

Genesis Rabbah, Gen. 14:13

רבי יהודה אומר כל העולם כולו מעבר אחד והוא מעבר אחד. ר' נתמיה אמר שהוא מבני בניו של עבר. ורבנן אמרי שהוא מעבר הנהר ושהוא משיח בלשון עברי
Rav Yehuda said, "*haivri* signifies that the whole world was on one side ('*ever*') while he was on the other side." Rav Nechemia said, "it denotes that he was descended from Eber. The rabbis said, "It means that he came from across the river; further, that he spoke in the language of the dwellers across the river."

JPS Torah Commentary, Excursus 4

Data overwhelmingly support the view that *ivri* is an ethnic term. The alternative geographic explanation is discounted by the fact that Abram's family back home in Mesopotamia "beyond the river (*m'ever hanahar*) is not called "Hebrew" but "Aramean" (Gen. 25:20).

Why does Abram, alone of the three patriarchs, bear this epithet and why only here? Why are the other people who are related to Israel and also descended from Eber, grandson of Noah, called "sons of Eber" (10:21) but never "Hebrew?" And why is the description reserved exclusively for the descendants of Abraham through the line of Isaac and Jacob but not used of the lines of Ishmael or Esau? Not all these questions can be satisfactorily resolved in the present state of our knowledge...

The true origin of the term "Hebrew" is still to be determined. Perhaps it came to be used of social elements marginal to a particular society. If it be a self-designation for the people in the formative period of Israelite history, it would explain why it is used exclusively of Israel. At any rate, the term fell into disuse with the founding of the monarchy until it was revived in much later times.

• **Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Genesis 14:13**

Abraham had remained the *Ivri*... remained isolated in his own distinctive character... peaceful living as neighbors next to one another but without being entirely mixed up and absorbed by each other... Abraham was not shy to keep to his own special characteristics in the midst of the Amorites even if it meant his remaining a tolerated stranger; he was Abraham from "the other side..." "living next to" the Amorites, he lived in friendly neighborly relations with them.

• **Artscroll Chumash, ad loc.**

Abraham was on one side of a moral and spiritual divide, and the rest of the world was on the other. Righteous people must be ready to endure such isolation; popularity is pleasant but it is also a snare, because the natural desire to win the approval of others can easily lead people to bend their principles.

• **Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*, p. 52**

Abraham and Sarah were caught up in the events of their time: famines, local battles, the destruction of the cities of the plain. But they were not heroic figures of the kind we find in Greek legends. Abraham was not a king or a warrior, a man of superhuman strength. For the most part, he and Sarah lived quietly, far from the arenas of power and fame.

What was special about them was that they had the courage to be different. They did not worship the idols of their time, but instead pledged their loyalty to the one God, creator of heaven and earth. When their neighbors were threatened, they prayed for them and fought for them. But they did not live like their neighbors. They had their own values. They kept to "the way of God, doing charity injustice." Unlike those around them, they did not worship nature of power, they did not believe that the world was simply in and arena of blind in clash and forces, and they rejected the myths and pagan practices of their time. As later tradition put it, "the whole world was on one side, and they were on the other."

Tradition offers several explanations of how the journey of Abraham and Sarah to an unknown destination began. According to one, Abraham was the iconoclast who broke his father's idols. According to another he was the philosopher who, seeing people worship the sun and the stars, asked but who created them? According to the rabbis, Abraham's faith did not begin with an answer but with a question...

Faith is born not in the answer but in the question, not in harmony but in dissonance. If God created the World, then He created man. Why then does He allow men to destroy the world? How are we to reconcile the order of nature with a disorder of society?

If I have interpreted the rabbis correctly, Judaism begins not in wonder that the world is, but in protest that the world is not as it ought to be. It is in that cry, that sacred discontent, that Abraham's journey begins. At the heart of reality is a contradiction between order and chaos, the order of creation in the chaos we create.

Judaism is a uniquely restless faith. Jews are always traveling, dissatisfied with the status quo and never quite merging with their environment. The rabbis suggest where and how these traits begin. For Judaism, faith is cognitive dissonance, the discord between the world that is in the world as it ought to be. That tension has been the energizing mainspring of Jewish life from the time of Abraham to today.