years later by his children and disciples on the sands of the land of the Cammeraygal people, who looked up at a completely different night sky?

Could he imagine three and a half billion souls?

God promised, "I shall make your name great and you shall be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you."

Of course as a Jewish community we cherish our heritage and our interpretation of our scriptures. They define our lives and our relationships. We take pride in our transmission of God's blessing and take pride in the pivotal role with which we have been entrusted in sharing God's revelation with His children.

We join this afternoon, brothers together, celebrating the legacy of our patriarch and committed to the eternal covenants which God established in his name.

- To teach and love the one true God.
- To conduct ourselves justly in His name.
- To study His ways and educate our families in his teaching.
- To show compassion to our neighbour and love to the stranger.
- To respect the rule of law and to pursue the path of peace.
- And in that we perfect our world.

The elevator bumped down and we were liberated by the Sikh mechanic. We nodded our farewells and went on our ways. Somewhere in Auckland a Sikh mechanic might be sitting even now in an interfaith forum telling his interlocutors of repair job at the hospital and the strange passengers he liberated. Maybe he wonders if we knew that he also meditated every day in his own way on the name of one omnipotent God as he aspired to play his part in the redemption of our world.

May God bless us in our endeavours that the love for people be alive in our hearts and our souls; a love for all people and a love for all nations; brothers and sisters together expressing a desire for the spiritual and material advancement of all creation!