

Hardships That Generate Inspiration

(First Day of Rosh haShana 2019)

The Torah reading of both today (Genesis 21) and tomorrow (Genesis 22) deal with some of Abraham's major trials and hardships.

Hardships can have different impacts on people. They can break someone and destroy one's drive, or, depending on how we are able to deal with them, they can enrich and inspire ourselves or others.

Six years ago, a 16-year-old Pashtun girl in Pakistan named Malala Yousufzai who, despite her early age, had been campaigning for the right of girls to education and learning professions, was shot in the head by members of the Taliban. Thanks to available medical care, Malala survived the assault, slowly recovered from the damage to her nervous system, and eventually continued her most important work. In defiance of her hardship, and partially *because* of it, Malala has inspired thousands of girls in her homeland and beyond to stand up for their rights to education.

The Mishna, in Pirkei Abot (5,3) mentions that Abraham – peace be upon him – was tested with 10 trials. The source does not mention what these 10 tests exactly were. Different commentators have come up with variagated lists. If we compare these different inventories, we find much more than 10 hardships that our father Abraham endured, even if we leave out Midrashic material, such as the story of his father's idolatry business, and being thrown into a fiery furnace.

Based on the Torah alone, we can list Abraham...

1. Being called to leave his family and homeland for an unknown destiny;
2. Encountering a famine once he had arrived in the Promised Land;
3. Having to seek refuge in Egypt;
4. His wife Sarah being abducted;
5. The conflict with his nephew Lot;
6. Getting pulled into a war between kings;

7. Sarah's infertility;
8. His fearful vision marking the "covenant between the parts";
9. The prophecy that Abraham's children would be strangers and slaves in a strange land;
10. His circumcision at age 99;
11. Sarah and Hagar making each other's lives miserable;
12. The announced destruction of Sodom, when Abraham argued with God for Sodom to be spared;
13. The intolerable conflict between his two sons Ishmael and Isaac; - followed by... (it doesn't get easier)
14. Abraham having to send away Hagar;
15. In the same act, but nonetheless a separate hardship: having to depart from his son Ishmael;
16. Sacrificing Isaac; Finally topped off with...
17. Sarah's death; *and*
18. Negotiations with Efron the Hittite over the purchase of a grave for Sarah.

We all know that 18 signifies CHAI, which refers to life, but... what a life Abraham had! We can easily state that the Mishna was not exaggerating when it counted 'only' 10 tests. If we want, we could even count the two narrated abductions of Sarah separately, add Abraham's worries about finding a suitable wife for Isaac, and dying without seeing grandchildren, and we end up with more than twenty hardships.

It is quite clear, and Abraham's stories shows it, that being "chosen" is no easy ride. Our father Abraham had a life filled with worries, hardships and trials.

One of the biggest frustrations during Abraham's life, and the main theme underlying his tests, was his longing for offspring, which is – of course – not very surprising. After all, God Himself had told Abraham at the very beginning: "I will make you into a great nation." It seems obvious that one needs progeny for that to come true. If there was any question about the meaning of that promise, God told Abraham after arriving in the Land: "To your offspring (*le-zar³akhaa*), I will give this land." Naturally, Abraham looked forward to a big family.

Focusing on that promise and expectation is seen as a sign of faith and trust, and it is counted as Abraham's great merit. However, it also gave Abraham and his family much anxiety.

Sarah, not able to conceive and very likely feeling that she let her husband down, found the pressure too much to take and offered him her maidservant as a concubine and his personal procreation assistant. Maybe, in that way Abraham's dream could be fulfilled. Unfortunately, that part of the dream turned into a nightmare.

Where were the days when Abraham restored peace in the land through battling with mighty kings? After surrendering to polygamy, he now sees the peace in his own household destroyed with his two wives fighting. And he is powerless.

The sun seems to break through again when Sarah miraculously gives birth to a son at age 90. But as a result, his camp – that had offered hospitality to so many different people of multicolored backgrounds – isn't big enough for Isaac and Ishmael. There is teasing, bullying, humiliating, and perhaps even violence and abuse. He, who would be a great nation, cannot even manage two sons.

Then comes today's Torah reading, when God tells him to let go of Ishmael. The great patriarch who once had the audacity to stand up against the Almighty Judge of the World himself, has lost his drive. Old and tired, Abraham doesn't feel like fighting anymore, let alone argue with God. He simply obeys and sends his son Ishmael into the desert with no more than a lunchbox and a bottle of water.

We see the same reaction when Abraham perceives God commanding him in a dream to take Isaac and bring him as a sacrifice, or at least, that is how Abraham understood the visionary message. He simply gets up and do as he is told.

If this is a weakness or a strength can be argued, but it is no more than understandable. Abraham had gone through so many phases... He had transitioned from being excited and full of high expectations to disillusioned and relinquishing the dream. Against all odds, there is the beginning of the fulfillment when Sarah gives birth, which then turned into a nightmare scenario, and finally Abraham is commanded it give it all up.

It is hard to pardon Abraham for not arguing with God on behalf of young Isaac's life. Why does he not even consider the possibility of having misunderstood the instruction? Abraham could have asked for a confirmation, a second opinion...? However, we can empathize with the worn-out Abraham giving up his *own* aspirations. He is no more a fighter.

Sometimes, it is actually good to let go of high, personal expectations. Surely, we should do our best, but not worry about the rest. The Mishna, again in Pirkei Abot, quotes Ribbi Tarphon saying: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither may you neglect it." We do not need to see the final result of our efforts, and most likely, we won't. If God has a plan, He is perfectly able to bring that to fruition, even if we may fall short.

If things are meant to be, it doesn't help one bit for us to get worked up about it. Keep using your talents, go the right thing, not just for the reward or for the outcome, but because it is the right thing to do. And leave the rest up to God, or to the universe, or whatever you might choose to call the Ineffable.

Too bad for Abraham, there were no meditation classes yet in Canaan, and no mindfulness training programs in Beer Sheva...

Yet, there is at least one important lesson that Abraham seems to have learned, which was unique in a society where so much of people's self-worth was about pedigree and progeny. Being willing to relinquish his offspring, Abraham showed his realization that the fulfillment of God's promise did not have to be based on a genetic continuation. The glorious blessing that Abraham had pursued did not need to be achieved through an ethnic continuum. His lasting benediction could be fulfilled through a spiritual heritage which was already planted in the lives of so many people around him.

Being a true son or daughter of Abraham is not primarily dependent on a percentage of Semitic genes, being confirmed by a 23-and-me DNA test. Or an impressive genealogy that goes back to some great sage, or to Abraham himself. To be of Abraham's seed means embodying his values, spreading goodness in the world, such as morality, spirituality, hospitality, promoting righteousness, imbuing life with a higher purpose, and sometimes even arguing with God.

This Jewish principle is pronounced in synagogues all over the world when a convert, who is not originally of Jewish stock, is called Son or Daughter of Abraham.

This reminds me of one such amazing woman, whom Suzanne and I were blessed to have known, a convert to Judaism from the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya by the name of Wanjiku Ngugi. Wanjiku had prayed intensely to God and asked Him to show her how she could best serve Him. After several dreams (not unlike Abraham, or the Khazar king in Yehuda haLevi's famous work, *The Kuzari*), she inspired her entire family to embrace a Jewish lifestyle. Naturally, for a poor person who lived in the heart of Nairobi, in a tiny house that was not much more than a shack, next to a garbage dump, her path to conversion was no shoo-in. But, eventually, together with a large part of her children and grandchildren, Wanjiku was officially converted, and she received the name Emunah Bat Abraham ; Daughter-of-Abraham.

Wanjiku-Emunah died a few years later from a stroke, and she became the first African Jewess to be buried in the cemetery of the established Nairobi synagogue. A few days ago, her granddaughter Sarah told me the following story that her grandmother had told before she died.

“A woman was admitted to the hospital with serious health problems, where she received oxygen. After a day of oxygen, she recovered and was presented with the bill: \$100 for the oxygen. The woman stared at the bill, and tears rolled over her face. “What is the matter?” said the doctor. “Is it a problem for you to pay this amount? Shall I set up a payment arrangement?” The woman answered: “No doctor, it is not the money. I can afford to pay it. But I realize how precious oxygen is. \$100 for just one day! I have been breathing air all my life without ever paying a single penny. God has given me so much oxygen for free, and I have not thanked him even once for this. How can I ever pay him back?”

Shortly before she passed away, Wanjiku (may her memory be a blessing) told her children and grandchildren who were gathered around her bed: “We cannot pay

HaShem back for all his blessings which are too numerous to count. But we can give him our thanks and gratitude and honor him in all our actions.”

Our father Abraham has weathered a lengthy list of hardships, but his legacy still inspires millions of humans around the world. The Jewish people, throughout its history, has experienced an endless string of misfortunes, but the Jewish path still offers inspiration to generations of people, inside and outside the Jewish community. Wanjiku too, went through hardships. She was born into wealth but fell into avid poverty after she was dispossessed by her Christian family. Even when she converted, she had already had a stroke and was half paralyzed when she immersed in the mikwèh. Nonetheless, her memory is a lasting inspiration for her children, grandchildren, and the Jewish community she founded in Nairobi.

This coming year may your trials be few and easy. May the hardships that we *will* encounter not be those that break us, but that make us stronger and add depth and inspiration to our lives and to the people around us.

May we all merit a year filled with blessings of health, meaning, and good deeds. And may we always be aware and grateful *for* these blessings!