

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Vayaera

"After some time, God tested Abraham." This is one of the most prominent lines of this week's Torah portion. God tests Abraham. God asks Abraham to go on a journey with his son, Isaac. Abraham is to take the lad up the mountain, and make of him a burnt offering. This is a horrific text, and for many years, I have been stuck on figuring out the result of this test. Volumes upon volumes of books house the several thousands of years of commentary and debate over this story. For many, it is nothing more than a polemic against child sacrifice. For many, this text demonstrates the blessing of blind faith. Abraham was so faithful that he would withhold nothing from God. For a good part of Christianity, this text predicts the sacrifice of Jesus. Even within the early Jewish midrash, some commentaries argue that Abraham actually killed Isaac, (the story ends as Abraham returns to the servants alone).

There are some radical thinkers out there who claim that Abraham failed the test. The three day journey in silence, that he never tells Sarah of the game plan, and the question Isaac posed as they were going up the mountain ("Uh, Dad, so where is this animal we are going to offer?"), all point the reader to grapple with Abraham's blindness. God had just promised our patriarch that through Isaac, there would be a great nation. That cannot happen if Isaac was killed on the mountain. The inability to stand up to God is seen by these commentators is the testimony showing a lack of faith. After all, four fifths of the Torah is about a guy who argues with God all the time - Moses. Biblically, God keeps testing and we keep judging the character tested by our perceptions of the test results. Yes, for generations the sages have struggled to prove the righteousness of Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Job, to condemn them as moral failures, or to simply prove their humanness as they go through life succeeding or failing along the way.

I struggle with the whole concept of being tested. Children test us, parents test us, friends, bosses, and co-workers test us. One could look at every task we undertake as a test of our wisdom and stamina. Face it, none of us like being tested by family, friends, or co-workers. In fact, we downright resent it. It seems that there needs to be one place -- one direction in which we might turn that accepts us, unconditionally. One would like to think that this place/direction was God. Throughout all of faith traditions, though, we find test after test. In the East, the test deals with one's ability to be free of judgment. In the West, the tests seem to be rooted in supremacy of one belief over another. Each one of us, though, talks about a loving God, Who is responsible for the majestic blessings of creation. We must be missing something.

Herein is the problem. Whatever divine inspiration goes into the creation of religious scriptures, the moment we put our hand to recording/translating/transmitting that message into language, we taint it with our own imperfection - the imperfection of being human. I have to believe that the test texts are our problem and not God's. My heart and head are secure that the God of Biblical literature is a mere human reflection of whatever God really is. The Biblical God's emotive outbursts, errant moments, and sometimes questionable judgment are not attributable to God, only our best understanding of our ability to relate to something beyond us. Neither condemnation of God nor blind acceptance of God's perfection, this assertion is true simply because our limited access to mind and the limitations of language will not allow us to define God. The notion of testing is also rooted in our own limitations. By

nature we need approval and external affirmation of our own authenticity. We need someone else to tell us that we are good. We also need to make sure that other people measure up to our standards. Based on our assessment of their performance on our test, we categorize them as "in" or "out" of our respective circles. Whatever God is, I cannot believe that there is an "out" in terms of the world's relationships. I guess I am stuck, for I find it heretical that books teaching us how to use and find God would also provide us tools to then claim one or the other is somehow excluded from God (as though we had the right to make or even interpret that choice). The more I study, the more sure I am that the magic of the Bible is in what it does not do. It does not provide mandates, for as to each rule we take from the book, there are other rules calling them into question. The Bible does not speak with one voice, when used in its originally intended manner, it speaks with each voice and in every generation. The Bible does make me look at my neighbor, but does not let me simply dismiss him. Where one can find texts instructing us to root out this group or that group, there are other texts that command us to live amongst those groups. In short, when we read the Bible as if its words are the sum total of its message, we are not fostering religion, and given what many do with the text, we are not even fostering community or humanity. We are only creating the next test, creating the hoops through which we expect others to jump. I do not think that God tests us. I think we do, and ... I think we need to stop doing so much of it. We all pass and we all fail -- perhaps the better answer should be that we all just accept that ... we are. Shabbat Shalom.