

The Tests We Face
Erev Rosh HaShanah 5772
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Sodom and Gomorroah were horrible cities. Most of what happened there is far too disturbing to speak of here in synagogue, but believe me, it was bad. I would tell you to use your imagination, but you probably couldn't come up with even half of the things that were going on there. What happened in these cities was no secret either. What happened in Sodom and Gomorrah did not stay in Sodom and Gomorrah. It got so bad, that God decided these cities and all of the people within them just had to go. Yes, it is true that one should hate the sin and not the sinner, but it got so bad in these wicked cities that it became impossible to distinguish between evil and those who acted in evil ways.

In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God lets Abraham know of plans to destroy these cities for their unending wickedness. Abraham, seeing potential for good through the thick haze of wickedness, challenged God's decision, using God's own morality in his argument against God. Abraham pleaded with God, arguing: "Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? What if 50 righteous people can be found in the cities, will you save the cities for their sake?"¹ Surprisingly, God agreed. But Abraham did not stop there: "What if there are 45 righteous people in these cities? What about 40? 30? 20? 10?" Each time, God agreed, and each time Abraham continued to press his luck and see how far he could push God for the sake of saving innocent strangers, and indeed guilty ones as well. Here, God was the source of Abraham's test. Did Abraham pass? In one way, he did not. He failed to find the righteous people he was seeking and the cities were destroyed despite his best efforts. But this failure may not be the most important part of this story. Abraham may not have been able to save the cities, but he risked his own life and his relationship with God while trying. Even though he failed in his endeavor, he tried very hard and maintained his moral character. Abraham failed this test, but he took it. For taking this test, even though he failed, we admire him and sing his praises.

There is another test that Abraham faces, though. On Friday morning, the second day of Rosh

¹ Genesis 18:23

HaShanah, Jews around the world will read the story of the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac. This text from Genesis tells the story of a pious father whom God decides to test. At God's command, Abraham takes his beloved son up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Abraham binds his son upon the altar, and with knife in hand, is poised to willingly slay his son, when an angel of God stops him at the very last moment from doing the unthinkable. God provides a ram in place of the boy, and Abraham, our ancestor, receives God's blessing for not withholding the son whom he loves. It is a difficult story to read, containing problematic issues surrounding theology and human nature. It challenges us, even from the first verse, with the words: "V'ha-Elohim nisa et Avraham/And God tested Abraham."² Why is God testing Abraham, and what does this test consist of? We do not even know if Abraham's test is one of faith or one of morality. Without knowing why God tested Abraham we can't even say whether or not Abraham actually passed the test. If the test was one of faith, perhaps he did pass. Abraham showed faith in God by acting according to God's command. Some say he had faith that God would not actually let him slay his son, Isaac. There is little question that Abraham passed a test of faith on that day...if indeed this test was a test of faith.

If it was one of morality, however, then Abraham clearly failed. He failed by opting out of the test. In striking contrast to the moral test of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham did not argue, he did not plead, he did not question. When faced with the destruction of a city of evil people, Abraham strove to find a way to save the righteous element therein. He stepped up to the challenge, pushing God, and arguing with God. True, Abraham failed that test, but he failed valiantly. When challenged again, this time with the task of killing his own son, Abraham failed, without ever giving himself the chance of success. The reader expects Abraham to scream, to cry toward the heavens, to use every ounce of strength in his body to fight against this immoral command. Instead, Abraham and his son walk silently up a mountain to an unthinkable fate. Abraham refused to offer an answer to this test of morality, and in remaining silent, he failed. One cannot pass a test one decides not to take.

² Genesis 22:1

This is a truly confusing and troubling text...hardly the sweet start to the New Year we should be expecting! So why do Jews read such a problematic text to mark our New Year? Why do we force ourselves to deal with unfair tests and a morally backward figure on a day celebrating the beauty and grandeur of God and the world in which we live? We read this text because in this world, the truth is that we ARE tested in unfair ways! This is not to say that God is constantly testing our loyalty and morality, but no matter what the source, we do face challenges throughout our lives, and we are graded by our families and by future generations. Others do look at our actions to see how we react in the face of difficult situations. These tests are not fun and they are not fair, but they are real, they are inevitable, and though sometimes we will pass them, there are also times when we will fail.

Three things can happen when we encounter a test in our lives: We can be paralyzed by the test and decide not to take it, thus failing it by not trying; we can take the test, try our best, and pass; or we can take the test, try our best, and fail, knowing we at least gave it a shot. In the Akedah, Abraham failed a test of morality by not even trying to pass it. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, he tried his best and failed knowing that he did all he could. In one instance, he gains our contempt, and in the other he gains our praise.

During one summer in rabbinical school, I held an internship doing chaplaincy, spiritual care at a hospital in Los Angeles. One of the Jewish chaplains informed me that a patient in the psych ward had requested to meet with a Jewish chaplain. I arrived on the floor, made it through security, and with the help of a nurse, found the patient's room. I sat by his bed, introduced myself, and listened. "To be brutally honest, rabbi, I called because I am angry at God. The God I grew up with is not the God I see in my world. I have been a good person, how could God let me be abused? How could God allow me to become this sick? How could God put me in this hospital? I grew up being told that God would reward me if I was good, but I don't see God working that way anymore." This man encountered a situation that challenged, or tested, his understanding of God, and he felt like he was failing. This sense of failure came with a lot of pain, but as we talked, he also began to understand the value of

entering into this test and trying his best to better understand God and the meaning of his own suffering. Upon facing this formidable test of faith and character, this man could have decided not to act. He could have chosen not to deal with his feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and pain. He could have laid in bed all day, not speaking to anyone. But this was not enough for him, so he picked up the phone and made a call. By calling to speak with a rabbi, he made the decision to take the test life was giving him. By speaking honestly to another person, by sharing the deep pain he was experiencing, he showed his willingness to take this test, and try hard to pass it rather than passively allowing it to paralyze him and his spiritual growth. Through honest and serious reflection, this man began to take this test. It was not a test that he wanted to have in his life, and it was not a test that he deserved, but he tried his best to answer it, and he grew from it.

A poem by Adrienne Rich appears in the Reform Movement's new siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*³. It reads,

Prospective Immigrants Please Note

Either you will

go through this door

or you will not go through.

If you go through

there is always the risk

of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly

and you must look back

and let them happen.

³ Frishman, Elyse D., ed. *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007. p. 25

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

This is the message we must take with us today, on Rosh HaShanah. There will no doubt be situations in the coming year that test us in unfair ways. These tests will surprise us, they will challenge us, and in many cases, we will not know how to correctly respond to them. They may be tests that cause us to rethink our relationships with God, with friends and family, or with our selves. I cannot promise that entering into these tests and trying our best to pass them will save us from pain or fear. Success is not a given. The potential for failure is very real. These tests are sure to cause us much pain, discomfort, fear, and anger, but they also hold the potential for personal, spiritual, and communal growth. These tests and the ways we choose to react to them can transform how we see ourselves and our role in the world. It is not the test that dictates whether we pass or fail, but rather the

answer we give in the face of it.

And we are always able to offer an answer to a test that we encounter. Yes, there will always be things in the world that are outside of our control, but we are in charge of the answers we offer in the face of these uncontrollable tests. You cannot control whether or not someone gets mugged outside of your house, but you can control whether or not you call the police. You cannot control whether or not a loved one gets cancer, but you can control whether or not you offer them comfort and support. You cannot control whether or not a corporation mistreats its workers, but you can control whether or not you choose to give that corporation your business. Whether we decide to enter into the tests we encounter in the coming year or to accept failure without even trying is in our hands. Our decisions will have lasting effects, both in the ways others see us and in the ways we see ourselves.

Abraham's refusal to offer any answer to the Akedah's moral test completely transforms him. He changes from someone who would argue forcefully against God to save the lives of evil strangers to someone who is willing to cut short the life of his own son. Abraham goes from a man fit to be a father of nations to an unfit parent who does not even deserve to raise one child. He moves from being a strong figure able to argue with God and challenge God's questionable decisions to a yes-man who does what he is told and asks no questions for the sake of showing loyalty and deference. After his refusal to answer this test of morality, we see Abraham differently, and he sees himself differently.

Encountering the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, every Rosh HaShanah serves as a reminder to us that we have the ability to respond to difficult situations, and that in our responses, we can show mercy to others. Every year, when Abraham's lack of mercy shocks and troubles us, it also reminds us to show mercy in our own actions, to be compassionate in our answers to the coming tests of the New Year. When we recognize our own ability to be merciful and compassionate, we are then able to emulate God and begin to right the moral wrong that occurred on Mount Moriah thousands of years ago. May the blasts of the shofar this year call God to mercy and compassion, but may they also move us to act in Godly ways when we encounter situations that test us to our core. May we see the

inevitable tests in the coming year as opportunities for transformation of ourselves, our community, and the world, and respond with answers of peace and hope. May we try hard to pass these tests, knowing that failure is much more palatable when we can say we have strived to do our best.

Either you will go through this door

Or you will not go through

The door itself makes no promises, it is only a door.

The choice is yours.

L'Shanah Tovah U'Metukah.