The Abraham Midrashim

A research project submitted to McMaster University in fulfillment of the requirements for the course Religion 750, as credit towards the degree of Master of Arts.

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McMaster University
June, 1977
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By task in the MA project was to collect and study rabbinic statements dealing with the figure and life of Abraham. These statements take the form of midrashim -- "textual interpretations" (Jastrow) -- based primarily on the text of Genesis 11:26 - 25:11 and/or the events, figures and relationships described therein.¹

The collection process involved three steps:

a) The working definition of an Abraham midrash as an interpretation in which the name or figure of the patriarch appears. Many Abraham midrashim are not, strictly speaking, statements about Abraham. Often they use Abraham to reflect on someone or something else.²

b) The location of Abraham midrashim. Especially helpful were concordances, such as JYJSMB, indices to individual collections, and the notes to Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews.⁴ Primary sources and abbreviations are listed on p. 40. The two most abundant sources are the Babylonian Talmud and Genesis Rabbah.

c) The development of a clear and concise method for recording the collected midrashim (see below p. 2).

The main purpose underlying the study of the collected material was to gain an insight into the workings of the Abraham midrashim: What do they do and how? In preparation for this question, the material was examined in three stages:

A) The Abraham midrashim were used as the basis of an inquiry into the nature of midrash.
B) Traditions were isolated from the body of material, and grouped together. For this purpose, a tradition was defined as a specific interpretation appearing in two or more midrashim which do not exhibit verbatim agreement.

C) One tradition was examined in detail.

This report will outline and illustrate both the method and results of the three-fold investigation. It will conclude with an answer to the general question.

A) The Nature of Midrash

As a component of a written compilation of Rabbinic interpretations, any midrash can be studied from three points of view:

1) as a textual interpretation
2) as a literary form
3) as meaningful content

It was possible to develop a chart which not only functioned as a system of notation, but also facilitated the examination of a given midrash in the three ways outlined above. The following three entries illustrate the system, and serve as the basis for some general observations about the nature of midrash.
### Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Midrash</th>
<th>Text being interpreted</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text Gen. 22:19 quoted.</td>
<td>Isaac Abraham sent Isaac to study Torah.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question &quot;And where was Isaac?&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorities R. Berekiah said in the name of the Rabbis of the other place:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution He sent him to Shem to study Torah.</td>
<td>Abraham Torah</td>
<td>Torah = the way to wealth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation in form of a parable. This may be compared to a woman who became wealthy through her distaff. Said she: Since I have become wealthy through my distaff, it will never leave my hand.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of Parable (Thus said Abraham: 'All that has come to me is only because I engaged in Torah and good deeds; therefore I am unwilling that it should ever depart from my seed.')''</td>
<td>Reward Torah and good deeds lead to reward. Abraham observed Torah. Abraham's seed. Torah is the permanent possession of Abraham's seed. Possessing Torah = studying, therefore fathers send sons to study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midrash</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Problem</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menahoth 53b</td>
<td>Jer. 11:16</td>
<td>Meaning of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>$\pi\nu$ $\theta\phi$</td>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Form

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Content or Themes</th>
<th>Messages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>between two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rabbis:</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

#### First interpretation

R. Hinena b. Papa: "Because of the noise of the words of the spies..."

#### Objection to first interpretation

R. Hyya b. Hinena: quotes Jer. 11:10. If R. Hinena's argument is correct, should read: 'Because of the noise of the great word ($\pi\nu\nu$).'

#### Correct interpretation

"The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, 'I heard thy voice and will have compassion ($\pi\nu\nu\nu$) upon them..." [after the destruction of the Temple, and the punishment of exile, they will flourish. Men. 53b]"
(5)

Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Midrash</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lam. Rabbah</td>
<td>This midrash is the introduction to a set of midrashim which address the question of why the temple was destroyed and Israel exiled. Rather than answer a specific textual question, it presents a question which the succeeding midrashim will answer.</td>
<td></td>
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Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Content</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When the Temple was destroyed.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abraham came weeping before the Holy One, blessed be He, plucking his beard, tearing his hair, striking his face, rending his garments, with ashes upon his head, and walked about the temple, crying:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Why have I been treated differently from every other people, that I have come to this shame and contempt?'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Messages</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Destruction of Temple is cause for lamentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abraham is aware of destruction and laments (in Rabbinic fashion).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Destruction is sign of shame and contempt. &quot;Abraham&quot; feels singled out from, and inferior to, other nations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong identification of Abraham and his seed -- Abraham becomes symbol for his seed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong identification of Abraham and his seed -- Abraham becomes symbol for his seed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong identification of Abraham and his seed -- Abraham becomes symbol for his seed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations

Textual Interpretation

The general function of midrash, as the name implies, is to explain the Biblical text. Every component of the text -- from letters and words to characters and episodes -- is potentially subject to scrutiny.

Solutions to exegetical problems can be arrived at in any number of ways. Three popular types of methods are:

a) playing on the meanings, sounds, and numerical values of words or their roots.

b) making relationships -- analogies or comparisons -- between biblical verses, characters, or stories sharing common features.

c) applying certain values and "facts." Some of these are present in the text, others are derived from the text, others relate most directly to non-biblical experience and knowledge.

Although lists of exegetical rules exist, the rabbinic collections do not reflect their systematic application to the problems of the text. Often a technical method is used not as a means of deriving an answer, but as support or justification for an already existing interpretation.

Literary form

The form of the midrash is the way in which the textual interpretation is presented. As the examples on the chart indi-
cate, there are no formal elements common to all midrashim. There are, however, certain popular ways of presenting interpretations, such as poems, \(^1\)
, parables, \(^2\) conversations between biblical characters, \(^3\) or rabbis, \(^4\) and lists of events \(^5\) or rabbinic interpretations. \(^6\) Sometimes the objective form itself conveys a message concerning the proper interpretation. \(^7\)

**Content**

The basic components of the content are themes. The study of the Abraham midrashim suggests that themes have several characteristics.

- a) They are noun-forms. However, not all the noun-forms in a midrash are themes.
- b) The nouns which are labelled "themes" on the chart are what Max Kadushin has called "words expressing the unifying concepts" \(^8\) and "generalizing ideas possessed by all the members of the people." \(^9\)
- c) Themes denote general categories whose specific content is provided by all the midrashim which contain or are related to the theme. For example, the theme "the justice of God" is a category to which belong such concepts as God's punishment of the wicked, \(^10\) the reward of the righteous, \(^11\) and "measure for measure." \(^12\) The concepts denoting specific content or aspects of themes also function as themes in their own right. \(^13\)

In presenting its interpretation, each midrash relates
the themes in a specific way. Aboth 6:10 is a clear illustration of this point.

Five possessions did the Holy One, blessed is He, take to Himself in His world; and these are they: the Law is one possession, and the heaven and earth are one possession, Abraham is one possession, Israel is one possession, and the Temple is one possession. . . .

This midrash contains the themes "Holy One . . .," "Law," "heaven and earth," "Abraham," "Israel" and "Temple." The specific relationship between the last five themes and the first is that of possession. The six themes and their interrelationships are treated differently in the midrashim charted earlier. For example, Israel is the seed of Abraham, the possessor of the Torah (Law), and the people put to shame by the destruction of the Temple.

These observations imply that a single midrash can be fully understood only in the context of other midrashim utilizing the same themes.

The "messages" outlined on the chart are examples of the lessons which the midrash imparts to its audience. They reveal that midrash fulfill functions apart from exegesis. The three sample midrashim not only discuss particular texts, but describe feelings, state principles and "facts" and express values related to, but not circumscribed by, the text and/or its interpretation. The division of Rabbinic literature into two general categories of homiletical interpretation and legal interpretation acknowledges the non-
exegetical functions of midrash.

The existence and acknowledgement of non-exegetical functions bespeak two related beliefs concerning the biblical text:

a) The Torah, prophets and writings belong to the children of Israel. The people and events described in scripture are Israel's own ancestors and history. Hence the importance of יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל. His career marked the historical beginnings of his children as a group which stands in an everlasting covenant with his God and theirs (Gen. 17).

b) The Bible not only records history but sets out a way of life which is eternally valid.

The inquiry into the nature of midrash suggests two general conclusions about what midrash does and how:

Midrash presents an interpretation of the biblical text.

In the course of presentation, it also fulfills non-exegetical functions which may be descriptive or didactic. These purposes are accomplished through the themes and their relationships specified by the midrash, as well as the objective form of the presentation.

B) Traditions: 1) Abraham Traditions; 2) General Characteristics of Traditions

The second stage of the study of Abraham midrashim was based on an observation made during the course of the first, namely, that there are many interpretations which appear in
two or more different midrashim. Such interpretations were labelled traditions, and served as headings under which midrashim were grouped.

1) It was possible to group a large percentage of the Abraham material into traditions. The purpose of this system of organization was not to contrast traditional and non-traditional midrashim but to become aware of concepts closely associated with Abraham. Some of the more popular traditions are:

- a) hospitality of Abraham
- b) Abraham as missionary
- c) Abraham as Torah-observant Jew
- d) The redemptive powers of the ram and shofar
- e) Abraham in the fiery furnace
- f) Abraham as astrologer
- g) The ten trials of Abraham
- h) Abraham as priest

The antiquity of traditions which appear in pre-Tannaitic texts using haggadic material can be assumed. Josephus knew that Abraham was an astrologer. Pseudo-Philo knew that Abraham had been cast into a fiery furnace.

2) The tradition concerning the hospitality of Abraham can be used to illustrate the general characteristics of traditions.

- a) A tradition is based on, but not directly stated in, the biblical text. Abraham's hospitality is learned from the description in Gen. 18 of his behaviour towards his three visitors.
It manifested itself in two ways: Abraham actively sought wayfarers (based on Gen. 10:2); Abraham gave the visitors more than he promised them (based on Gen. 10:6).

b) The tradition becomes an accepted fact about Abraham's personality. As such, hospitality is a valid basis of comparison between Abraham and other biblical figures, such as Job and Moses.

c) As a fact about Abraham, the tradition is used to interpret other passages. Gen. R. 52:1 explains why Abraham journeyed from Sodom (Gen. 20:1):

> For in consequence of the destruction of the region of Sodom wayfarers ceased, and he said, Why should I permit hospitality to cease from my house? He therefore went and pitched his tent in Gerar.

Midrash Tehillim 110:1 interprets the meaning of לֶדֶנ in Gen. 21:33.

> Abraham opened an inn, and welcomed those who came and went, as is said 'And Abraham planted an inn in Beer-sheba' (Gen. 21:33). Of this verse, R. Azariah taught: Abraham built an inn, and welcomed wayfarers.

d) The tradition is used to form other traditions which are in turn used to exegete other verses. Ex. R. 1:16 explains "And the midwives feared God" (Ex. 1:17):

> They said: 'Abraham, our ancestor, peace be upon him, opened an inn where he fed all wayfarers, men who were uncivilized; and as for us, not only have we nought wherewith to feed them, but we are even to slay them! No, we will keep them alive.'

e) The tradition is used in conjunction with other traditions. In Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 25, the hospitality tradition is
linked with the tradition that the souls Abraham and Sarah
"made" in Haran (Gen. 12:5) were proselytes.

What did our father Abraham do? He made for him-
self a house opposite Haran, and he received every-
one who entered into or went out from Haran, and he
gave him to eat and to drink. He said to them: Say
ye, The God of Abraham is the only one in the uni-
verse.

f) The midrashim containing the tradition point to the meaning
which the tradition had for those who created, transmitted, and
recorded it. The examples cited above suggest that the Rabbis
valued hospitality very highly. The homiletic use of the hos-
pitality tradition is illustrated by Midrash Tehillim 18:29.

For while the Lord stood, waiting for the guests to
finish eating, Abraham sat with them. So it
follows that giving hospitality is greater than doing
honor to the Lord's presence, for Abraham presumed
to say to the Lord: 'My Lord, if now I have found
favor in Thy sight, pass not away, I pray Thee, from
Thy servant' (Gen. 18:3).

In conclusion, traditions seem to function much like themes
do. Indeed, some, such as the hospitality tradition, become
themes in their own right. They also serve to underline values
and concepts which are meaningful to the rabbinic mind.

C) Case Study -- The "Ten Trials" Tradition

The purpose of the last stage in the study of Abraham
midrashim was to examine some ways in which the figure and life
of the patriarch are used. If themes are in fact integrally
related, and if old, popular traditions reflect commonly held
beliefs, then a case study of one such tradition is one way
to accomplish this purpose.

The choice of the "ten trials" tradition was influenced by three factors:

a) Popularity. "Ten Trials" is a major theme in eight different midrashim.51

b) Antiquity. The fact that Jubilees treats "ten trials" as a fact about Abraham indicates that the tradition was already in existence in the second century B.C.52

c) Comprehensiveness. Because it makes a statement about Abraham's life as a whole, "ten trials" provides a broad framework within which to place many midrashim and traditions having a narrower focus.

The study was conducted in two steps:

1) The midrashim containing the tradition were outlined on a chart in order to discern major themes and messages.

2) Midrashim relating to the trials were examined.
### 1) Kidrashim Containing the "Ten Trials" Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kidrash</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Messages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5:3</td>
<td>Statement of Tradition</td>
<td>With ten trials was our father Abraham tried, and he stood them all to show how great was the love of Abraham our father.</td>
<td>Ten trials</td>
<td>Ten trials are an historical fact about Abraham.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>Endurance of trial</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Love</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Kidrash Rebhimm 18:25

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text: Psalm 18:31b -- &quot;The Word of the Lord is tried.&quot;</th>
<th>Relationship between Abraham and trial concept.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>Abraham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason: whom the Lord proved in ten trials.</td>
<td>Lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List</td>
<td>Trials are listed. (see p. 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to trial</td>
<td>Abraham accepted trials with love and reverence and stood up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Result</td>
<td>Abraham received reward: Reward God is his shield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof</td>
<td>Ps. 18:31b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidrash</td>
<td>Form</td>
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<td>an. Y.</td>
<td>Text</td>
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<td>Ekeb 5</td>
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<td>K. 24:14</td>
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<td>v. R. 15:12</td>
<td>Text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Implications,</td>
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<td>General Principle</td>
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<td>Specific Case:</td>
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<td>application or illustration of principle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hidrash</td>
<td>Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rb A. 33</td>
<td>p. 132</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aboth 5:3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reason for</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Trials</td>
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<td>correspondences</td>
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<tr>
<td>RH h. 26-31</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>List of</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>trials</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose of</td>
<td></td>
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<td>trials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midrash</td>
<td>Content</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Nathan said:</td>
<td>&quot;Justice befits God, for He guards it and does not favour anyone.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proof</td>
<td>Jer. 9:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>&quot;Abraham, who withstood ten trials, was not favoured.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text: Exodus 32:10: "Now therefore let me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them."

Conversation between Moses and God:
- Moses pleads: "Why art thou angry with Israel?"
- God: "Because they have broken the Decalogue."
- Moses: "Well, they possess a source from which they can make repayment."
- God: "What is that source?"
- Moses: "Remember that thou didst prove Abraham with ten trials, and so let those ten trials serve as a compensation for these ten broken commandments."
- Conclusion: "This is why he said: Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel."

- Moses pleads: "Lord of the Universe! Why art thou angry with Israel?"
- God: "Because they have broken the Decalogue."
- Moses: "Well, they possess a source from which they can make repayment."
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- Conclusion: "This is why he said: Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel."
Observations

a) None of the midrashim indicates how the tradition was derived from the text. The likely source is Gen. 22:1

In most sources, the Binding of Isaac, to which 40 in Gen. 22:1 refers, is made the last trial of the ten. The number of trials seems to have no direct textual source, although it might be related to the ten times God was tried according to Num. 14:22. The popularity of number ten is evident both in the Bible and in Rabbinic lists.

b) There is a strong association between the themes of "Abraham" and "trial" and "righteousness." The association extends beyond the midrashim containing the "ten trials" tradition. Indeed, where the word or idea of "trial" occurs in the Biblical text, it is referred to Abraham, as is the word or idea of "righteousness."

The "ten trials" tradition depicts a three-way relationship between the three themes, which can be illustrated as follows:

Abraham

\[ \overset{\text{abraham}}{\overset{\rightarrow}{\overset{\uparrow}{\overset{\downarrow}{\overset{\rightarrow}{\text{ten trials}}}}}} \overset{\rightarrow}{\overset{\uparrow}{\overset{\downarrow}{\overset{\rightarrow}{\text{righteousness}}}}}} \]

Abraham is the man who demonstrated his righteousness through the ten trying events of his life.

c) The tradition is considered an historical fact. For homiletical purposes, midrashim place it in direct relationship to another period in Israel's history, the exodus from Egypt.
because of the ten trials which Abraham withstood, God helped the children of Abraham in specific ways during the Exodus.
d) The tradition not only states an historical fact but also serves as a paradigm for the experience of Israel in the diaspora.

This conclusion is supported by Tan. Y. Vayyera 55:

The early generations were tried by the Holy One himself . . . But the later generations were tried through the nations, as it says, "Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to try Israel by them." (Judges 3:1)

If the paradigm holds true, Israel's trials, like Abraham's, will also be followed by peace, reward and blessings. Pesikta de Rab Kahana 23:10 expresses Israel's own experience according to the trial-reward pattern.

According to R. Hanina, the verse from Genesis 22:13 teaches that the Holy One showed Abraham the ram, released from one thicket, getting entangled in another thicket, and so on, by which the Holy One was implying: Abraham, thy children, like the ram, will be caught by the nations of the earth, entangled by the four kingdoms, and forcibly drawn from kingdom to kingdom -- from Babylon to Medes, from Medes to Greece, from Greece to Edom. But in the end their redemption will be announced with a ram's horn . . . ."

In conclusion, the midrashim containing the "ten trials" tradition explain a set of events belonging to Israel's history. In doing so, they also perform three other functions:
a) They describe the situation of exile (as trial and suffering)
b) They set forth ways of enduring exile, that is, they explain what it means to be righteous (obedience to Torah, love and reverence for God, acceptance of trial)
c) They provide hope and reassurance that exile will end and be followed by a time of peace and blessing.

Before examining some of the midrashim dealing with the individual trials, it is necessary to discover what the trials were.
Three of the midrashim outlined on the above chart contain lists of the ten trials:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Biblical Event</th>
<th>ARN &amp; Mid.</th>
<th>FRM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Gen. 11:26 -- &quot;And Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran.&quot;</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famine</td>
<td>Gen. 11:31 -- &quot;Now Abram and company left Ur of the Chaldees (also 15:7, Noh. 9:7)&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>Gen. 12:1: &quot;The Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee.&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Famine</td>
<td>Gen. 12:10: &quot;And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there ...&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Gen. 12:11-20: &quot;... and the woman was taken by Pharaoh's house ...&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and by Abimelech</td>
<td>Gen. 20:1-18: &quot;And Abimelech ... took Sarah.&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant between</td>
<td>Gen. 15: &quot;Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that he is not theirs.&quot; (15:13)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishmael</td>
<td>Gen. 16: &quot;And Sarah, Abram's wife took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid, ... and gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife.&quot;</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumcision</td>
<td>Gen. 17: &quot;This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee: every male among you shall be circumcised.&quot; (17:10)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah and Samuel</td>
<td>Gen. 21:2-21: &quot;Cast out this bondwoman and her son ...&quot; (21:10)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigent son of Isaac</td>
<td>Gen. 22: &quot;Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering ...&quot; (22:2)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations

a) There is a core group of eight trials (counting the events concerning Sarah as a single trial).

b) Each midrash adds other events from Abraham's life to make up the required number of ten. One can only conjecture about the factors influencing the choice. Aboth de Rabbi Nathan appears to be concerned with the symmetry of the trials, while Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer seems to stress the ideas that Abraham believed in God, and suffered, from earliest childhood.

Rabbinic reflections on the individual trials are outlined on the following chart:
### Abraham Related to the Ten Trials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Content of Trial and Purpose (when given)</th>
<th>Abraham's Actions (Righteousness)</th>
<th>Aftermath of Trial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Magnates and magicians sought to kill him. Abraham had to hide.</td>
<td>Learned holy language. Trusted God.</td>
<td>For Abraham - Survived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Fiery Furnace</td>
<td>Abraham was cast into a fiery furnace by the king Nimrod.</td>
<td>Abraham refused to worship idols in order to avoid trial. He sanctified God's name. (ie. offered himself for martyrdom)</td>
<td>For Abraham - He was rescued by God. - He acquired his servant Eliezer. - He lived free from pain. - He was rewarded in the hereafter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Migration from Haran</td>
<td>Abraham had to leave his father's house at God's command. He had to begin wandering.</td>
<td>Abraham obeyed God's command. He took converts with him.</td>
<td>For his children - Children get atonement. - Passover sacrifice. For others - All mankind was set in one path.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose: To make Abraham's name great in the world.</td>
<td>Other Results - Abraham's wanderings end when he arrives in Canaan.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Trial</td>
<td>Content of Trial and Purpose (when given)</td>
<td>Abraham's Actions (Righteousness)</td>
<td>Aftermath of Trial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Famine</td>
<td>Physical suffering of Famine, wandering and exile</td>
<td>He did not rebel or complain, Abraham left Canaan.</td>
<td>For Abraham: saved from Famine. For children: learn not to cavil or be resentful if suffering befalls them. -Israel is fruitful in Egypt and in exile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Sarah is taken by Pharaoh and Abimelech</td>
<td>Sarah was taken to be their wife</td>
<td>Abraham tries to prevent trial by hiding Sarah, Abraham prays for Abimelech.</td>
<td>God punished Pharaoh and Abimelech, and preserved Sarah. Abimelech restored Sarah and himself restored because of Abraham's prayer. Children learn that they must honour their wives, and that they should not run unnecessary risks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>War with the kings</td>
<td>Chaldeans attacked Abraham, Kings wished to slay Abraham</td>
<td>Abraham battled with the kings for Lot's sake, Abraham gave tithes. Abraham said, &quot;I will not take a thread nor a shoe-latchet...&quot; Abraham wins through prayer.</td>
<td>For Abraham: God helped Abraham win. Abraham becomes a king. For Israel: Abraham's children are saved at midnight from Egypt, they receive commands. For others: people become converts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Trial</td>
<td>Content of Trial and Purpose (when given)</td>
<td>Abraham's Actions (Righteousness)</td>
<td>Aftermath of Trial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covenant between pieces 115</td>
<td>God reveals to Abraham Torah, Temple, Yoke of the Four Kingdoms and Gehenna</td>
<td>Abraham chooses the exile because it is temporary punishment.</td>
<td>For Israel -suffering is temporary and followed by redemption -Israel is saved from Gehenna by Abraham -Israel will leave Egypt with spoil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hagar</td>
<td>Hagar is given to Abraham 119</td>
<td>Abraham begot Ishmael 120</td>
<td>For Abraham -Ishmael worshipped idols -Abraham was unfit because of Ishmael 122</td>
<td>For Israel -Israel was afflicted by descendants of Ishmael 123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumcision</td>
<td>Abraham was ordered to circumcise himself at the age of 99 124</td>
<td>Abraham obeyed 125</td>
<td>For Abraham -he became perfect 126 -he was fruitful 127 -he became first proselyte 129 -God appeared to him 129</td>
<td>For children 130 -receive merit -are redeemed from Egypt and at the end of the Fourth Kingdom through circumcision and Paschal sacrifice 121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial</td>
<td>Content of Trial and Purpose</td>
<td>Abraham's Actions (Righteousness)</td>
<td>Aftermath of Trial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J Hagar and Ishmael expelled</td>
<td>Sarah wanted Abraham to divorce Hagar and send away Hagar and Ishmael whom Abraham loved.</td>
<td>Abraham obeyed Sarah.</td>
<td>For Abraham Abraham's line was carried on through Isaac.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K Binding of Isaac</td>
<td>God commanded Abraham to journey to a place He would show him and to sacrifice Isaac there.</td>
<td>Abraham obeyed with joy. Abraham took care to make the sacrifice ritually fit.</td>
<td>God called off the sacrifice. Abraham sacrificed a ram instead. Isaac was saved.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Purpose:**
- to show how Abraham did God's will.
- to make known to all Abraham's love for God.
- so no one will say that there was no reality in the other trials.

Red Sea during the Exodus and final redemption through a ram's horn.
Observations

a) Rabbinic treatment of the individual trials generally reflect the pattern associated with the ten trials tradition.

If trial is a symbol for exile, and Abraham a symbol for the individual and group in exile, the functions of the midrashim and the specific content of the themes Exile, Righteousness and Reward can be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exile</th>
<th>Homiletical Righteousness</th>
<th>Reassuring Reward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) Experience of Exile</td>
<td>(i) Relationship to God</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Physical Survival</td>
<td>Obedience to command (C,I,K)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding (A)</td>
<td>Worship-Prayer (E,F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifice of self and family (B,K)</td>
<td>Sacrifices (K)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pogrom (F)</td>
<td>(ii) Behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (D)</td>
<td>Integrity of belief (A,B)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Group Survival</td>
<td>Protection of kin (E,F)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility of Intermarriage (I)</td>
<td>Avoidance of risk (D,E)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention of Identity as distinct, separate group (I,J)</td>
<td>Proselytizing (C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) Reason for Exile</td>
<td>(iii) Attitudes to Exile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment for sin (G)</td>
<td>Acceptance (D,G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive value (purposes B,C,G,K)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exile will end (G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) The ten trials and the "ten trials" tradition also provide more specific content for the theme of "Election of Israel":

The members of Israel are the children of Abraham who stand in a special covenantal relationship with God. Even the worst trial is evidence of this relationship. As God's elect, Israel is superior to the nations.147 This superiority will be recognized at the end of the trials.148
Conclusion: What Abraham midrashim do and how

The study of the Abraham material has disclosed three types of functions:

1) Midrashim present interpretations of the biblical text, and the events and figures which the text describes. They use various technical methods and/or accepted facts either to derive or support their solutions to textual problems.149

2) Midrashim also fulfill non-exegetical functions.

a) Explanations of Israel’s history can also serve to depict the situation of Israel in exile. Abraham is used as a symbol of the children of Abraham, and his life as a paradigm of Israel’s experience.150

b) Descriptions of Abraham’s behaviour are homiletical, using Abraham as the model of the ideal “child of Abraham.” The homiletical function is often explicit, as in Gen. R. 92:1:

... as soon as Abraham set out, famine assailed him, and still he neither cavilled nor murmured against Him. So thou too, if suffering afflict thee, neither cavil nor be resentful.

Abraham is also used to illustrate how one should not behave.

Sanhedrin 99b explains Gen. 36:22 'And Lotan's sister was Timna':

What is the purpose of writing "And Lotan's sister was Timna?" -- Timna was a royal princess, as it is written... Desiring to become a proselyte, she went to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they did not accept her. So she went and became a concubine to Eliphaz the son of Esau, ... From her Amalek was descended who afflicted Israel. Why so? -- Because they should not have repulsed her.

Homiletical midrashim often serve legitimating and polemi-
c) The life of Abraham and the historical experience of Israel provide concrete reassurances that salvation will come in the future as it did in the past.\(^{151}\)

Reassurances are also provided by graphic illustrations of the saving process, as in Yebamoth 121b:

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that the daughter of Nehonia the well-digger fell into a large cistern, and people went and reported the accident to R. Hanina b. Dosa. During the first hour he said to them, 'All is well!' In the second hour he again said, 'All is well.' In the third he said to them, 'She is saved.' 'My daughter,' he asked her, 'who saved you?' — 'A ram came to my help with an aged man leading it.' 'Are you,' the people asked him, 'a prophet?' — 'I am,' he replied, 'neither prophet nor the son of a prophet; but should the beneficent work in which the righteous is engaged be the cause of disaster to his seed!'
Midrash also performs functions not directly related to Israel's experience in exile. Sanhedrin 107b uses Gen. 24:1 to explain how and why old age came into existence.

Until Abraham there was no old age: whoever saw Abraham said, "This is Isaac," and whoever saw Isaac said, "This is Abraham." Therefore Abraham prayed that there should be old age, as it is written, And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age.

For academic study, the value of midrash lies in the insight it provides into the values and concerns of the Rabbis. Tan Vayyera 7 underlines the importance of physical survival by declaring that the righteous succeed in fleeing from external danger.

Rabbinic literature does not lend itself to categorization and classification. A given midrash will contain many themes, operate on literal and/or symbolic levels, and perform one or more functions using exegetical methods, sets of symbols and/or literary form. This characteristic of midrash makes a systematic treatment of rabbinic reflections on a particular topic very difficult. On the other hand, it makes almost every midrash and tradition a potential key to the rabbinic mind.
1. Abraham is mentioned more than forty times outside of Gen. 11:26-25:11. Sandmel gives a good summary of the biblical as well as the apocryphal and pseudographical references. 5. Sandmel, Philo's Place in Judaism (New York: Ktav, 1971) pp. 30-59.

2. For example, Sanhedrin 99a (also Aboth 3:12):
   "R. Eliezer of Beited taught: He who defiles the sacred food, despises the festivals, abolishes the covenant of our father Abraham, gives an interpretation of the Torah not according to the halacha, and publicly shames his neighbour, even if he hath learning and good deeds to his credit, hath no portion in the future world."
   The midrash expresses the importance of circumcision, and is not concerned with Abraham himself.


5. Strictly speaking, this proem is an aggadah and not a midrash. It illustrates Kadushin's point, that "the independent character of the haggadic statement can be discerned no matter in what context the statement is found, in a homiletical composition no less than in an exegetical context."


6. Pr 33.3 -- Meaning of "Hebrew" -- 

7. Gen. R. 55:1 -- Plays on words containing the consonants "י" and "ש".

8. "דָּוִד", in Gen. 18:10, refers to thirty righteous men. PBB 11:15.


10. Sanhedrin 29b compares Qoadiah and Abraham, who were both prophets. (Abraham was a prophet, Gen. 20:7).

11. Baba Mezia 86b compares the meals and feasts made by Abraham and King Solomon.

12. For example, the high value placed on Torah, Gen. R. 56:11.
13. Nazir 23a-b: "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city! refers to Lot who separated himself from Abraham..." (Gen. 13:11)


15. For example, the "Fact" that Abraham was a Torah-observant Jew, used in Gen. R. 56:11, is a tradition derived from in Gen. 20:5.

16. For example, Yoma 26b, explains that $\sqrt[n]{3}$ in Gen. 24:1 means that Abraham was elder in the scholars' academy. As Sandmel says, "The rabbinic literature reads back into the career of the patriarch its own interests and concerns." Sandmel, p. 95.


18. For example, Gen. R. 39:13 must add an extra number to $\sqrt[n]{3}$, to make it equal 75, the age of both Esther (Hadassah) and Abraham.

19. The interpretations beginning the chapters of Midrash Rabbah are usually proems. Eg., Gen. R. 44:1-3: "R. Akiva commenced his discourse ..."


23. Num. R. 2:12 gives lists of events (when blessings were given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and traditions (fiery furnace, hospitality of Abraham, Abraham as missionary).


27. Ibid.

28. PR. 49:5.


30. Ibid. Teh. 1b:22.
31. As Kadushin explains, "The subconcepts are not designated
as such by the Rabbis, and are not in any sense inferred
from or subsidiary to the main concepts. They are, in
fact, treated in rabbinic literature in exactly the same
way as are the main concepts. Only after some scrutiny do
they stand revealed as 'belonging' to their respective
main concepts, and this because they appear to share in
the ground provided by the latter." Kadushin, p. 16.

32. Men. 53a.
34. Lam. R. Proem 24.
35. Ibid.
36. Men. 53b.
38. Midrashim are considered different if they are not in ver-
batin agreement in their original language.

39. e.g. Num. R. 10:5; ARN A 13; PRE 36.
40. e.g. Mid. Teh. 110:1; ARN A 12; Gen. R. 39:14.
41. e.g. Mid. Teh. 1:13; Gen. R. 49:2; PR 10:4/5.
42. e.g. Gen. R. 56:9; Rosh Hashanah 16a; PRK 23:10.
43. e.g. Gen. R. 56:11; PRE 16; Pesahim 118a.
44. e.g. Baba Bathra 16b; Yoma 26b; Nedarim 32a.
45. e.g. Aboth 5:3; Mid. Teh. 16:25; PRES 26-31.
46. e.g. Gen. R. 40:6; Nedarim 32a-b; Deut. R. 2:7.


Josephus, The Works of Josephus, translated by Whiston
(Edinburgh: Nimmo), p. 32.

48. Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo Philo, trans. by James (Lon-
don: Macmillan, 17) pp. 94, 141.

49. ARN A 7.
50. ARN A 13.
51. See pp. 14-17.
52. Jubilees 17:17-18: "And the Lord knew that Abraham was faithful in all his afflictions; for He had tried him through his country and with famine, and had tried him with the wealth of kings, and had tried him again through his wife, when she was torn (from him), and had tried him through Ishmael and Hagar, his maid-servant, when he sent them away, and in everything wherein He had tried him, he was found faithful, and his soul was not impatient, and he was not slow to act; for he was faithful and a lover of the Lord."

Jubilees 13:7: "This, the death and burial of Sarah is the tenth trial wherein Abraham was tried, and he was found faithful, patient in spirit."

Charles states that Jubilees was written between 109 and 105 B.C.


54. The suffering Abraham endured during his life is the basis of comparison between the patriarch and Jes. e.g. Baba Bathra 15b; PR 47:3. The events listed in this midrash are considered to be among the ten trials in other midrashim or in Jubilees. See chart p. 21 and note 52.


57. See Aboth 5:1-6 for examples.


59. E.g. Baba Bathra 15a explains that Isa. 41:2 (",ם" אלפ יבשות) refers to Abraham.

On Abraham's righteousness is based the tradition that Ethan the Ezrahite (1 Kings 3:11) is the patriarch, e.g. PRK 5:1; Baba Bathra 15a; PR 14:4.

60. PRK 20-31.

61. Mid. Teh. 16:25.

63. The end of the exile is implied by the fact that there are ten trials. Although ten trials ensure a long time, they are nevertheless finite in number.

64. ANB A 33 lists the trials this way:
   "Twice, when ordered to move on;
   twice, in connection with his two sons;
   twice, in connection with his two wives;
   once, on the occasion of his war with the kings;
   once, at the (covenant) between the pieces;
   once, in Ur of the Chaldees;
   and once, at the covenant of circumcision."

65. Only Pha considers Abraham's birth a trial. Other rabbinic sources agree with two of Pha's comments: Abraham knew God from childhood -- Nedarim 12a-6 (others say that Abraham knew God only in adulthood Gen. R. 64:4); Abraham learned Torah in the cave. Mid. Teh. 1:13.


67. Cant. R. (p. 61)


69. Avodah Zarah 73a.

70. Gen. R. 42:3.

71. Pesahim 116a; Gen. R. 36:13, 34:1, 35:6. Two midrashim suggest that Abraham in fact burned in the furnace: Gen. R. 34:8: "He [the Lord] smelled the savour of the patriarch Abraham ascending from the fiery furnace." L.. R. 44:5: "... Moses argued: 'If it is burning that they deserve, then remember, [Lord], Abraham who jeopardized his life in the fiery furnace in order to be burnt for Thy name and let his burning cancel the burning of his children ..."

72. Pen 16.

73. R 19:57 (cont)

74. R 24:45 (Tehillahema 4.3).


76. Ex. R. 15:12.

78. The terms 'הָאָרְנוֹן' (Gen. 12:1) which begin the trial are often seen as a sign of Abraham’s election and righteousness. Abraham was the first one to show God spoke since Noah (Gen. R. 39:5).


81. Ibid.

82. Ibid. Teh. 119:3, 112:2.


85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.


89. Ibid.

90. PEB. 26.

91. K 12:85 (Gen. R. 40; Hemdath Hayamin ad. loc.)

92. Ibid.


94. Baba Kamma 60a.

95. This is implied by Baba Kamma 60a, Gen. R. 40:2.


98. PEB 26.


100. PEB 26.


103. Baba Mezia 59a.

   "But Abraham did not say, 'She is my wife,' and then trust
   in God to save him. Rather did he reason, God did not bid
   me run unnecessary risks by ignoring the circumstances
   of the hour."


106. PKE 26.


108. e.g. Hullin 89a; Gen. R. 43:9.


112. Pr. 49:5.

113. e.g. Thread of blue, and strap of Tefillin (Hullin 89a,
   Sukah 17a).


115. The three aspects of this trial are dealt with in a single
   tradition. See PKE. 5:2; Pr. 15:2, Gen. R. 44:21.


117. The idea that Abraham saves his children from Gehenna
   is graphically illustrated by the tradition that the
   patriarch sits at the gates of hell and does not allow
   anyone who kept the law of circumcision to enter. (Abrav
   19a). Great sinners are given foreskins from babies who
   died before circumcision, and are therefore permitted to
   enter Gehenna (Gen. R. 48:8).

118. Berakoth 5b.


120. Gen. R. 45:5.

121. K 10:34 (Gen. R. 45; Zohar 2, 86a).

122. Pesahim 50a, 119b; Mid. Teh. 116:22.

123. K 16:32 (J. Ber. 1, 6; PKE 32).
128. Hag. 3a; Sukk. 49b.
131. PSH 29.
132. PSH 30.
133. Deut. R. 4:5.
134. Ibid.
135. Satan is sometimes considered the instigator of the last trial. (Sanhedrin 89b.)
138. Sanhedrin 89b.
142. Ibid.
143. Ibid.
146. The "Aftermaths" (pp. 23-26) which discuss what the children learn from the trials, as well as Abraham's punishment for begetting Isaac, also serve homiletical purposes and are therefore included under righteousness.
147. This is reflected in the emphasis on proselytism, and in the relationship between circumcision and revelation (Gen. R. 48:1). It is most blatant in the tradition which calls the two boys in Gen. 22:3 - "people like an ass" (פַּרְקָה בַּיַּיִשׁ) (Gen. 22:3) because they cannot see God's sign. (BRK 20:3, Gen. R. 50:2).

148. Baba Bathra 91a-b.

149. See p. 6.

150. See pp. 19, 27.

151. See pp. 20, 27.

152. Baba Bathra 60b, which is an aggadah but not a midrash, indicates that survival overrides even the all-important practises of Torah and circumcision.

... And from the day that a Government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids us the observance of the Torah and the precepts and does not allow us to enter into the "week of the son" we ought by rights to bind ourselves not to marry and beget children, and the seed of Abraham our father would come to an end of itself. However, let Israel go their way: it is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen. R.</td>
<td>Genesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex. R.</td>
<td>Exodus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev. R.</td>
<td>Leviticus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num. R.</td>
<td>Numbers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deut. R.</td>
<td>Deuteronomy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cant. R.</td>
<td>Song of Songs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ruth R.</td>
<td>Ruth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lam. R.</td>
<td>Lamentations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eccl. R.</td>
<td>Ecclesiastes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Primary Sources

|---|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
Other Works Consulted


