

## The Lech Lecha Saga and the Tests of Abraham

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In Pirkei Avot we read: “Our father Abraham was tested with ten tests and he withstood them all—in order to make known how great was our father Abraham’s love [for God].” (Avot 5:2-3)

What were these tests that Abraham passed? Common amongst most commentators are these six: 1. Abraham leaving his homeland, 2. the famine in Canaan, 3. war with the four kings, 4. circumcision at an advanced age, 5. removing Hagar and Yishmael from the house, and 6. the command to sacrifice Isaac. The need to fill in the remaining four tests has commentators cherry-picking from other events in Abraham’s life, though not all from biblical sources.

While numerous commentaries list the midrashic episode of Nimrod throwing Abraham in the furnace as the first test, R Moshe Maimonades appears to stick to the biblical texts and does not feel the need to illustrate an incident of Abraham’s heroism as told through midrash, to merit his divine selection as the future father of a great nation.

And indeed Rambam manages to collate ten trials from the first Lech Lecha to the second, exclusively from the biblical text. He does so by separating the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael into two discrete trials, and by counting each of Sarah’s abductions - first by the Egyptians, and later by Abimelech in Gerar.

I’ll tackle the abductions first: It is not surprising that some commentators leave either one or both of these abduction episodes out. Abraham’s “success” in each of these two incidents appears to be more down to sheer luck than any calculated risk taking on Abraham’s part. Each of the two plots could have gone horribly wrong at any point, and certainly would have left Sarah wondering where her husband’s loyalty lies and common sense has disappeared to ... but more on that later.

Other commentators also count the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael as two separate trials, claiming a different set of reasons applied to the expulsion of Hagar the mother and her son Yishmael. R Moshe Ben Nachman (Ramban) takes the differences to the extreme, viewing the expulsion of Hagar as sinful – and therefore a failure on Abraham’s part, thus excluding it from the list altogether.

Maimonades also enumerates Abraham’s marriage with Hagar as one of the trials, a move questioned by Meiri. We can generally agree that marriage presents a wide gamut of challenges, but is this a special test designed for Abraham or is Maimonades stretching the mark a bit? Perhaps the challenge stems from the tension of having two wives after having taken on a second wife in the pursuit of children, for many men, one wife is more than they can handle, so bringing a second wife into the equation requires a considerable degree of bravery. Meiri, however, suggests that the test consisted of the struggle to raise children after having already despaired of bearing offspring, and the challenge emanating from the particular dynamic leading up to the birth of Yishmael, shortly followed by the subsequent expulsion of the child and his mother.

Almost all commentators see the akedah the culmination of Abraham's career. The literary parallel between the "lech lecha" that initiates Abraham's journey in today's parsha (Bereishit 12:1) and the "lech lecha" of the akedah (Bereishit 22:2) creates a sense of bookends framing our patriarch's mission and his devotion to God. His mission begins and ends with the identical phrase Lech Lecha – Go Forth.

The drama of the akedah also makes it a likely candidate for a culmination, however not all commentators see it as such: Rabbenu Yonah of Geronah lists the akedah as the penultimate trial, and adds the task of buying a burial plot for Sarah as the tenth and final test. Other commentators may belittle this additional trial, rationalising that after passing what could be seen as the ultimate test, Abraham might then not concern himself with buying a burial plot, however as one R. Bezalel Zolty offers in support of Rabbenu Yonah's rationale: That Abraham indeed proceed to find a respectful burial plot for his beloved wife testifies to Abraham's authentic greatness.

And this leads me on to one final provocative thought (and forgive me for briefly jumping ahead into the next two parshot: There is no question that the akedah is a test for Abraham. And all commentators agree that it is a test that he passes. However, I would like to bring together a few curious hints to what is to come, and possibly revisit this success. Let's consider the following:

1. After the Akedah, God no longer speaks directly to Abraham.
2. Abraham returns with his attendees to Beer Sheva
3. Sarah dies in Kiryat Arba
4. Abraham goes to Kiryat Arba to bury Sarah

There are different commentaries that attempt to explain the geographical distances between Abraham and Sarah at the time of her death and why they came about. Differing explanations are offered by Rashi, Rabbi Isaac bar Yehudah and Rabbi Yehudah haChasid as to why Abraham was in Beersheva, while other Rabbis place Abraham in Hebron. I will not go into these in detail, because what is interesting is not the differences between them, but the common denominator.

None of the commentators seem to suggest that following the Akedah trial, Sarah decides to walk out on Abraham of her own accord. And I do wonder if indeed there is a taboo on such thoughts among the great Rabbis.

Yet could it be that Sarah, horrified by the fact that her husband would sacrifice their only son to follow God's will, would walk out on her husband? I'll remind you that Abraham does have a history of tempting fate with other people's lives, namely Sarah's, in not one, but two almost identical abduction incidents. So this could indeed be the proverbial straw that breaks the proverbial camel's back: the step that Abraham takes which is too far for Sarah to handle. And to be fair, what kind of mother would willingly stand back and resist all motherly instinct to protect her only son, and allow such a thing to happen?

And then there is the communication between God and Abraham, only through angels following the akedah, unlike before where God spoke to Abraham directly.

Yet these aspects of the Akedah episode are not explored – what could be interpreted to be a catastrophic breakdown in trust between Abraham and Sarah, and a further breakdown in communication between God and Abraham, both seem to be brushed under the rug... and understandably so. This turn of events threatens to shed the “success” from the akedah story and provide an inconvenient “fail” as a conclusion to Abraham’s spiritual journey, his “Lech Lecha” which starts out as a promise to become the father of nations could not possibly end in failure. To the best of my knowledge, none of the great Rabbis have excluded the akedah story from the list of Abraham’s successful tests, to do so would have been considered far too controversial.

The akedah saga is, nonetheless, a pivotal game changer. Lines have been crossed that probably should never have been crossed, and things will never be the same again for Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and God.

And if indeed there is failure at the akedah, is the failure Abraham’s own to bear alone? Or does God share responsibility in this act of ultimate loyalty that almost sees the promise of Abraham’s great host of nations cut short with one stroke of the knife? Is it guilt that drives God away from ever communicating directly with Abraham again, and indeed is it guilt that drives Abraham to go to such lengths to find Sarah – the wife who may have walked out on him in the face of his zealous loyalty to God – an honourable resting place?

In Lech Lecha, Abram bravely sets off on a journey into the unknown to prove his loyalty to God. If he had the gift of foresight two parshot forward, would he have done the same...?

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