

Abraham's Final Exam

Rosh HaShana 5770 – Day 2

Temple Shir Tikva

Rabbi Neal Gold

I don't know how the Voice sounded when it came to him.

But one sleepless night when the desert wind blows so hot, Abraham heard the Voice of G-d once again.

“Avraham.”

And he responded as he always had, since the Voice first came to him. He said, “*Hineni* – Here I am.”

He knew that Voice well by this point in his life. When it had first come to him, Abraham was living in Haran. He had already known great pain and suffering. His father had died there while their family was on a pilgrimage from Ur-Kasdim, leaving Abraham in charge of all the family duties. Some time later, his brother Nahor died, far too young. The pain of living in this household must have been terrible. But Abraham and Sarah took in their young nephew, named Lot, and raised him as if he was their own son.

Lot was like a son to them. Because try as they might, they could not conceive children on their own. Throughout the years, Abraham and Sarah drew closer and closer to one another, but Sarah was unable to bear any children. It was heartbreaking.

This was his state of mind the first time the Voice came to him. It said, לְךָ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ, וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֵל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרַאֲךָ : Get going, leave this place, your homeland, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.¹ That was the first trial, and he passed it: together with Sarah and his household and his nephew Lot, they dutifully started off to the land of Canaan.

Subsequently, there were many other trials to endure, on the road to becoming G-d's covenanted partner. They survived famine and exile. They endured the separation from Lot. And, most famously, there was the time when G-d threw Abraham a major curve ball.

You remember: there were 2 cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, whose foundations were so corrupt that everything there became utterly noxious. But when G-d proposed the destruction of the cities, Abraham stepped forward and said, “Wait a minute -- shall not the judge of all the earth behave justly?” And he argued with G-d that if 50, 45, 40, 30, 20... even 10 innocent, decent people remained in the cities, the cities should be allowed to endure. G-d considers Abraham's case, and ultimately, agrees: “If there are 10 innocent in the cities, I will not destroy them.”²

After that scene, the Torah says that Abraham returned to his place. I think there's a sentence missing from the Biblical text. I think – buried somewhere in the sands where they found the Dead Sea Scrolls – there's a version that concludes with these words: “And G-d smiled and said, ‘**Finally!**’” Finally – here's someone who's so passionate about doing what's just and what's right that he'd even argue with Me for the sake of justice and decency. Finally –

¹Genesis 12:1

²Genesis 18:32

because I know that if he'll argue with me, certainly he'll stand up to any earthly tyrant that would behave abhorrently. Finally – I've got a partner. He's passed the test!"

Many more dramas unfolded in Abraham's life. At his advanced old age, the ancient prophecy began to come true, and Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Yitzchak, Isaac, and at this point in the story, everyone – including Sarah, Abraham, and the reader – takes a deep sigh of relief. Because now we can see that the ancient promises are starting to come true. Now we can envision how this story of trial and victory are going to play out. After much delay, we can see that Isaac will become the next generation of the family, and the fulfillment of all those promises of old. Abraham and Sarah were meant to be the parents of a great nation, and Isaac would be that heir. Now, finally, Abraham could go to sleep at night with the clarity of how the rest of his life and the rest of his story would unfold.

Until this one particular desert night, when the Voice called again. That Voice that he had always trusted, even when he wrestled with it, and even when it took him far from home, spoke: "Take your son, your only one, the one that you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

So Abraham awoke early the next morning, and gathered everything he needed. He took his sturdiest donkey, and two servants, and his son Isaac. And he personally prepared the wood for the sacrifice. And then this caravan set off towards the hills to the north, Abraham riding with his trusty knife dangling by his side throughout the three days' journey.

On the third day, the terrain had changed, and he lifted up his eyes and saw from afar... something. Something told him that this was far enough. He and Isaac dismounted, and went to a certain hilltop, together.

They arrived at the place. Abraham built an altar. He prepared the wood. He bound his son Isaac. He laid him on the altar, on top of the wood! He picked up the knife, raised it in the air, prepared to do this deed, he's really going to do it, to bring the knife down –

"Avraham, Avraham!" "*Hineni.*" "Don't lay a finger on that boy." So comes the voice from the angel of G-d, and this last test of Abraham has come to an end.

It began with the words, וְהִתְאַלְקִים נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם : G-d put Abraham to the test.³ He had survived famine, and wandering, and the threat of war. But the culmination of all the tests of Abraham's life was the Akedah.

"With 10 trials our father Abraham was tested," says the Mishna.⁴ The lists differ – Rashi has one, the midrash has a different one, Maimonides has a slightly different one – but they all agree: The binding of Isaac is the culmination, the Tenth of Ten Times when G-d tested Abraham. **The final exam.**

There are many, many questions to be asked about this story. But at the core is this: What kind of test is this? And did Abraham pass the test?

After all, Abraham is famous for raising moral objections to G-d. He argued so eloquently for the defense of Sodom and Gomorrah; in fact, that was the key to that test: Being willing to stand up even to G-d if he thought G-d was acting unjustly.

Where is that Abraham in the Akedah story? Abraham who so confidently argued with G-d about the fate of the cities – he reacts so silently when G-d calls him to sacrifice his son. How can this be?

³Genesis 22:1

⁴Pirkei Avot 5:3

I would propose today my own reading of the Akedah story and this final exam. I propose that **Abraham failed the test.**

How else can we understand the morality of G-d's challenge? Surely this test of the Akedah is like the test of Sodom and Gomorrah – G-d tests Abraham to see if he is willing to argue even with G-d when a state of affairs is so obviously unjust.

Would he, the one who was willing to argue the defense of the cities, also be willing to stand up for the well-being of his own family? Would he be willing to put down the knife and say, “I won't – can't – do it.”

But, he didn't. Abraham succumbs to traits that many visionaries have succumbed to: his family nearly gets sacrificed on his road to fulfilling his destiny. Almost. And he fails the tenth test, after 9 successes.

But, now wait a minute. If you've followed me this far, you'll agree we have a glaring problem: The text doesn't say he failed the test. Rather, at the end of the chapter, G-d says to Abraham, *I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore.*⁵ The text certainly seems to say that Abraham, after all this, reaped a great reward! After all, why did Abraham receive all the blessings at the end of the chapter if he failed this test so miserably?

And that, my friends, is precisely the point, and perhaps this is the great reason why we read this story on Rosh HaShana in the first place:

Why does Abraham receive all the rewards and blessings and promises? Yes, G-d says, you failed this test. I was hoping you'd argue with me for the well-being of your family as eloquently as you argued with me for the well-being of Sodom & Gomorrah. You came up short. You failed this one. **And I love you anyway.**

The message to Abraham, to his descendents, and to the readers of his story is: Being perfect is not the standard that G-d holds us to, and it is not the standard to which we should hold our heroes, our teachers, our parents, our children, our lovers, or ourselves. To all of them, at this season of the year especially, we should be able to say: I love you anyway, even when you fail. Even when you let me down. Because that trust is one of the assumptions of our love for each other.

We read this story on the Second Day of Rosh HaShana. The Ten Days of Teshuvah, from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur have begun: a time of looking within and without, of sifting through the pieces of our lives and our relationships and taking stock.

That is a healthy thing, but with it comes a danger: The danger of punishing ourselves or others for not being perfect enough.

That is a very dangerous message. Because it has been well documented that not only is perfectionism a dangerous pathology, it is also a major impediment to growing *at all.*

In Abraham we might recognize a classic personality – we might even recognize some of him in ourselves or in others we love: the perfectionist. What is a perfectionist? It doesn't mean, “someone with high standards.” Who could be against high standards? We should have higher standards, I believe, for most aspects of our lives.

No, the perfectionist is something else entirely:

⁵Genesis 22:17

- The perfectionist sees only the destination or the goal, but not the journey that will take him to that place;
- The perfectionist has a deep-seated fear of failure that prevents her from taking on a task where the outcome is not assured;
- The perfectionist is unable to improvise or adapt when small details go wrong along the way.
- To the perfectionist, success or failure is a zero-sum game: There is only success or failure, and no sense of growing and learning from mistakes made along the way.

Maybe you know someone like that. Sometimes these traits are applied inwardly, towards oneself. Sometimes they are applied outwardly, towards people in our lives, whom we expect to be perfect. You know, like when a child brings home a 90 on a math test, and the parent says, “What happened to the other 10 points?”

If our standard for ourselves or our loved ones is perfection, there is only one inevitable result: Disappointment. That’s because perfection is the realm of G-d and G-d alone; it is not on the human yardstick.

I think that perfectionism is a uniquely American pathology. You can see its impact all around us. We are bombarded by messages that tell us we should be more perfect, or we should feel bad if we aren’t. We should have the perfect children and the perfect lovers. We should have bodies like the models on the magazine covers. We should have perfect careers. And if we don’t have all these things, it simply must mean that we don’t want it badly enough, and we are guilty.

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar is a psychologist and author who teaches at Harvard. In fact, his lectures are a Harvard phenomenon: He currently teaches a course that is the most heavily enrolled undergraduate course in college’s history. Over 1400 students come to hear him lecture – on the subject of “How to Be Happy.” Really – all those brilliant minds in the Harvard community, looking to Tal Ben-Shahar for insights on what they’re missing in their lives about the pursuit of happiness. Surely he has tapped into something here!

Well, the Israeli-born Ben-Shahar – his name means in English, “Morning Dew” – has written a new book called *The Pursuit of Perfect*. And in it, he describes how chasing perfection inevitably leads to frustration and dead-ends.

He writes:

It’s easy to understand how perfectionism leads to the rejection of failure and painful emotions. What is surprising, though, is how perfectionism can lead to the rejection of *success*. We see this in people who seem to “have it all” but are nevertheless unhappy. If the only dream we have is of a perfect life, we are doomed to disappointment, since such dreams simply cannot come true in the real world.⁶

In fact, his research shows that those who expect perfection from themselves – in their work or in their relationships – inevitably end up falling short. A person’s long-term success and happiness are largely based on pursuing challenging goals, but at the same time accepting failure and learning from it.

⁶ Tal Ben-Shahar, *The Pursuit of Perfect* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2009), xix.

The ability to take failure and to grow from it is, for many great leaders, a key to their success. They say of Thomas Edison that while he was developing the first light bulb, he made over 1,000 different attempts. Each one was a failure. He could have thrown up his hands in frustration at any step along the way. Instead, each failure was a step back to the drawing-board. But imagine – 1,000 different times! Somebody once asked Edison what it felt like to be such a failure. He replied: “A failure?” he asked. “I’m not a failure. I invented the light bulb. It was simply a 1000-stage process.”⁷

Or consider this example, which is drawn from Dr. Ben-Shahar’s book:

There once was a man who at the age of 22 lost his job. One year later he decided to try his luck in politics, and ran for his state legislature. He lost. Sensing that politics wasn’t for him, he tried his hand at business again – another bust. He suffered a nervous breakdown at age 27. Subsequently, recovering from that crisis, he decided to run for office again, this time for a congressional seat. He lost. Five years later he ran again, and lost. When he was 46 years old, he ran for the state Senate seat. He lost. When that failed, he sought the nomination for vice president, and lost. Just shy of his 50th birthday, he ran one more time for the Senate and lost. But two years after that defeat, this man finally won an election, and he became the President of the United States. His name was Abraham Lincoln.⁸

Similarly, I have been thinking about the legacy of Ted Kennedy. Kennedy, the Lion of Senate, was of course a great advocate of social justice, as well as being a terrific friend of the State of Israel and this Reform Jewish movement of ours. As you and I well know, he also had some awful flaws in his character, which reach their apogee in Chappaquiddick. Can we rectify the two things?

I was listening to an appreciation of Kennedy on NPR last month after his death. One of the guests – I’m sorry I can’t recall who it was – was asked by the host whether it was possible for a greatly flawed man to be considered a great man. The response was for the ages: **“In my experience, that’s the only sort of great man there is.”**

By decrying perfection, it doesn’t mean we aren’t supposed to fulfill the best we can be. It doesn’t mean that we should set low standards for ourselves, our children, or for one another. I would not suggest that the message of the *Akedah* or Tal Ben-Shahar is to shrug off any opportunity for growth by saying, “Hey, I’m not perfect.” In fact, the message is quite the opposite. Dr. Ben-Shahar explains that perfectionism is a zero-sum game: The perfectionist says, if I can’t win, it’s not worth participating; if I can’t be the best, I won’t try at all.

Instead, Ben-Shahar suggests that perfectionism prevents us from being our fullest selves. Where the perfectionist sees life’s journey as a straight line, we know that life’s path has spirals and cul-de-sacs. The perfectionist masks a deep-seated fear of failure; we strive to accept failure, like Edison, as feedback towards our goal. The perfectionist is defensive, rigid, and static; we strive to be open to suggestions, forgiving, and adaptable. All of which are goals that lead to a richer, healthier, and ultimately more successful life.⁹

Let’s go back to that mountain on that day so long ago. Abraham was still holding the knife above his head when G-d called to him, “Abraham, Abraham. Don’t lay a finger on that boy!”

⁷ On the Internet, perhaps apocryphal, in several forms.

⁸ Ben-Shahar, p.29

⁹ Ben-Shahar, p.18.

How did Abraham feel in that moment? Was he relieved? Disappointed? Scared to death?

I imagine that at that moment, a great flood of self-awareness seeped into Abraham's being. He saw himself as he was for the first time in a long time. He looked down and peered directly into Isaac's eyes.

And that's the moment that Abraham realized that he had failed.

And he became afraid. Deeply afraid. In this moment of blindness, had he just forfeited all the blessings that he had been promised? He had been tested, but when the final exam came around, he came up short. What about the blessings?

"What about the blessings?" replies G-d. "Yes, Abraham, you still get the blessings. I love you anyway. I wasn't looking for perfection. I was looking for you."

And Abraham saw that G-d saw, and Abraham named that place Ad-nai-yireh; which means, 'On the mount of Adonai there is seeing.'

And so it comes to be:

G-d says, "I will bestow My Blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants."¹⁰

G-d forgives Abraham for not being perfect. Perhaps, by the end of his life, Abraham has learned to forgive himself.

On these Days of Awe, I pray that we, too, can find that sense of forgiveness. May we find the strength this year to no longer sacrifice those we care about on the altar of perfection. Then, and only then, can we get moving on the real work of this season: growing, healing, living lives that are more full, more whole, and at peace.

Amen.

¹⁰ Gen. 22:17-18