

The Strength to Continue On:
Jewish response to challenging times

Rosh Hashanah 5782

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L'shanah tovah everyone. Although Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the world, our Torah readings in the morning are not from the narrative of creation. Rather, we get the messy, complicated lives of Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham and Isaac. Instead of God's supernal power and the creation of the heavens, sun and moon, we read instead of jealousy, anger, cruelty, compassion and the challenges of faith in the human realm. This year, what struck me most was the opening verse for the second day of Rosh Hashanah:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיָּחַם אֱלֹהִים אֶת־אַבְרָהָם

And it was, after these things, God tested Avraham.

Avraham's test, of course, was the command to bind, prepare to sacrifice and then unbind his son Isaac.

Before I go any further, let me clarify something important: *I do not bring forward this biblical verse, “and God tested Avraham” to imply that the pandemic is God testing us with God’s divine logic or motivation hidden from view.* Nonetheless, at this turn of the year, we may be feeling depleted, overwhelmed or frustrated -- worried, uncertain and grieving our many losses. Indeed, we may feel... tested.

It is an understatement, of course, to say that this has been a challenging year. Some of us have lost loved ones to the pandemic, others have gotten sick or feared for friends and family. Our lives and livelihoods have been disrupted. At this time last year, many of us held onto the hope or expectation that we would be able to gather together fully in this Sanctuary, celebrating our freedom from the worst of the pandemic. Instead, again we need to be cautious as the Delta variant spreads. We find ourselves – still – in difficult conditions that are bigger than we are and beyond our complete control. The future is uncertain.

So, this Rosh Hashanah morning I want to ask: What does Judaism teach us about how to respond, how to endure, when life experiences test us?

To answer this question, we'll take a deeper dive into the biblical verse I introduced a moment ago, consider the conditions of our people during the trials of their desert wanderings, and then go to an unlikely place for Rosh Hashanah, the story of the biblical heroines Ruth and Naomi.

The paradigm we began with is that of Avraham. Rabbinic commentators imagined that Avraham actually underwent ten major tests in his life, the most profound of which was the call to bind and sacrifice Isaac and then, in the end, to release him unharmed. How do we understand, then, “And after these things, God tested Avraham”?

The 18th century rabbi Moshe Luzzatto saw the language of trial or test as the paradigm for the very nature of living. Everything good and bad could be seen as a trial. Even good fortune comes with its challenges of complacency, selfishness and greed. For Luzatto, life is like a “raging battlefield” as we move

from one test to the next, constantly challenged to survive each trial.

For other rabbis, though, life is not to be understood as a series of tests that we pass or fail. Rabbi Alan Morinis, a leader of the modern Musar movement – a Jewish spiritual practice that focuses on virtues, ethics and character development -- asks us to look at “tests” from a different perspective. He reminds us that the root of the word “test” nisayon” – nun samech – is the same root as the words for both miracle and banner. It carries with it the connotation of being uplifted or raised up like a flag. So, the verse we’re looking at can be read instead: “God raised Abraham up.”

In the words of Morinis, drawing on the teachings of the 13th century commentator Ramban “ ... A test is not meant to see if a person can withstand the test or not... Rather, life is set up in its fundamental structure to give us many tests because this is the life process through which we become strengthened and more resourced [so we can rise up to the higher level of greatness that

is our potential]...tests are not pass/fail, but the process of becoming.”

We need to be very careful here. When someone is suffering, or grieving or in pain, we don't say their sorrows have come to them to teach them a lesson; Rather, Morinis's more generous reading of the trials of life puts before us the possibility that we might eventually derive meaning and personal growth from our struggles.

Still, while we are struggling, the question remains: Where will we get the strength to continue on? How do we make sure that our trials do not overcome us?

This past summer, amidst a weariness deeper than I have known before, I read with amazement – and envy - the story of the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Manna fell from the heavens for them. A cloud of glory and a pillar of fire showed them the way. Their clothes never wore out and their feet did not swell. A rabbinic tale even imagines that the cloud of glory cleaned and pressed their clothes -- cosmic dry cleaning! Truly

God's protection and sustenance was with them each step of the way.

I do not expect such miracles for us. My experience of God's presence in the world, clearly, is different from that of our biblical ancestors. And so I found myself searching for answers in an unlikely place for the High Holy Days: the book which we read on Shavuot, the Book of Ruth.

The story of Ruth is set in the period of the Judges -- after the Israelites had settled in Canaan, but before they demanded a king. In this fraught and chaotic time we learn of the struggles and trials of Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. It is through *chesed* -- human acts of lovingkindness -- that she and Ruth not only endure, but ultimately prosper.

Famine had driven Naomi, her husband and two sons to Moab, where the sons marry. Then tragedy strikes -- in Moab, Naomi's husband and both sons die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, widowed and penniless. Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem to seek food and any protection available in her homeland. She implores her daughters-in-law to

stay in their native land of Moab; but Ruth, able-bodied and able to glean the fields, insists that she will accompany Naomi:

Your people My people

Your God My God

Wherever you go I will go

Wherever you die I shall die

Her first act of resilience and her first lesson to us in surviving personal trial - is that she claims an identity and declares her belonging to a community. And in a profound act of *Chesed*, of loving kindness, she promises to accompany and support her mother-in-law.

In Bethlehem, Ruth goes out to find food and meets Boaz, a wealthy landowner who is also kin to Naomi. And here the cycle of *chesed* continues. Boaz, impressed by all that Ruth has done for Naomi, extends life-saving privileges and protections to Ruth. Ultimately, they marry, and the couple's great-grandson is said to be King David. They found the ancestral line from which, according to tradition, the Messiah will come.

It is striking that the explicit actions of God are all but absent in the Book of Ruth. Prayers are invoked for God's blessing, but all the blessings that come into the story – the movement, as Tikva Frymer-Kensky describes it, "...from famine to fullness, from futility to fertility" – come through human acts of loving kindness. Alicia Ostriker notes, "God's kindness invoked by human beings is also enacted by them....To put it another way, the kindness of human beings reveals the kindness of God." That is: Through our actions, we bring God into the world.

As a community we have responded to the trials of this year through tremendous acts of *chesed*. As members of a community, we have not stood alone but have woven the bonds that make God manifest and have strengthened ourselves even as we give each other support, companionship and hope.

Many of you may have received the announcement about how one of our own Kehillah Religious School grads, Alex Werden, now a lieutenant in the military is helping supervise the welcoming Afghan Evacuees. We found out through him and his father that the refugees were in need of two simple things upon arrival: cell

phone chargers and soccer balls for the kids and he wondered if his community at home could help. Within a day, Kehillah members had sent 700 phone chargers to Wisconsin along with, in Alex's words, enough soccer balls to break every window in Wisconsin.

This was just last week. Throughout the year our mitzvah knitters made over 20 shawls which lovingkindness circle members and I were able to place around the shoulders of mourners as a comfort during Shiva. Young religious school students created dozens of beautiful holiday baskets and hand delivered them with family members to homebound elders otherwise isolated during these festive times. Dozens of volunteers making monthly snack drops brought over 200 hand baked snacks to help sustain the UNC COVID medical team. Our monthly food drive for IFC continued even this Sunday of a holiday weekend, and we have brought in up to 70 bags of food per delivery.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe comments on the remarkable verse in the Psalms, "The world is built of your love." (Psalms 89:2) He

continues with this remarkable insight: “Every act of hesed, even a small one, is an actual act of building and creation, enlivening the spirit of the broken-hearted.” (Rav Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, vol. 2, p. 198)

To circle back for a moment: Lest you think I was too quick to dismiss our Israelite ancestors, there are at least two more valuable lessons from their decades in the wilderness that I want to offer before I conclude.

The book of Numbers goes to great lengths to list all **42** of the places where the Israelites stopped and encamped during their arduous journey from Egypt to Canaan. I have come to understand that this passage, which in the past has seemed tedious and repetitive, actually has deep wisdom for us: If you’re going to go the distance, you’ve got to stop and rest. Ideally, the cycle of the Jewish year provides us with times for resting, reflection, restoration – and honoring how far we’ve come in the journey. But we can seek out small moments in a week, in a day, to pause and catch our breath.

Second of all, our ancestors *kvetched!* Often, they were not happy to be in the wilderness; they longed for certainty, even if that meant slavery. But while they complained, they continued on the journey to Canaan. We, too, do not always have to be happy and serene; we do not have to act as if this is always easy. In the tradition of our ancestors, we can *kvetch* – and keep doing acts of lovingkindness and keep moving forward.

No doubt we gather this Rosh Hashanah feeling tested and weary. Through each act of *Chesed* may God be with us, helping us to endure, and giving us strength. In this way, even as we are tested, may we live lives of meaning, creating with God blessing and sweetness in the New Year . L'shanah tovah.