



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

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**Rosh Hashanah**  
**September 18 (Sundown) - September 20 (Evening) 2020**  
**1-2 Tishrei 5781**



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### "We Can Learn from Our Trials"

How life teaches us! We read books and attend lectures and we think we are ready for what life brings. Armed with our learning, we venture into the world only to discover that the formulas of the brain do not help bind the wounds of the heart.

The first time I went to counsel someone who was dying, a rabbi with many years of experience as a chaplain accompanied me. With the arrogance of youth, I believed that nothing good could ever come from pain. Imagine my horror when Rabbi Krause asked the patient, "What has your cancer taught you?" And imagine my surprise when the patient answered with the many valuable lessons that he had derived from his illness: renewed love of life, better priorities, deeper love for his family. This man knew exactly what Rabbi Krause was addressing, and he was able to share the precious insights that he had gained at such a high price.

When I was fourteen, I, too, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Having endured a terrible pain, so embarrassing that I hid it from my family for two years, I could not take it anymore. Once I revealed my suffering to my parents, they rushed me to a doctor. I was poked and prodded by countless experts, each trying to decide on a productive response. Thank God, one clever dermatologist noticed some bumps on my arm, and connected that to my internal affliction. Within two weeks, I was undergoing chemo- and radiation therapy that lasted for several months.

Even though the assessment that my cancer was terminal and inoperable turned out to be an exaggeration, the pain and fear were not. I would gladly never have suffered that anguish. But I know that I could not be the rabbi, counselor, husband, father, or friend I am today were it not for the lessons I learned then. The truth is, each of us faces challenges and endures pain — our own and that of our loved ones — at different points in our lives.

As creatures who are mortal, it is not ours to choose whether or not we suffer. However, we do have the power to choose how we respond to our suffering. It is in this light that I would like to think about the *Akedah*, that shocking story of the trial of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. Each year, when we read this story in the middle of our holiest season, it makes us profoundly uncomfortable. Part of our struggle, no doubt, is that we object to a God who demands the sacrifice of what we love most.

We hate that Abraham is called to demonstrate faithfulness by offering up his beloved son. According to tradition, Abraham is a stand-in for each of us: “Sound a ram’s horn before Me so that I remember in your behalf the binding of Isaac and count it to you as though you had bound yourselves before Me.” We all perceive our own pain in Abraham’s silent anguish. Just like Abraham, we, too, must concede that life puts us on trial. We cannot choose whether we will suffer or not, but we can decide what to do with our suffering.

Abraham has no exemption from suffering; indeed, his righteousness makes him more aware of his own pain. As the *midrash* notes, “God tests the faith of the righteous in that God reveals to them only at a later time the ultimate meaning of the trials to which they are subjected.” Like the rest of us, in the midst of suffering, Abraham cannot discern purpose or pattern. Only pain.

And in his experience of pain, Abraham is no different than any other human being. Indeed, according to the *Zohar*, the great work of the *Kabbalah*, to live is to lose, to be is to suffer and to grieve: “Rabbi Shimon said: we have learned that the expression ‘And it came to pass in the days of’ denotes sorrow, while the expression ‘And it came to pass’ even without ‘in the days of’ is still tinged with sorrow.”

*Tinged with sorrow.* I cannot think of a better description of what it feels like to be alive. We Jews know that the dominant flavor of life is bittersweet; even in our moments of greatest joy, we recall our losses. And even during our greatest grief, we draw consolation from love and hope. Being tried does not have to destroy us. Interestingly, the biblical word for test, *nissayon*, develops into the modern Hebrew word for experience or experiment. We, alone, can transform our tests into opportunities for new understandings and deeper connections. With the right attitude, our trials can transform us. The philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said, “What does not kill me, makes me stronger.” I think Abraham would have said, “What does not kill me, can make me more compassionate.”

Why is Abraham tested? We are never told. One possibility is that suffering was a necessary — if regrettable — spur to caring. Throughout his life, Abraham had known only success: a beautiful and devoted wife, great wealth, prominence, and intimacy with the Creator of the universe. With all that bounty, how could he empathize with others? How could he not feel superior to other people with their failures and their sorrows?

Suffering teaches Abraham what success could not. The *Zohar* notes this when it asks, “Why is it written that God tested Abraham and not Isaac? It had to be Abraham! He had to be crowned with rigors. Abraham was not complete until now.”

Perhaps Abraham’s trial adds a layer of depth to his faith. How easy it is, when all goes well, to put God in our pocket, to think of God as a big buddy. Suffering makes such narcissistic and arrogant faith impossible.

By undergoing his ordeal, Abraham transcends the bartering faith of his youth for the more nuanced trustfulness of mature *emunah*. As the psalmist sings: “You Who have made me undergo many troubles and misfortunes will revive me again. You will turn and comfort me.” While faith does not exempt us from tragedy, it does provide comfort. Abraham learns that faithfulness between God and humanity is commitment, relationship, steadfastness.

Just as the Torah records no reason for Abraham’s trial, few of us ever know why we endure suffering and sorrow. But we do know that how we respond to suffering has the power to transform us. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan notes, “According to Jewish traditional teaching, a person is not trapped but tested. Our vicissitudes should serve as a challenge to our faith. To deny the worth of life and to fall into despair because the promise is slow of fulfillment is to fail the test.” How we cope with the trials of life spells the difference between renewal and resignation, between spiritual growth and spiritual stagnation.

Abraham’s greatness lies precisely in his determination to respond to his trial with resilience. God calls out the test, and Abraham answers, “*Hineni*, here I am.

Even without knowing where he is going, Abraham arises early, packs the donkeys himself, eager to face whatever life may bring. In the words of Rabbi Julian Morgenstern, “This is the true faith, which enables us to endure all trials and stand all tests, and prove ourselves fit and ready for the great work for which, sooner or later, God calls everyone of us.”

Abraham passes the test because he faces the challenge. Rather than fleeing, rather than cowering and allowing the struggle to cripple him, Abraham moves forward, to go wherever it is that his path in life will lead.

And Abraham learns that suffering can be a source of insight. It is in this spirit that the Ramban, Rabbi Moses Nachmanides, asserts, “All trials in the Torah are for the good of the one who is being tried.” Not that pain is good; Judaism does not celebrate misery. But neither do we refuse to learn from life’s challenges. In the *Talmud Yerushalmi* it says, “Why do you scorn suffering?” The great men and women of the Torah wrestle with their pain and emerge wiser and better. In that sense alone their trials are for their benefit.

Abraham’s trial becomes a source of personal growth and spiritual depth. The *Zohar* recognizes a hint of that when, at the moment Isaac is bound to the altar and Abraham raises the knife in the air, an angel of the Lord calls out: “Abraham! Abraham!” Why does the angel say Abraham’s name twice? Rebbe Hiyya says that the angel repeats “Abraham!” to animate him with a new spirit and to spur him to new activity with a new heart. Indeed, the *Zohar* claims that the angels shouted “Abraham! Abraham!” to show that “the latter Abraham was not like the former Abraham; the latter was the perfected Abraham while the former was still incomplete.”

“God tries everyone in some ways. The real test is the way we offer our sacrifice, the willingness with which we give up what is dear, the perfect faith in God which we still preserve, and which keeps from doubting God’s wisdom and goodness.” These words of Rabbi Morgenstern’s, written almost a century ago, translate the great lesson of the *Akedah*: we do not seek to suffer. We do not deify pain. But we know that suffering and pain are part of the journey we call life, and we know that we can learn, and grow, even from an encounter with tragedy. In this New Year, may God give us the wisdom and fortitude to derive experience from our tests, so that we may all be strengthened and give strength to each other.

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