

God Tests the Righteous

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Yeshua:

"Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham..." (Genesis 22:1, NKJV).ⁱ

This verse provides a rather puzzling question. If God is omniscience, meaning that He is all-knowing, why does He need to test Abraham? And, if He already knows the outcome of the test with Abraham, then why is the test even necessary? To discover an answer, we will turn to *Midrashic* commentary; *Genesis Rabba 55:2*.ⁱⁱ

The *Petihta*, i.e., prooftext:

1. *"God will test the righteous, but the wicked and he who loves violence, His soul despises" (Psalm 11:5).*

The first *Mashal* of R. Yonatan:

2. R. Yonatan said:
3. A flax worker, when his flax is blighted, doesn't beat it very much,
4. because [if he beats it too much], it splinters.
5. But when his flax is [of] good [quality], he beats it a lot.
6. Why? Because it improves and continues (to improve, the more he beats it).
7. Thus, the Holy One blessed be He does not test the wicked.
8. Why? Because they cannot [with]stand the test, as it says,
9. *"And the wicked are banished like the sea..." (Isaiah 57:20).*
10. And whom does He test? The righteous, as it says:
11. *"God will test the righteous..."*
12. *"And it was after these things, the wife of his master lifted up her eyes..." (Genesis 39:7).*

The second *Mashal* of R. Yonatan:

13. *"And it was after these things..." (Genesis 22:1).*
14. R. Yonatan said:
15. The potter, when he checks (the contents of) his kiln, doesn't check the defective pots.
16. Why? Because he doesn't get a chance to strike them even once before he breaks them.
17. And what does he check? Well-made pots,
18. because even if he strikes them several times, he doesn't break them.

19. Thus, the Holy One blessed be He does not test the wicked, but rather the righteous, as it says:
20. *"God will test the righteous..."*

The *Mashal* of R. Elazar:

21. R. Elazar said:
22. [This may be compared] to a householder who had two cows,
23. one strong, and one weak.
24. Upon whom will he place the yoke?
25. Not upon the strong one!?
26. This the Holy One blessed be He tests the righteous, as it says:
27. *"God will test the righteous..."*

This lengthy *Midrashic* commentary has three *Meshalim*, Parables of how God tests the righteous: a flax worker who beats his flax, a potter who strikes his well-made pots, and a householder who places his yoke upon the strong cow. God does and will test His children. God tested Israel in the wilderness. For us who are in Christ, the church we also find ourselves in situations where we are being tested through trial and tribulation. *"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ"* (1Peter 1:6-7).

Now, it is important to recognize that self-inflicted tribulation is not from God. Our intentional and deliberate sin through willful disobedience has its self-destructive consequences. King David certainly learned this lesson the hard way. And yet, God will use every circumstance to mold and transform our character.

The first thing we see in the *Midrash* is the repetition of Psalm 11:5: *"God tests the righteous...but the wicked His soul despises [hates]."* This is not a comparison but a contrast, and so the inescapable conclusion is that God loves the righteous and therefore His testing is out of love. This will be the theme of the three *Meshalim*, yet each will focus on a different type of divine testing as a unique and sometimes painful experience: a beating, a blow, and a yoke. Let us now explore the three *Meshalim*, first matching the metaphoric elements of the *Mashal* and the *Nimshal*:

<i>Mashal</i>	<i>Nimshal</i>
The first <i>Mashal</i> of R. Yonatan	
The flax worker	The Holy One blessed be He
Blighted flax	The wicked
The beating of the flax	Tests and trials
The splintering of the flax	Inability to withstand a trial
Good flax	The righteous
The improvement of the flax	The improvement of the righteous
The second <i>Mashal</i> of R. Yonatan	
The potter	The Holy One blessed be He
Defective pots	The wicked
Well-made pots	The righteous
The checking, striking of the pots	A Divine test
The breaking of the defective pots	The inability of the wicked to withstand tests
The endurance of the well-made pots	The ability of the righteous to withstand the test
The <i>Mashal</i> of R. Elazar	
A householder	The Holy One blessed be He
The strong cow	The righteous
The weak cow	The wicked
The yoke	A Divine test

The first *Mashal* of R. Yonatan describes the process for making linen, a highly valued fabric made from the fibers of the flax plant. The manufacturing process is laborious. First, the flax is soaked until the outer cover softens. Then it is beaten until the fibers fluff up enough to be spun into thread. R. Yonatan contrasts the flax of blighted and good quality. The blighted flax if beaten, will splinter rather than turn into fiber. The good flax, however, is beaten considerably, because the more it is beaten, the higher the quality of the fiber.

At one level of the *Mashal*, we see the righteous are taken through a process of transformation, from raw material to one that is refined. Thus, Divine trials are for the improvement of the righteous. However, a deeper examination reveals more. R. Yonatan opens the *Mashal* by explaining that the wicked are not tested because they are unable to withstand the test. But the righteous God tests without giving any explanation. From our world-centered viewpoint, we might expect that God wants to improve us, and He does but does He test us for our glory or His? For this reason, R. Yonatan is more concerned with explaining why the wicked are not tested rather than explaining why the righteous are.

R. Yonatan continues with an explanation of the wicked being banished like the sea, for its waters cannot be still, and they cast up dirt and mud. *"They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the*

blackness of darkness forever" (Jude 1:12-13). The wicked are not tested because they cannot stand still and are incapable of being refined. As the bad flax splinters and the sea casts up mud, the wicked can only respond to divine testing with failure, and this would be a senseless act.

R. Yonatan concludes with a quote from Genesis chapter 39, the story of Joseph being seduced by Potiphar's wife. This attempted seduction is a Divine test, and while its consequences appear disastrous, its purpose was for refining and elevating him. Not for Joseph's glory but God's, because it was through his elevation that God was able to preserve the family of Israel and the lineage of the Messiah.

This second *Mashal* or R. Yonatan describes a potter who checks the contents of his kiln. Checking involves striking the items several times. Only the well-made pots are struck because they will not break under the blows. But the defective pots are not struck even once because they will break even to the slightest touch. Again, the motivation for striking the well-made pots, i.e., for testing the righteous is unknown. The potter already knows which pots well-made and which ones are defective.

So, just as with Abraham, why is the test even necessary? The only reason given is that the righteous can withstand the test, and this Divine test is a blow, something painful to be endured. The apostle Paul uses a similar analogy in the book of Romans: *"What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:22-24).* Striking the well-made pot does not have any refining benefit except to confirm its quality, and that being attributed to its creator. This test is for God's glory, not ours.

One nuance that is partly addressed here in Romans 9 deals with the issue free will versus Divine election. The thought of free will is central to both Judaism and Christianity, with divergence forming in Christianity around election and salvation. This is a complicated subject and is better discussed separately. But, in these parables, to retain the value it is important to view God as completely sovereign on every level, especially in His election of those who He deems as righteous and those who He calls wicked. Scripture is clear. There are vessels of wrath, and there are vessels of mercy.

The last *Mashal* by R. Elazar describes a situation in which the owner of two cows needs to place a yoke upon them to carry out a task. The householder naturally chooses a strong cow because he will be able to carry the burden. While R. Yonatan has focused on beating and blowing as a form of divine testing, R. Elazar describes a Divine test as a burden to be carried. Jesus used a similar analogy when He said: *"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).*

This last *Mashal* takes us in a new direction. A yoke implies that we are being employed to carry out God's work. One does not attach a yoke to an animal unless there is a task to accomplish or a burden to carry. In contrast, the first two *Meshalim*, here we see an explanation of why the

righteous are being tested, and the wicked are not even mentioned. R. Elazar interprets such trials as divinely ordained tasks that need to be accomplished, a test of faith and obedience rather than a test of endurance.

And what is our first task? Jesus said: *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"* (Luke 9:23). In this calling, the wicked are not even chosen, for they by God's investigation have no purpose. The wicked follow their lusts, but the righteous will deny themselves to follow Christ. And our second and equally important task? *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35).

In conclusion, we see that God's divine testing comes in various forms. In the first example, we learn that beating flax has a refining benefit. God needs to change our nature to conform to His, and this may require us to experience His discipline: *"For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives"* (Hebrews 12:6). In the second example, we see that striking a well-made pot does not have any refining benefit. It is simply a confirmation of its quality, and that being attributed to its creator. God is glorified. In the last example we see that Divine testing from God also comes in the form of carrying a burden or a task, our first task being to take up and carry our crosses daily, and the second to obey His commandments; that we love each other as Christ has love us.

Let us close with encouragement, dear brothers and sisters, for God's love for you is immeasurable. Therefore: *"Rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy"* (1Peter 4:13).

Amen!

ⁱ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

ⁱⁱ Mimi. *Learning to read Midrash*. Urim Publications, ISBN 965-7108-57-8.