

“Socrates and Abraham”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

The scholar of ancient Greek thought, F. Cornford, summarized Socrates' twofold claim to greatness. First was the philosopher's discovery of the soul, and second, because Socrates fashioned a morality of spiritual aspiration, to take the place of the current morality of social restraint. Before him the Sophists and others explained how to confine one's desires and dreams, and live in harmony with what existed. The key to life was limitation. Socrates, according to Cornford, reached far beyond that.

Socrates believed in some limitations of course, but also in reaching beyond the narrowness of stoicism. He anticipated Browning's famous line centuries later: “Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?”

Biblical characters embody both ideals — that of social restraint and spiritual aspiration. The laws of the Bible are intended to guide one to live well with other human beings. Unbridled desire is both foolish and destructive. Who is wise? asks Pirke Avoth. One who is satisfied with what he has.

Yet the tradition is animated by a belief in something greater than the world. The Torah depicts souls that yearn for a connection to God.

The Bible does not give its characters long, self-justifying speeches in the mode of Greek philosophers. They are less given to abstract thought. But they powerfully combine this mix of limitation with aspiration. In the character of Abraham, one-thousand years before Socrates, there is vividly depicted a noble soul reaching for something higher than human beings had ever known.