



Abraham's Resilience • Parshat Vayera

According to the *Mishna* in *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, Abraham was challenged by ten trials, and he withstood each test, demonstrating the greatness of his love and devotion to God (*Avot* 5:3). The tests, according to Maimonides, begin in *Parshat Lech Lecha* with Abram being asked to leave his homeland, and culminate in God's command to Abraham at the end of our Torah reading, *Parshat Vayera*, to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. This last challenge, the most difficult one to fulfill, is the only one explicitly labeled as a test in the actual text.

Why did God test Abraham? This philosophically-loaded question has been addressed by many important Jewish thinkers, who used this test-case as a springboard to discuss the function of challenges and suffering, in general. The starting point for the deliberation is that since God is omniscient, He did not need to test Abraham to know whether he would succeed in passing the trial. Rather, the test served to either increase Abraham's reward, elevate his status and influence among others, or contribute directly to his personal development.

For some, the answer to this theological conundrum is rooted in the Hebrew word used to denote "test" in this context: *nisa*. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, for example, connects the word *nisa*, spelled here with the Hebrew letter *samech* to the phonetically similar *nasa*, spelled with the letter *sin*. Just like *nasa* with a *sin* means "bringing something to a further or higher position" so too,

nasa with a *samech* is a test which functions to elevate someone into a stronger position. The test allows latent talents to come to the fore, generating leadership growth.

One midrash, in contrast, connects the word *nisa* to the word *nes*, used to describe the mast or sail of a ship (*Bereishit Rabbah* 55:1). One interpretation of this midrash is that the test is meant to serve as a sign and a banner to the rest of the world to witness that Abraham achieved greatness as a devout servant of God. Alternatively, the 16th century Moroccan scholar, Rabbi Vidal ha-Tsarefati, in his commentary, *Imrei Yosher*, explains that in this midrash the test serves as a mechanism to improve Abraham's character. Here the metaphor of the raising of the sails is not meant to evoke a sign or a signal, but rather as the instrument that allows the ship to function effectively.

In a fascinating parallel, Dr. Scott Barry Kaufman in *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization*, adds to the work of humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow with recent findings within the field of psychology. One of Kaufman's main heuristic tools for conceptualizing self-growth moves away from the image of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a pyramid formation, which Maslow himself never suggested, to think of self-actualization through the metaphor of a sailboat. Lower-level security needs of safety, connection, and self-esteem are reflected in the hull of the boat. Higher-level needs of exploration, love, and

purpose, which underpin the ability to flourish and self-actualize, are represented in the sail. The hull protects us from the dangerous water, but it is the sail that allows us to explore, grow, and move with a sense of meaning and direction.

Each morning, we pray to God that we not be tested. We do not glorify suffering in Judaism, as evident by the Talmudic teaching: “neither suffering nor its reward” (BT *Berachot* 5b). We do not seek out dangerous challenges. But when we *are* confronted with a test, we are called upon to rise to the challenge and grow into and from the experience. The literature on post-traumatic growth (PTG) indicates that suffering can, but does not always, strengthen relationships, help people identify new life possibilities, and can increase love, generosity, humility, diligence, and purpose. It can promote spiritual maturation, and a greater appreciation of life.

In their 2020 book, *ISResilience: What Israelis Can Teach the World*, StandWithUs executive director, Michael Dickson, and trauma-specialist, Dr. Naomi L. Baum, profile stories from Israel that reflect and embody the resilience that is at the heart of the State of Israel. They note how “Israelis routinely carry on with their day-to-day lives not just when things are calm and peaceful but when rockets are launched at them, through stabbing intifadas, during official conflicts and wars and unofficial waves of gruesome terrorism. And they don’t just survive – they thrive.”

If given the choice, we would all turn back the clock to October 6th and do everything within our power to prevent Hamas from attacking Israel. Yet, confronted with this unfathomable challenge, we are called on to learn from Abraham and try as hard as we can to raise our sails. Israelis today are demonstrating to the rest of the world their physical and spiritual resilience and determination.

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Character Challenge: Reflect either on the current situation in Israel or on another challenging personal experience. What have you learned from suffering that has changed you?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “There is also something really unusual about Jews and Judaism; as it says in Exodus 1:12, ‘The more they were oppressed, the stronger they grew.’ That is what I call super-resilience. Resilience means you survive the pressures. Super resilience means you grow stronger with the pressures. That is really the gift we give our children” (Interview with Rabbi Ari Kayser, *Perspectives*, Issue 10, p. 15).