

October 6, 2013

Parashat Noach

Shabbat Shalom. This d'var torah is being given in honor of my mother's first yahrtzeit. May her n'shama have an aliyah.

Today is not actually my mother's yahrtzeit. That date falls tonight. I therefore wanted to speak about a topic that relates both to this week's parasha, Noach, and next week's parasha, Lech L'cha. At the end of Noach, in the Shivi'i aliyah that I lained, we're introduced to Avraham and his family, Sarah, Terah, Lot, etc. So I'm going to talk about Avraham and his 10 tests. More specifically, which is the most impressive of the 10 tests. These 10 tests start in Noach and continue through Lech L'cha and even into the parasha Vayera.

A quick digression. My son Aaron isn't here, but he likes it when I add some family "fun facts" to my talks. In this talk, I have two. The first one, that I'll share now, is that my father's parents were named Avraham and Sarah; and I am named Avraham and my wife Lynda, somewhat surprisingly, is named Sarah. So at least I've always got that going for me.

Now, I know what you're thinking. The greatest of the 10 tests is clearly test #10, the akeidah. That's what you're taught in school, we read about the akeidah on Rosh Hashanah, Rebecca [Minkus-Lieberman] spoke about its importance on the High Holidays, and Rachel [Adler] did the same last week in her d'var torah. Plus, you may think that because it's the 10th of the 10 tests, it must be the most impressive one, just like Makat B'chorot was the biggest of the 10 plagues.

Clearly, the akeidah is an important test. I don't dispute that. But keep an open mind. My topic is what was the most "impressive" test for Avraham. I think I can show you that it was not the 10th test but, instead, it was the 2nd test.

You may be surprised to realize that you already know many of the tests that Avraham took. He had to leave his home and go to a strange land, he gave himself a brit milah, he sent away Hagar and Ishmael, he won in the battle of the 5 kings versus the 4 kings, he survived a famine, etc. But undoubtedly, until we deal with it, you're going to be stuck thinking that the 10th of the 10 tests, the akeidah. So, before we address what was really the most impressive test, let's deal with the akeidah.

As for the akeidah being the 10th of the 10 tests, that doesn't prove anything. After all, no one contends that the 10th of the 10 Commandments is the most important commandment.

In Vayera, the passuk 2 in Perek 22, reads as follows "Vayomer, kach nah et beencha..." Art Scroll translates the sentence as follows: "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, go to the land of Moriah and bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you." But the passuk does say actually "please." The verb "take" is in the Tzivooi-Command tense. Gd is telling Avraham what to do—not asking. While this

is a pivotal moment in Jewish history, it does affect whether the Akeidah is the most impressive of Avraham's test.

Long ago, for centuries, GD spoke through prophets. When GD told them to do something, they did it. In ancient times, there were hundreds of n'veiim. Moshe is only the most famous of them. Nowadays, there are still people who claim that GD speaks to them. We call them crazy people. When they hear voices they often take tragic acts. What do the n'veiim and these crazy people all have in common? They do what the voice in their head tells them to do. This should not come as a surprise. When you hear a voice telling you to do something, it's understandable that you do it.

To determine how hard it is to do or not do what GD instructs, I tried to think of n'veiim in Tanach who did not want to listen and do what Gd said. I could think of three examples. There are probably others, but that's all I could think of.

The first is an incident with Moshe. He was told at the burning bush to go to Pharoah and tell him to let the Jewish people go free. Moshe didn't want to. He tried to talk GD out of it. In return, GD said that Aaron would instead do the talking and punished Moshe. Now, the Kohanim would now come from Aaron's lineage, not Moshe's. But Moshe still ended up going to Pharoah just as GD had originally commanded.

The second is Bilaam. He was a non-Jewish prophet hired by Balak to curse Israel. But GD wanted him to instead bless Israel. Although that isn't what Balak wanted, GD forced him to bless Israel by literally putting the words into his mouth.

The third is Yonah, perhaps the best example. Yonah was told to go to Ninveh and warn them to repent. Yonah didn't want to. Not only did he not want to, he actually took steps to run away. When on the ship in the storm at sea, he still did not change his mind and agree to go. But what happened? He ended up going just as GD has originally ordered.

So now, hopefully I've explained that the 10th of Avraham's tests was not necessarily the most impressive one. Avraham had to do what GD had told him to do.

So let's now talk about the 2nd test. The first question is what is the 2nd test? Perhaps you won't be surprised to hear that there is a difference of opinion about what the 10 tests are and, as result, which is the second. I'll just mention the positions of what I consider to be our two greatest rishonim.

Rambam is probably considered the second greatest. His position is that all of the 10 tests are in the written Torah. So the first test does not begin until next week's parasha, Lech L'cah, when Avraham is commanded to go to a new land.

We're not going to follow that opinion for two reasons. One, as I told you initially, this d'var torah relates to both this week's parasha and next week's. Following Rambam won't allow that to occur. Two, I set you up by telling you that Rambam is the 2nd most prominent of the rishonim, so that enables me to rely instead on the most prominent one, Rashii.

Rashii has 2 tests occurring in this week's parasha, Vayeira. To understand the 2nd, we have to know what the 1st one is. When Avraham was born, Nimrod was the most powerful ruler in the world. He was a famous hunter and known for building the Tower of Babel. Similar to when Moshe was born in the time of Pharoah, when Avraham was born, the magicians with Nimrod foresaw that a challenger to him would be born. As a result, all the newborns were being killed. So, to protect him, Terach raised Avraham in hiding for many years. This was the first of Avraham's tests.

After the danger was gone, Avraham, as a boy, worked in his father's idol shop where, as we all learned in school, he came to believe that there was one GD. He smashed his father's idols and disputed Nimrod's claims to supremacy. Terach, a high ranking official, eventually reported him to Nimrod where Avraham was then sent to prison for 10 years after he denied that Nimrod was the supreme being. Upon being released, Avraham was brought before Nimrod at a public event in order to recant. At this second test, he did not recant. Avraham proclaimed again that GD was the only supreme being.

There is a dispute as to what happened next. One view is that Avraham was thrown into a furnace and a miracle occurred and he survived. Another is that Nimrod did not want to make him a public martyr and so he secretly banished Avraham and his family from the land. For the purposes of this talk, it's not important. What's important is that, after coming out of prison after 10 years, after not having been instructed by GD to do anything, and at risk for his life with no reward, Avraham proclaimed GD's dominion—not Nimrod's—over the world. That is why this 2nd test was, in fact, the most impressive of Avraham's tests.

Let me end with my second family fun fact. We know Avraham and his family moved west at GD's command. In the 1920s, my grandmother (on my mother's side), left behind all that she had behind and moved west from Russia to New York. In the 1950s, my mother left her family behind and moved west (via Florida) to Chicago. In the 1980s, my wife left Cleveland and moved west to Chicago. In the 2010s, my daughter Rachel moved west from Chicago to California. Check in with me in the 2040s when, if Rachel has a daughter who makes aliyah, my lineage will have circumvented the world in just 5 generations and 120 years!

Shabbat Shalom
Arthur Rosenson