

Myra Estelle Class: Trust and Fear

The Concept of a Trial (Stone Chumash)

Abraham did not win his new status by default; he had to prove his greatness by passing ten tests of faith (Avos 5:4). The first trial mentioned in Scripture is in the first passage of this parshah, Lech Lecha, the command that Abraham give up his entire past and follow God's lead to a new land. By definition, a Heavenly test is one that forces a person to choose between God's will and his own nature or understanding of what is right. Clearly, it would be no challenge to Abraham, who was the epitome of kindness, to be asked to help the needy, but it would be a supreme test of faith for him to desert his aged father and homeland or to give his cherished, beloved son as an offering. Thus Abraham was tested by being forced to subordinate his wishes and wisdom to those of God. By doing so, he demonstrated his conviction that man's highest goal is to accept the Divine wisdom as the sole truth.

Since God knows all future events and how every person will respond to any given situation, why was it necessary to test Abraham? According to Rambam (Maimonides) (Moreh Nevuchim 3:24) the trials were meant to display to the world how a great man obeys God. Thus, when Abraham set precedents in faithful obedience, his performance under extreme pressure became lessons for the rest of humanity.

Ramban (Nachmanides) explains the concept of trial differently. Of course the outcome is never in doubt to God, for He knows that the person being tested will persevere. To the contrary, a just God does not impose trials that are beyond the capacity of the individual—God tests only righteous people who will do His will, not the wicked who will disobey. Thus, all the Torah's trials are for the benefit of those being tested.

But that is known only to God. The person being tested has free choice, and he must find the strength and wisdom to choose correctly. If he does, then he has translated his potential into action and made himself a greater person, for actual deed far outweighs mere potential in the Heavenly scales of judgment, and he can therefore be rewarded for what he did, rather than for what he was merely capable of doing.

Awakening Love: A Spiritual Quest Into Judaism, Myra Estelle

From the time we're born we are all immersed in a continuous process of having our mind broadened so that we can increasingly integrate more understanding. This process expands our consciousness by forcing us to flex the invisible muscles of our mind to solve any problems that arise, in the same way that we strengthen the physical muscles in our body by using weights to create resistance when we exercise. Every attempt we make to overcome an obstacle increases our fortitude so that we can gradually build up resistance to negativity and become more self-empowered.

We gain inner strength when we have to withstand an opposing force. By making our resolve stronger, we gain the power to resist any of our negative thoughts, and it becomes easier to absorb whatever lesson we are learning through our experience. Once we have withstood the challenge and the lesson has been learned, the teaching won't be needed any more—then our newly developed positive attitude will cancel out the difficulty and it will begin to be resolved. This is why Judaism teaches that everything is ultimately for the good.