

Dear Community,

The reality of suffering is deeply woven into humanity's religious experience. Whether ideologically sound or not, our relationship with G-d – and often our belief in his very existence - is a product of our experience with pain far more than it is a product of contemplative introspection. There are those who assert their belief, or disbelief, is predicated on claims of empirical support and the outcome of hours of intellectual cogitation. Others present assumptions of moral certitude as a metric to assign truth to religious dogma. Still another group will cite an experiential phenomenon while engaging in religious practice as proof of G-d. But it is in the crucible of pain and fear that the deep core of our religiosity is either forged - or incinerated.

The question of G-d in the face of pain, truth in the face of suffering, justice in the face of tragedy, has haunted people from the beginning of time. Can a G-d allow suffering? If there is no G-d, is life and loss meaningless? Can banal platitudes about 'making a difference' stand up to the reality of the human as an accident? Can G-d hate? Does G-d care? Can G-d care?

Moshe asks G-d this question (Brachot, 6b), the angels challenge G-d's justice (Yom Kippur liturgy). But in the end, we are forced to accept the reality: we are limited, reasons for painful events are by their nature complex, and our minds are small. A species that cannot predict the weather with any certainty cannot hope to process a calculation spanning space and time. Attempting to betrays a hubris blind to the limits of its competence.

Yet we are forced to deal with pain. To see G-d through the fog of despair and feel love while in the arms of hate. How can we do this? To think about this question as a Jew, we must look to our ancestors, the ones who forged our path and originated the concept of monotheism despite suffering.

We first go to Abraham, the first Jew, the founder of our merry band of thinkers, believers, and herring eaters. *"With ten tests Abraham, our father, was tested - and he withstood them all. [This was] in order to show how great was the love of Abraham, our father, peace be upon him (Avot 5,3)."* What were these tests? How to count them is a subject of much debate (see Rambam, Rav Ovadia Mi'Bartenurah, Rabbeinu Yona, Rashi). But why was Abraham tested? And why ten?

Our sages (Medrash Rabah) teach us that our ancestors, the patriarchs, and matriarchs of the Jewish people, play a far greater role than merely serving as the genetic pool

from which we emerge. '*Ma'aseh avot, siman labanim*': events in the lives of our forefathers and how they dealt with them are an eternal compass to their descendants. The Ramban elaborates on this principle, viewing the actions of our seven Avot/Imahot as not simply instructive, but rather causative. Each challenge that Abraham faced and successfully navigated embedded into the fabric of the future Jewish people a strength, a capacity, to face similar challenges.

The Maharal of Prague describes the number ten, in base ten, as symbolic of the divergent becoming one. Just as the integers from one to nine are individual until they are wrapped into a single unit as ten, ten in our spiritual reality indicates a seemingly disparate collection forming a greater unity.

The ten tests, ten seemingly disconnected challenges faced by Abraham, were likely seen by his contemporaries as meaningless pain, or possibly a consequence of renouncing paganism. In reality, through these ten tests, this unity of faith in the face of adversity, Abraham was weaving the fabric of a nation that would stand firm and proud in the face of countless onslaughts through history. Instead of a helpless man buffeted by the Fates, Abraham was the author of a legacy of strength, belief, truth, and sacrifice.

Pain, tragedy, and suffering exist and challenge the lonely man of faith. All we can control is how we approach the events that happen to us. Abraham left us a legacy of not only belief, love, and trust in G-d, but a perspective on pain as an opportunity to grow, not a reason to fall. Invest in your relationship with G-d, strengthen your trust in Him, so that when the bad times come, we can believe, we can grow, and we can find meaning in the heart of seeming senselessness.

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein