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ABRAHAM'S ORDEALS REVISITED

According to tradition, God tested Abraham ten different times. The first trial, as elucidated in the Midrash, was Abraham's *auto-da-fe* before the raging fires of King Nimrod's inquisition.¹ The remaining nine are portrayed in Scripture itself. They are: (2) God's command that Abraham leave his home for a yet unannounced, strange land; (3) the pervasive famine that greeted Abraham's arrival in Canaan, thereby forcing him to travel again immediately, this time to Egypt; (4) the abduction of his wife Sarai by Pharaoh upon his entering Egypt; (5) the war he was compelled to wage on behalf of his nephew Lot; (6) God's revelation at the *berit bein ha-betarim*, the original covenant, that Abraham's progeny would be enslaved for generations; (7) circumcision; (8) Sarah's abduction by Abimelech; (9) the exiling of Ishmael from Abraham's home; and lastly, (10) the *akedah*, the Divine command that Abraham offer his beloved son Isaac as a burnt sacrifice.²

Each trial was action- and belief-oriented. Would Abraham act loyally, and would he still maintain belief? But being more than mere tests, each ordeal was a Divinely designed faith-frame giving Abraham the opportunity to achieve a spiritual level surpassing that which he possessed prior to the immediate trial. And since the elevation is according to the pain, each trial had to be progressively more painful than its predecessor.

Prima facie, the progressively-more-difficult nature of each trial is not always obvious. In what way, to cite just two examples, was Abimelech's abduction of Sarah, the eighth test, theologically more disturbing than Pharaoh's earlier abduction of Sarai, the fourth test? Surely, the physical pain induced by circumcision, the seventh test, could not match the searing pain felt previously in Nimrod's fire. Nor was circumcision as life-threatening as Abraham's earlier battle-test against the overwhelming armies of Amrafel. However, by focusing on the sequence of a particular trial and its location relevant to what had already transpired, as well as on the period of Abraham's life in

which the trial surfaced, the progressively-more-difficult quality of each succeeding trial becomes apparent.

Using as a criterion the phase of Abraham's life in which a trial occurred, it becomes obvious why Abimelech's abduction of Sarah was, for Abraham, theologically more confounding than Pharaoh's earlier abduction of her. For the public humiliation to Abraham, by now a recognized statesman and prince, was necessarily greater than the mere heartache he experienced in Egypt while yet a lesser known, private citizen. Moreover, his life's work in Canaan was now in jeopardy of collapsing since even well-meaning citizens could rightfully argue, "Where, Abraham, is your Protector? Is this how God rewards his followers?"

One hundred seventy years later, Jacob's vexation over Joseph's disappearance was magnified by the tragedy's occurring after a period when Jacob felt he had earned the right to tranquility. So too might Abraham the Elder be perplexed that this catastrophe had taken place after a phase when he had assumed that his position and following were secure, free from further abrasions and attrition. Yet he did not recoil, but remained a resolute believer.

The ordeal of circumcision was not intended to test Abraham's willingness to endure pain or the possibility of death in service to God. Already before, when battling Amrafel and defying the fires of Nimrod, Abraham had evidenced those qualities. Circumcision carried a different challenge: Would Abraham actively do that which might make him the object of public ridicule and scorn, which might make him appear foolish?³

Had Abraham suffered or died in Nimrod's fire or in the battle against Amrafel, he would have died a hero's death. Falling in battle as well as publicly defying the inquisitor are, and were, universally recognized acts of heroism. However, suffering or dying for the act of circumcision would not have been so viewed. The surrounding culture and milieu certainly considered such an undertaking foolish. Had the test of circumcision been placed prior to Abraham's acknowledged ascendancy and acceptance, the fortitude necessary for its implementation would have been less demanding. But here again, it was profoundly courageous to have been willing to risk a lifetime's worth of evolved and hard-earned respect at this secure phase of his life, when he was already an elder member of the establishment. Having achieved respectability, leaders quite often shirk pronouncements or actions that, however noble, are condemned by the hierarchy as foolish. Yet Abraham "was not deterred by the scoffers" (Rashi, Genesis 17:23).

Using sequence, that is, the juxtaposition of contiguous events and ordeals, a pattern of Divine contradiction and nullification

becomes evident. Each new ordinance nullified Abraham's previous sacrifice and accomplishment, thereby rendering each fresh trial more incredulous and painful than its antecedent. After leaving Ur, where he had already fashioned a mini-community wedded to the Ideal, Abraham enters Canaan only to leave it right away due to famine. Now, en route to Egypt, he is no longer accompanied by devotees; the devoted *rekhus* who had journeyed with him from Ur are no longer willing to continue the merry-go-round.

Because Abraham listened to God, two communities disposed toward Him had dissipated: the original community in Ur and now the remnant constituency who had accompanied him thus far. In effect, his sojourn to Canaan had nullified his earlier work in Ur, and his subsequent travel to Egypt eradicated what was left in Canaan. Like a seesaw, where the present motion cancels the previous surge, the immediate ordeal nullified the earlier accomplishment.

Additionally, these events were theologically disconcerting. It was as if God worked against His own self-interest. Moreover, God appeared indifferent to Abraham's previous efforts and accomplishments, and was indeed demonstrating that sacrifice on behalf of God leads not to reward but to pain and punishment.

Worse, God, it seemed, had contradicted Himself and broken His Word when, immediately after promising, "I will make thee a great nation, bless thee, and make thy name great" (Genesis 12:2), He made the whole filial foundation of that nation suspect and its aura unblessed by allowing the mother of the nation to be held sexually captive—a national catastrophe, impairing their ability to convince others of the blessedness that comes to those who join the ranks of a Divine community. Sarai's captivity was made the more incomprehensible and theologically incongruent precisely because it followed God's just stated promise of blessing and greatness.

Despite all the nullifications and contradictions, Abraham acceded to God's will and, even in those moments of yet unresolved crisis, never wavered in his perception of God as Truth, Justice, and Perfection.

Again by using the sequence and order approach, the theologically puzzling element in each ordeal surfaces. God's revelation to Abraham that Abraham's own descendants would for centuries be enslaved should have been crushing, given that Abraham had just jeopardized his own life precisely to spare Lot and many strangers a slavery under Amrafel. So too was his need to rescue Lot ironic given that just recently he was compelled to separate from him.

As with all contiguous trials, the juxtaposition of the *akedah* trial immediately after the Ishmael episode suggest a direct correlation between the two. That commonality is the loss of a child. For the

sake of Isaac and future Israel, Abraham was forced to sever ties with Ishmael, a son whom he loved, as evidenced by his plea, "Wouldst that Ishmael live before You" (Genesis 17:18).

But more than banishment and exile, Abraham was, in effect, called upon to sacrifice his son Ishmael. Ishmael was ill with fever, unable to walk, still young, and headed toward the oven of the Negev desert, yet Abraham supplied Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, with only one water pouch. Though later Abraham walked with Isaac towards death, here he sent Ishmael towards death. It was this sacrifice that made, thus far, the trial of Ishmael the most difficult of all.

The pain and theological paradox inherent in the *akedah* surpassed even the previous sacrifice of Ishmael. First, because here Abraham was asked to directly and actively kill; second, Isaac was his most beloved; and third, inasmuch as God had promised, "From Isaac shall come forth your seed" (Genesis 21:12), the Divine antimony was striking.

In fact, the theological quandary was made quintessential precisely because of what Abraham had been required to do in the previous Ishmael trial. For Abraham must now have been wondering how God could command him to kill Isaac in light of how He had previously ordered him to forfeit Ishmael so as to guarantee Isaac's spiritual destiny. Abraham was now asked to destroy the only redeeming element of Ishmael's exile: Isaac. Abraham's grief was now twofold: a grief for Isaac and a renewed grief for Ishmael's estrangement. With Isaac's death, Ishmael's exile became purposeless, thereby arousing in Abraham a rekindled grief about Ishmael. It was *the* example of nullification, a theme dominant throughout all ten ordeals.

(In a way, Abraham's plight mirrored Jacob's experience 150 years later. If Benjamin were to die in Egypt, what redeeming value could Jacob have ascribed to Rachel's untimely death—she having died while giving birth to Benjamin?)

And yet, even in this moment, when God seemed to be nullifying Abraham's previous sacrifice of Ishmael, Abraham not only obeyed and believed but loved God as strongly as he always had. Realistically, then, what Abraham protorealized into future Israel was the *ve-ahavta* creed: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and utmost" (Deuteronomy 6:5). The physical father of the Jewish people had to be the spiritual sire of its credo.

Ve-ahavta embodies two elements: performance ("utmost and soul") and conviction ("heart and soul"). Throughout the ten ordeals Abraham demonstrated and reified both features. He yielded to God by performing acts of courage involving logic; acts, superficially,

devoid of reason; and even acts perceived as foolish or self-harming. He also believed in God as Truth and Perfection even when Divinely ordained events led, temporarily, to personal tragedy and national catastrophe, and even in the face of what appeared to be Divine breach of promise. Each trial, individually, demanded painful action-mandates tied to excruciating theological inconsistencies. Not only did he regularly surrender and believe, but he did so with love. Wishing to discern to what variegated levels the *ve-ahavta* speaks, the Jew need only look to Abraham's ten ordeals for a matrix; they anticipate the range and the horizon of the *ve-ahavta*.

With the completion of the *akedah* the *ve-ahavta* had been actualized; nothing more was to be gained from further trials. Thus Sarah's death, though sudden and tragic, was not identified by the Rabbis as yet another—an eleventh—test of faith, but viewed as something outside them.

The tests, spanning almost a century of Abraham's life and targeting every conceivable human role, were particularly debilitating given that Abraham had no national history from which to draw solace. Not only did God test the levels of Abraham's potential, he also tried Abraham's—man's—ability to sustain faith and love to a God so capable of afflicting his devotees. The ordeals belied the comforting and panacean religious principle of reward for devotion. They were provocative to faith, since each new test demanded a nullification of the previous sacrifice. Hence, throughout, Abraham was in danger; for the possibility prevailed that far from elevating Abraham, a point existed at which Abraham could have felt so betrayed and theologically confused that he might have declared, "Enough!" and reverted to his pre-faith days. So while each test carried potential for even higher levels of transcendence, it conversely carried the seeds for complete faith rejection, i.e., all or nothing. For all men and for all times, Abraham confirmed that man's devotion and faith in God can be limitless and impregnable.

NOTES

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:19.
2. Rabbeinu Yonah deletes *berit bein ha-betarim* and adds, instead, Abraham's purchase of Sarah's burial plot. Rambam deletes the episode with Nimrod as well as the *berit* and instead adds Abraham's taking Hagar as a maidservant and his later expelling her.
3. Circumcision was the only one of the ten trials that was also a normative *mitsvah*. And since the performance of *mitsvot* were not categorized as trials, Abraham's circumcision had to necessarily involve an extra-*mitsvah* characteristic. This was, as mentioned, his willingness to endure ridicule, especially after he had achieved an elder statesman status.