

D'var Torah: Rosh Hashanah, Day 1, 5780 (September 2019)
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The Torah readings for today and tomorrow present really dramatic moments in the lives of the first Jewish family. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac all experience crossroads in their lives. In today's reading, Sarah speaks her last words, and those words are to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham, although reluctant, complies, signaling a transition in his family structure. Isaac's status as Abraham's true heir is established. And the crucible of tomorrow's reading centers around that relationship. For Hagar and Ishmael, what begins as a story of banishment becomes a new beginning in their lives.

These stories, although they are so familiar at this point, also strike me as melodramatic. It's like I'm watching a soap opera. And the thing about melodramas or soap operas, perhaps what makes them a guilty pleasure, is that we judge the characters—that's part of the fun. Judging their choices, saying "OMG I would never!" Or, "Can you believe what they did!" Or, "That is SO messed up!" This one is heartless; that one is foolish. And maybe that is part of why we have these readings on Rosh Hashanah—because we can't help but judge Abraham or Sarah or Hagar or even Isaac or Ishmael. They rabbis sure did judge them—a lot. And maybe as we catch ourselves judging them we are reminded that at this time of year we are all being judged. We are all being evaluated.

What is a Test?

I had a teacher in high school who euphemistically called tests "opportunities." As in "Next week, you will have an opportunity for a grade," or "This is an opportunity to earn up to 100 points." I'll be honest. We did not like him. And we saw the "opportunity" as just ridiculous. It's a test, we thought, just call it a test. In retrospect, I get his point. There is a way to look at the test as a positive thing—a chance to earn points, to show what you know, what you can do. Like game day for an athlete. Yes you can show skills in practice, but the game is when you really see how you measure up.

It seems that is how we are supposed to look at the tests in the Torah, as opportunities for our ancestors to prove their devotion or faith. Abraham is famously supposed to have been tested by God 10 times. By Rambam's reckoning, we read about the last 3 of those tests on Rosh Hashanah: Sending away Hagar, becoming estranged from Ishmael, and sacrificing Isaac. These were opportunities for Abraham to demonstrate his faith in God and God's promise to him. By this perspective, Abraham shows humility by understanding that he did not see the big picture and so must accept what God (or his wife) says despite his own reservations. One has to wonder if Abraham knew he was being tested in these moments. And were these tests even fair? They seem to be trick questions: it looks like a question about should you banish your wife and son, but really the question is "do you have faith in God's promise." For me, the readings for Rosh Hashanah, and the theme of the holiday itself, raised questions about testing and judging: why test? How should we grade tests? What makes a test fair? For those of us who are educators or students, tests are part of our day-to-day life. Teachers have to evaluate students—figure out what they know, what they understand, what they are able to do. We evaluate in a variety of ways, but the big focus is on tests. Actually, the new euphemism is "assessments." Somehow a "test" seems scarier than an "assessment." Also, an assessment can be a written test, a paper, or an oral presentation. But they are all ways that we teachers try to figure out

how our students are doing, how to measure student learning and progress. And, actually, also how to measure how we're doing as teachers.

Historical Background

The earliest standardized tests we know of were civil service exams given in China in the 7th century. In the West, oral examinations and essays were the more common assessment tools. Objective written testing was not a part of education in the US until the growth of public schooling. Horace Mann advocated standard written tests for Boston public school students in 1845 so that all could have an equal opportunity to show what they learned and in order to evaluate how the schools themselves were doing. Other public school systems followed, and by the early 20th century, they had become controversial. In 1906, The NY State Dept of Education complained to the state legislature that students were just being taught for the test, at the expense of a more holistic approach to content and skills. So the controversies we have today about testing are not new. By the early 20th century, standardized tests had expanded and changed. They claimed to test ability or intelligence, not knowledge. In other words, they were supposed to *predict* learning, rather than measure it after the fact. And that is when things really got problematic. They were notoriously biased against the less privileged and basically confirmed assumptions about who would succeed and who wouldn't. Can tests really assess what a person will do and not just what they have done? Is that fair?

Today's reading says that God heard Ishmael's voice "Ba-asher hu sham" or "Where he is." According to a midrash, this means that Ishmael was judged by his present actions, not by his future actions. The midrash says that when Ishmael was crying, angels laid information before God saying that in the future, his descendants would kill the children of Isaac. This was because the Midrash linked the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to Ishmael. So the angels asked why God was going to provide a well for such a person. God asked the angels, "what is he now—righteous or wicked?" The angels replied, "Righteous." God responded, "according to his present deeds I will judge him." This is the fair evaluation—what is he now, in this moment. On Rosh Hashanah we think about what we will do in the next year. What we will be. But we are judged on who we are at this moment. In this moment are we aware enough and humble enough to see our shortcomings? Can we take responsibility now for our relationships with others?

In the 1960s, achievement tests emerged as a way to assess schools and teaching methods, to make sure—in the context of the Cold War—that American students were being taught the right way. When I give a test and students don't do well, the first thing I ask is, "what did I do wrong?" Why didn't they get it? How could I teach it better?

We can ask a similar question of ourselves during Rosh Hashanah. How can we create a community where we treat each other better? How can we help each other do better? On the one hand, this season calls for a lot of personal introspection—*cheshbon nefesh* (accounting of the soul). But we do it as a community, because we understand that to do better, we need support from each other. We need a study group.

The Bad Test Day

Is it really fair to judge a student based on how they perform in one particular moment? What if they were prepared, but had a bad day on the day of the test? A student is attentive in class, studies for the

test, but then when they sit down, they just draw a blank. Or they had a big fight with their parents or their best friend and just aren't able to concentrate. And then they get a bad grade. Should that count?

Sarah has maybe the best day of her life when Isaac is born. She says, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." צָחַק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהֵי בְּלֵהֶשְׁמַע יִצְחָק-לִי: She feels her joy so great that it imbues everything. She spreads joy to all around her. It's this moment that is reflected in our prayers when we refer to God as Pokayd Sarah.

But then she has a not-so-good day. It is at her insistence that Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. There is a lot of discussion as to why. Many rabbis suggest immoral behavior by Ishmael: idolatry, sexual immorality, even attempted murder. Others suggest the two boys argued over their inheritance. I found Ramban's summary interesting: he agrees with other rabbis who said it can't have been about immoral action, because that would mean that Abraham has such goings on in his camp. And there is no way there would have been idolatry or such in his household. The inheritance argument doesn't make sense either, because Isaac was too young at this point to be arguing with Ishmael over birthrights. Ramban concludes, "The best in my view is that this occurred on the day of Isaac's weaning and Sarah saw [Ishmael] scoffing at Isaac at the great feast (for Isaac). And that's why the Torah said, "[Sarah saw] the son of Hagar the Egyptian- and not "Ishmael"- "scoffing". And likewise she said "drive out this slavewoman and her son" For she said [in effect] "A slave who scoffs at his master should die or be flogged. But I want only that you should drive him away from me, and that he shouldn't inherit your property at all together 'with my son' who is the son of the lady of the house." So the issue is one of status in the household, and it's Sarah's issue. This explanation refers back to an earlier conflict between Hagar and Sarah when Hagar became pregnant with Ishmael (which, although it was Sarah's idea may have been one of the worst times of her life). Sarah treated Hagar harshly and Hagar ran away. Ramban says that Sarah sinned in treating Hagar harshly. Radak agrees, saying that Sarah was tested when Abraham told her "she's your slave, do what you want with her." Radak says that people in power should show restraint in how they treat others, and Sarah failed that test. Ramban also suggests that it was because of Sarah's insistence that Hagar and Ishmael leave immediately, that Abraham sent them away only with some bread and a skin of water. He could have sent them with more supplies, with camels and sheep and gold and silver, so they could travel safely and comfortably.

Reading this section today, Sarah's actions don't sit well. She seems petty or thin-skinned. After all, she is still the first wife, and her son is going to inherit, and they just had this big party. It seems like an over-reaction. This moment could very well have been a test for Sarah. But do we judge Sarah based solely on this moment? Is that fair? She had other tests: leaving her birthplace with Abraham; being passed off by Abraham as his sister—twice—to protect him; infertility; seeing her husband's love for another woman's son; hearing about the near sacrifice of her son. But on Rosh Hashanah we just get this one moment—a really troubling moment. We have to look at it. We can't pretend it didn't happen. But it's not Sarah's whole story. On Rosh Hashanah, we look unflinchingly at our bad days, the times we didn't do well on the test, but we also accept that those moments are not the whole gradebook.

Absolute Standard or Sliding Scale?

Another big question about grades: should everyone be held to the same standard, or should there be more of a sliding scale—grading on a curve? Noah is called righteous in his generation. Is that a compliment? Some commentators say that it's extremely good, because despite the evil of the people around him, Noah was still good. He didn't give into peer pressure. Others say that really Noah wasn't that good, it's just that everyone else was so evil, he seemed righteous by comparison. But either way, God walked with Noah, so God grades on a curve? Nehama Lebovitz says that Hagar was being tested with her banishment. She had already been promised by an Angel that Ishmael would grow up to be strong and free. Yet she was despairing. She put her son under the bush far away from her so she wouldn't have to watch him. Was this showing a hardness of heart or a mother's mercy? Why did she not see the well? Should we expect Hagar to have the same trust and faith in God that Abraham does? The same Angel that made the promise about her son also told her to return to her abusive mistress. And then when she is finally set free, she is not given sufficient means for survival. It doesn't seem fair to hold Hagar's doubts and despair against her.

On Rosh Hashanah are we all judged by the same standard? I nearly wrote myself into a corner when I started down that road. But where I landed was this idea: empathy. These tests of Abraham, of Sarah, and of Hagar center not just around faith, but empathy—can they put themselves in the position of another? Can they understand what another person is feeling? And on Rosh Hashanah, isn't that what we want? That others will try to understand our perspective—why we did what we did, even if it was wrong. And maybe that is what we can offer to others—empathy and understanding.

Grading on Improvement

Students often ask me if I grade on improvement. In other words, if they don't do well on the first couple of tests but then get the hang of things, will I weigh the latter grades more than the earlier ones? The idea here is to not penalize students for their starting place and to recognize their growth.

There is a midrash about Ishmael and Abraham. Long after Ishmael was sent away, Abraham misses him and wants to see him, so he tells Sarah that he is going to find Ishmael, but he promises her that he won't dismount from his camel. He finds Ishmael's camp, but Ishmael and Hagar aren't there—only Ishmael's Egyptian wife. Abraham doesn't identify himself and asks her where they are. She says they're out, and she doesn't offer Abraham any water or food, she curses at her kids, and she curses Ishmael when he isn't around. Abraham is dismayed and leaves a message for Ishmael: "When thou returneth, go and remove the nail of thy tent and put another nail in its stead." When Ishmael returns, his wife tells him about the visitor and relays the message. Ishmael realizes that it was Abraham who had come, and he understands the message. He divorces his wife and marries a Canaanite woman. Three years later, Abraham returns. Again, Ishmael isn't home, just the new wife. She shows Abraham great respect and offers him hospitality. Abraham blesses Ishmael and leaves his wife with a message for him: "The nail which thou hast in thy tent is a very good one, do not ever remove it from its place. And Ishmael knew that it was his father and that his wife had given him due honor and respect, and Ishmael praised the Lord." After that, Ishmael took his family to the land of the Philistines and they lived for a while with Abraham there.

So midrashim are complicated, and what should resolve a problem in the text sometimes just raises more questions. What I like about this midrash is that it imagines a next chapter for Ishmael and Abraham. And it's not a Disney ending. It imagines a long passage of time, but there being a basis for growth—Abraham hasn't forgotten his son. Ishmael still has feelings of love and respect for his father

and still values his father's advice. From that, Ishmael finds a way to better his life, and father and son can start to reconnect. What resonates for me there is the continued trajectory towards restoring the family. And we hope that on Rosh Hashanah that we are recognized for the progress we have made.

Conclusion

A final thought about testing. One of the more common questions I get from my students is, "Do we have to know this?" Or, the slightly more diplomatic version, "Is this going to be on the test?" It usually comes after an extended digression into some details that—really—are kinda interesting and actually vaguely relevant to the topic. Teachers do not like being asked "Do we have to know this." First of all, it suggests that only parts of our lessons are important, that perhaps there is stuff that we just do to fill out the class period but it doesn't really matter. Second of all, we like to think that what we offer in class goes well beyond what is on the test. We teach habits of mind, critical thinking, insights into how the world works. And third of all, we believe that learning should be for its own sake, not just for the test. But I get where the question is coming from. There is so much to learn, and for students who are trying to strategize and figure out what to spend time studying, they don't want to waste their time. So I often answer, "You don't need to know this for the test, but it's something you should understand. Because life is the real test." And on Rosh Hashanah, I guess that's the point.

May we all be inscribed with a passing grade. Shanah Tovah.