

Vayera 5779
Testing, Testing
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The harrowing narrative of the binding of Isaac eludes easy interpretation. Up to that moment, Abraham has been God's faithful servant, following God to a foreign land and founding a new nation based on God's word. Abraham has followed each of God's commands to the letter. And, now, seemingly out of nowhere, God puts Abraham to the test. What test, exactly? That is not clear. What is strikingly clear is that when God summons him, Abraham responds immediately "*Hineini*" here I am, and then hurries to fulfill the terrifying command.

On their way to Mount Moriah, Isaac addresses his father, and Abraham again says "*Hineini*," saying "here I am, my son." And, when the angel calls out just before Abraham slays Isaac on the altar, again, Abraham answers, "*Hineini*," here I am.

It seems to me that much testing is going on here. The word *hineini* implies full presence and attention. Repeatedly, Abraham affirms that he is present. Perhaps he is testing himself, asking himself, where am I--what kind of father, what kind of servant of God, what kind of man am I in light of what is happening? The medieval commentator Rashi (Gen 22:12:2) brings a midrash which suggests that God, too, is being tested. According to the midrash, when the angel stays his hand, Abraham turns to God in exasperation, saying, "first you told me that Isaac is my link to eternity. Then you told me to sacrifice him. Now you tell me to do nothing. What is it that you want from me?" The unasked deeper questions, of course, being "what kind of God are you, and what how can I make sense of our relationship?"

It seems that Abraham passes God's test, when the angel tells Abraham: "...the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you..." (Gen. 22:16-17). Indeed, most commentators see it that way, and Abraham becomes the ultimate role model of one who fears God and faithfully obeys God's word. I want to suggest that Abraham may pass one part of the test yet fail another, and further, that God also fails Abraham in this incident.

The musical notations in the text indicate a momentary stop, called a *pasek*, between the repetitions of Abraham's name when the angel comes to stay his hand from slaying Isaac. The Zohar notes the significance of that pause: "The latter Abraham was not like the former" (Vayera 120 a-b). Abraham is changed after binding Isaac on the altar. The eager servant who says "*Hineini*" when God first calls is not the same person who says "*Hineini*" after the ordeal. Something dies in Abraham's supposed passing of God's test.

God never speaks directly to Abraham again after the incident, and it seems that Abraham never sees his wife, Sarah, alive again. There is also no record of further interaction between Abraham and Isaac.

And the blessings proclaimed by the angel are not new, having been promised long before this incident. One finds that Abraham is no more blessed now than before, and in some critical way, he is diminished. What has happened?

Many commentators suggest that the point of the exercise is not for God or Abraham to learn anything about one another, but rather for ensuing generations to be inspired by Abraham's faith and also to learn that God does not want human sacrifice, as was practiced widely by many of Israel's neighbors at that time. I think it may be true that our tradition needed to show Abraham's unwavering faith at the very moment it made clear that we would not be a people who practiced child sacrifice so that no one would

doubt either point. And while that may be true, I would also suggest that we can take more from this episode.

Considering the binding of Isaac in its narrative context yields a more nuanced reading. The words “some time afterward” precede God’s command that Abraham sacrifice his son. Many commentators try to identify the events that cause God to test Abraham, and none fully explains why God would test Abraham at this point. However, a close look at the sequence of choices Abraham makes leading up to God’s bitter command points to a compelling reason.

Earlier in the *parashah*, Abraham has circumcised himself, interrupted a visit with God to welcome three strangers into his tent with exceptional hospitality, and argued with God over the fate of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” (Gen. 18:23) he demands to know. Also earlier in the *parashah*, Abraham places Sarah in a compromising and dangerous position, banishes Hagar and Ishmael, and makes treaties with the Philistines. Abraham’s activities in this one *parashah* alone reveal a complex character whose actions are sometimes surprising. One cannot help but note a division between the admirable, first triad, and the questionable, second triad. Abraham’s essential character seems to change between the first and the second triad. Furthermore, after Abraham has set out to found a nation that will be different from all the others, his willingness to do as the other nations and sacrifice his child at this late stage in their relationship may be quite troubling to God. Perhaps God needs to know whether Abraham can be a fit partner to continue leading the new nation, or whether he is less aligned to the mission--or to God’s essence, than God needs him to be at this point.

I wonder if fear and obedience are not God’s only hopes for Abraham. Could it be that God would have given Abraham new blessings, or more

intimacy, if Abraham had not hurried to Mount Moriah and bound his son on the altar?

Human beings are so complicated and full of surprises, and in our *parashah*, God appears at least as difficult to understand as his human partner. I have been mulling over this narrative for a long time, and I think what troubles me most about is how strongly I can relate to it, and I suspect the same may be true for you. The fact is that most of us are not as consistent or predictable in our actions, thoughts, and feelings as we might or wish we could be. We are always becoming, always creating ourselves. Sometimes we evolve in a linear fashion; other times, we strike out in a new direction entirely. The truth is that we are often being tested, and if we held up a mirror we might asked ourselves “*hineini?*” “Am I really here? Is this who I really am?”--there are moments when we would not be sure of the answer. We want to be polite, and sometimes we are inconsiderate. We want to be loving, and it comes out as anger. We want to stand for something, and we catch ourselves not doing it. Every moment is a defining moment, both personally and interpersonally. Sometimes we may feel God’s presence as we face the daily challenges of being human in a world full of other people, and sometimes it just feels like a lot of testing and our anxieties over who we are or who they are alienate us from those we love most in the world. I believe that is what happened between God and Abraham. When they lose their ability to dialogue with mutual love and respect, they lose the joy of their partnership.

(Here, Rabbi Forester shared a personal, related anecdote.)

I would like to offer two humble suggestions that I take from all of this.

First: We do not have to test people we love. There are gentler and more productive ways to negotiate when their needs don’t match ours or when people we care about say or do things that make us wonder who they are. Rather than testing them to see what their true colors are, we would do

better to remember that no one is completely predictable and we are all, always, in some state of flux. We can help those we love explore who they are, compassionately, and we can make room for them to do the same for us.

Second: When we call our relationships into question, the most important question may be, “hineini?” Where am I, who am I, at this moment and at this time in my life? What am I radiating and how am I filtering my perceptions? How do I feel about how I am changing?

My hope and prayer is that the myriad defining moments that make us who we are becoming hold blessings for all of us, the Jewish People, and all of humanity.