



Vayelexh

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Trial by Water: Exodus and the Akeidah

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The Splitting of the Reed Sea endures in Jewish tradition as one of the most memorable and awe-inspiring miracles of the Exodus story. It represented God's utter mastery over nature and a stunning salvation of the oppressed Israelites. A straightforward reading of [Exodus 14](#) suggests that the purpose of the miracle revolved around the Egyptians rather than the Israelites. God tells Moses that He will "gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD."¹ This verse suggests that the

Splitting of the Sea served primarily to increase the knowledge and glory of God; indeed, the Song of the Sea as well as the later testimony of Rahab describe how other nations greatly feared God as a result of this miracle.² This essay offers a novel rereading of the narrative based on overlooked rabbinic sources. I argue that Exodus 14 reenacted the earlier episode of the *Akeidah* (Binding of Isaac) in [Genesis 22](#). The literary links between these two texts yield the intriguing possibility that the Splitting of the Sea also functioned as a test of the Israelites' faith analogous to God's trial of Abraham.

Rabbinic sources draw explicit connections between the *Akeidah* and the Exodus. [Mekhilta](#)

¹ Ex. 14:4; see also v. 17-18. All biblical translations follow the JPS 1985 edition via Sefaria. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations follow Sefaria.

² Ex. 15:14-16; [Joshua 2:10](#).

notes several thematic parallels. Firstly, it likens Abraham's and Pharaoh's eagerness to fulfill their respective missions; Abraham saddled his donkey himself, and Pharaoh similarly harnessed his chariot without the aid of servants.³ Secondly, R. Shimon b. Yochai states that the knife wielded by Abraham in preparation to slaughter Isaac protected the Israelites from the sword brandished by Pharaoh.⁴ While neither of these parallels reflect specific textual connections, R. Benaya provides a third example based on the reappearance of a verb; in merit of Abraham splitting wood in preparation for the sacrifice of Isaac (*vayibaka atzei olah*), God split the sea (*vayibaki'u hamayim*).⁵ A fourth parallel notes that the Splitting of the Sea occurred during the morning watch (*ashmoret haboker*), just as Abraham arose early in the morning (*baboker*) to perform the *Akeidah*.⁶

Beyond those identified by the *Mekhilta*, more recent writers have found further literary links between these two biblical episodes. [R. Yaakov Medan](#) points out that both passages contain wordplay between seeing (*re'iyah*) and fear (*yir'ah*).⁷ [Nachum Krasnopolsky](#) notes that after the *Akeidah*, God promises Abraham that He will

make his offspring as numerous as the sand "on the seashore" (*al sefat hayam*); this detail does not appear in God's earlier blessings to Abraham, and the phrase *al sefat hayam* is not used again until it next appears in reference to the dead Egyptians.⁸ From a structural standpoint, [R. Elchanan Samet](#) argues that both episodes contain two parallel passages with a dividing sentence that marks a surprise turn from the apparent conflict to its resolution; in the case of Abraham, the appearance of the angel, and at the sea, God's command to Moses to split the water.⁹ In both cases, the initial framing of each narrative assures the reader of a positive outcome; the Torah tells us that God tested Abraham, and God foreshadows to Moses that He will gain glory through the Egyptians.¹⁰ I would add another commonality: in both cases, an angel intervenes to protect people in a vulnerable position: Isaac from Abraham, and the Israelites from the Egyptians.

The above parallels invite us to read Exodus 14 as a sequel to the *Akeidah*. The concept of a *nisayon* (test) helps explain other rabbinic sources on the Splitting of the Sea. One passage in [Avot de-rabi Natan](#) states that God "tested our ancestors with

³ Gen. 22:3; Ex. 14:6.

⁴ Gen. 22:10; Ex. 15:9.

⁵ Gen. 22:3; Ex. 14:21.

⁶ Ex. 14:24; Gen. 22:3.

⁷ Gen. 22:12-14; Ex. 14:10, 13, 31.

⁸ Gen. 22:17; Ex. 14:30.

⁹ Gen. 22:11-12; Ex. 14:15-16.

¹⁰ Gen. 22:1; Ex. 14:4.

ten trials, and they did not emerge whole from any of them... they rebelled at the Sea of Reeds.”¹¹ Similarly, [Midrash Tanhuma](#) inserts the sea motif into the *Akeidah*; after failing to convince Abraham and Isaac to abandon the mission, Satan “made himself into a great river before them.” Abraham persisted on his path until the water reached his neck, whereupon he cried out to God, who responded that through Abraham his name will become unified throughout the world; subsequently, God “rebuked the spring and the river dried up.”¹² In this reading, God tests Abraham’s faith through a trial by water akin to the one his descendants faced centuries later.

Reading Exodus 14 as a trial along the lines of the *Akeidah* raises the question of the purpose and intended outcome of the test, and whether or not the Israelites passed it. Did God expect the Israelites to believe that He would spit the sea for them? From the Israelites’ perspective, they presumably faced death on both sides; they did not know what would happen next. Hence their complaint to Moses, “Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?”¹³ Perhaps returning to slavery in Egypt remained a possibility; upon finding out that the Jews fled, Pharaoh had exclaimed, “What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our

service?”¹⁴ Regardless, entering the sea without an assurance of a miracle constitutes a life-or-death test. In this regard, the analogy to the *Akeidah* works well; God challenged Abraham to sacrifice his own son, and the Israelites to sacrifice themselves.

The Israelites’ complaint supports the critical characterization of the Psalmist: “Our forefathers in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant love, but rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds.”¹⁵ *Avot de-rabi Natan*, cited above, echoes this criticism and implies that the Israelites did not fully pass the test. A Talmudic passage also follows this reading, and it even adds that the Israelites rebelled a second time during their arrival back on dry land, as they still feared that the Egyptians would follow them.¹⁶

However, other rabbinic sources suggest that at least some Israelites demonstrated faith at the sea. [Sotah 36b-37a](#) records a dispute between R. Meir and R. Yehuda. R. Meir maintains that while each of the tribes fought over which one would enter the sea first, the tribe of Benjamin jumped in; R. Yehuda, however, asserts that all of the tribes refused to enter the sea, until Nahshon ben Aminidav of the tribe of Judah jumped in. Like R.

¹¹ *Avot de-rabi Natan* 34:1. A variant of this source inverts the idea by stating that the Israelites “tested” God ten times in the wilderness, including once at the sea ([Avot de-rabi Natan 9:2](#); cf. [Mishnah Avot 5:3-4](#)).

¹² *Tanhuma, Vayeira* 22 (translation mine).

¹³ Ex. 14:11.

¹⁴ Ex. 14:5.

¹⁵ [Ps. 106:7](#).

¹⁶ [Arakhin 15a](#).

Yehuda, *Mekhilta* identifies “four factions at the sea: One was for lunging into the sea [i.e., drowning]; another, for returning to Egypt [i.e., slavery]; another for warring against [the Egyptian forces]; another, for crying out against them.” R. Yehuda and the *Mekhilta* here presumably maintain, like *Avot de-rabi Natan*, that the Israelites failed the test. R. Meir, on the other hand, seems to contend that the Israelites passed the test; after all, the biblical account does not indicate hesitation after God reveals the plan to Moses, and the chapter concludes by highlighting the Israelites’ belief in God.¹⁷

One final rabbinic source deserves closer consideration as a possible rejection of the *Akeidah*-Exodus analogy. R. Benaya’s argument that the merit of Abraham splitting the wood resulted in the Splitting of the Sea appears in another midrash alongside a dissenting view: “Rabbi Levi said [to him]: Enough. Until here. Rather, Abraham [acted] according to his ability, and the Holy One blessed be He [acted] according to his ability.”¹⁸ Here, R. Levi denies any connection between Abraham’s actions and God’s decision to split the sea, though the precise point of contention remains unclear. R. Benaya’s emphasis on Abraham’s merit fits well with R. Yehuda’s account that the Israelites failed to adequately demonstrate their faith. R. Levi’s rejection of this view fits well with R. Meir’s opinion, which regarded the Israelites as thoroughly believing in God, thus rendering Abraham’s merit unnecessary.

¹⁷ Ex. 14:16, 31.

Framing Exodus 14 as a second *Akeidah* provides a compelling explanation of the episode’s purpose. Why would God orchestrate an elaborate series of stunning miracles merely to increase the awareness and glory of Himself among the *Egyptians* whom He had decimated through the Ten Plagues and whose army he would immediately annihilate? It seems difficult to accept a reading of the Israelites as mere bystanders or props in this plan. The rabbinic analogy to the *Akeidah*, however, explains the enduring significance of the Splitting of the Sea. In Genesis 22, Abraham demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice Isaac by splitting wood for his trial by fire; in Exodus 14, his descendants encountered their own trial by water. These two moments, both memorialized daily in our liturgy, stand as eternal reminders of the power of faith and the glory of God’s will.

When My Synagogue Closed

Danny Groner writes about community building, among other topics, in his newsletter: <https://dannygroner.substack.com/>.

The simplest answer to the basic, expected question for why my synagogue closed after a decade is that, post-pandemic, too many people wanted something different. Some physically moved away, some decided actively to attend much less often due to changing priorities, others drifted away from religious ritual, or they had

¹⁸ *Bereishit Rabbah* 55:8.

discovered a better local option for how to spend their weekends, or something else entirely. Whatever the case may be, we lost much of our footing to a crisis we couldn't seem to overcome.

I never tried to sway people who had left to come back, focusing instead on nurturing those who came once to return again another time. My aim was to rebuild momentum at the most granular, grassroots level, even when we had little to boast of in terms of numbers. Even if there were fewer of us, I told myself, the energy we imbued there could remain unmatched. While we didn't offer the full range of programming throughout the week that other larger institutions could, what we did present we performed exceptionally well. We could triumph through curation and differentiation.

I was a mere congregant—never during the life of this *shul* did I have any active or official position. If someone offered a compliment, I was happy to receive it. If they came with a complaint or some sort of a helpful suggestion, I was never the right party for them to *kvetch* to. I called myself the most important minor-league player the *shul* had, taking my cues from the people making the bigger decisions, those who set the standard for what we were building and beholding. My prerogative was to fill in the gaps as only I could, helping to make it a welcoming environment like perhaps none of us had experienced elsewhere.

Much of the back-end work was handled by a rote committee, with the *gabbaim* handling the front-end side. In between, there's plenty to go around

that mostly goes neglected, and I was hoping each and every time I was in the building to be the face of what needs to get done, of what should be lifted.

My personal hope, always, is to leave that type of building better than I found it. It was my mission to capture and collect those who otherwise would have gone unnoticed, to reward them for joining us with a friendly hello and, if they stuck around, a longer conversation at *kiddush*. I greeted everyone with a joy and energy that is often absent from these types of institutions, pushing past simple pleasantries.

I am based in Riverdale, New York, where there are a dozen or more places to pray—no shortage of options. The difference between one and the next, both intellectually and spiritually, is negligible. We are playing in the margins. If all you want is a predictable *minyan*, you can find one within minutes of leaving home in Riverdale. But what has been lacking from my experience—in Riverdale and, really, everywhere else—is somewhere you could feel you belong, where you can contribute, where you emerge as more than you thought yourself capable.

Patrons at synagogues tend to stick to their own, speaking to nobody. It promotes and reinforces bad culture, even if they aren't doing anything overtly unkind. Really, synagogues should be havens for kindness, harbors for those who seek a buoy at the close of a tough workweek. Yet that aspect of Judaism is often forgotten at synagogues, where the goal for many is to remain

silent and isolated, fixed and set. They choose around the length of the sermon—or no sermon at all. They select based on whether there's hot food at the *kiddush* that follows. They opt for something that feels familiar to them, never questioning whether they might be able to give more than they are used to.

The *shul* I envisioned would bridge those gaps, designed to be intergenerational—a group of like-minded peers and kindred spirits. You should want to get to know the others who have similarly made the decision to pray and participate where you are. These are no strangers but rather fellow congregants who likely tick how you do, whom you haven't yet had the pleasure to meet.

People invoke all kinds of excuses to justify why synagogues aren't living up to their conventional reputation for warmth; as long as they appear full, people assume they must be doing the job for some number of the congregants. I aspired to set the bar higher, to create a *shul* experience that lives up to its potential. I made sure of it by going over and introducing myself to everyone present each week, looking to bring a stronger sense of cohesion to spaces that are too commonly scattered.

The conventional talking points around synagogues need to be dropped in favor of the realities people have experienced for quite some time: How many people actually meet for the first time and make friends at synagogues? How many know the names of the congregants in the next

row? I looked to jump-start positive change that would last.

While our sanctuary was impermanent—our Modern Orthodox congregation rented space in the basement of a Reform temple—it never felt temporary. This was a congregation designed to be lay-led from the outset, to rally those largely untapped at larger houses of worship to grow active in making somewhere new feel both sacred and familiar. The greatest resource wasted by synagogues that overlook their patrons is the skills and strengths of their own members.

I appointed myself the usher. I sat at the very front left of the room, where I could scan and process all of it and also identify those entering from the back who seemed less acquainted with the services and less attuned to our festivities. Until this synagogue formed and fostered what I had to give, I, too, was a back-of-the-room guy. I recall from those days and decades that if nobody greets you during prayers, you won't stick around for the refreshments that follow. You assume that island is reserved for the invited few, sectioned off for known insiders.

When I was getting married in 2018, I didn't have anywhere to host my *aufruf*. I would sooner have skipped it than hosted it at a *shul* to which I was unaccustomed, where I'd feel uncomfortable attending—and moreover being highlighted by a group of strangers in the name of a rite of passage.

My wife and I had already chosen to reside in

Riverdale after we got married, so I reached out to the *gabbaim* at this still-budding *shul* to inquire if I could have my *aufruf* there, despite my not being a member. They not only permitted it but asked what I had in mind—and said they'd accommodate. I wound up planning an *aufruf* that wouldn't have flown elsewhere in the area—my mother speaking after services, my father reading the *haftarah*—leaving me with fond memories from that weekend many years on. I didn't know then that any of this was possible to curate and create. Days after my wedding, I joined the *shul*. The financial cost made no difference to me, as I had already seen the exponential value of calling that place my spiritual and social home going forward.

By reputation, houses of worship are widely called community centers. In my experience, though, they often fail to live up to that reputation. Most people enter and then exit without seeing much by way of community, even if the rooms they step into are indeed packed. The others who sit in the pews beside them are bodies that fill the room more than they are companions with whom to connect or collaborate.

I've come to realize that for a vast majority of synagogue-goers these spaces function more as amusement parks than community centers, places where they and their families participate in familiar rides and routines. It's the individual experiences that they prize and will speak about glowingly soon enough. If others are nearby, waiting for the same rides as they covet, it would be a deviation from the day's purpose to go over

and make acquaintances. In fact, it's hardly done to the point of it seeming weird. Besides, what if they had already met them once before and had forgotten? Imagine the embarrassment.

I watched a generation proud of the institutions and infrastructure they built, devoid of any recognition that they'd injected no joy or real sense of community into those spaces. I've long argued that for my generation—the Millennials—we are not instructed to be builders in the same capacity as those who preceded us; rather, we are expected to embed joy for the very first time in those same locations.

In a community our size—fewer than 100 member family units during our best years—it was easy, if you set out to make it a priority, to know all of the names and faces. I wrote short profiles in those early years that were featured in our weekly bulletin. At the very least, it provided the photo directory that some people asked for—family unit by family unit, one at a time. At most, it generated reasons for people who might not have approached others to express commonalities they possessed, based on what they'd read and could reference while seated or standing beside another, no longer beside 'an other.'

Through that lens, it was somewhat effortless to spot the visitors among the crowd. Each week, as we marched the Torah back to the ark, I'd pace slowly through the men's section and shake every single hand, calling out first names. Some labeled me as the mayor. For the ones I didn't recognize, I'd linger with them for an extra half minute,

inviting them to remain with us after services conclude so I can get to know them a bit better over some herring. This weekly ritual inspired me, someone who began as a back-of-the-room guy, to arrive early and stay all the way through to the end.

Ultimately, you can only bleed members for so long, overlooking missing faces and explaining empty seats. It's not always the summer season when lots of people are away. There isn't perpetually a celebration taking place nearby that yanked out some of your regulars. The future of the congregation was in question for much of this past year, and with no clear path forward for the congregation, the kindest conclusion emerged to announce our closure. The final meeting was set three weeks in advance for July 12. It allowed people to get resettled elsewhere ahead of the upcoming High Holy Day season.

When the closure came, I wasn't torn up over the decision. I had mourned my *shul* last winter, many months ahead of the announcement. The board made the proper and dignified call: we no longer had the money or the manpower to remain afloat. We had drifted too far from what we were founded upon. There was no tide-turning plan in place to move ahead productively, to right this ship. Without a differentiator that defined what we were and would be, it was better to close up shop actively than to fade away passively.

Getting dressed that final Saturday morning, I donned a brown polyester jacket my friend Jesse had recently re-gifted me. Once a neighbor and

always a champion of the self-work I've done, Jesse moved to the suburbs amid the pandemic. With that jacket I wanted to express something only I adorned: my past together with my present to form who I am today. That jacket doesn't quite fit me, and it didn't actually match or make my outfit on a summer day, but it acted as a security blanket in case I required one.

I arrived that morning even earlier than I typically would, desperate to take in any extra healing breaths while they were still available. An officiant came over to ask if I'd like to be called up to the Torah. I suggested that countless other men were more deserving of the honor ahead of me, presumably members of the board or past presidents who'd put far more hours into ruling and running the synagogue as it stood. He replied, "I was told to give you one." In that case, I said, I'd be honored to accept. Which one did I want? I chose the seventh and final blessing—my bow.

I didn't take a prayer book, choosing instead to scan the full room. Others prayed silently, together. A teenager walked in and went to his regular spot. I noticed that he had put on his sweater backward. I recalled the mild shame of such mistakes at that age—having it pointed out later in the day and sensing that everyone must have been laughing at your expense for hours without telling you.

I decided to cut off that false impression at the pass, to spare him the potential trauma of an incident that might plague him. I walked over and whispered that he might want to switch his

sweater around in the bathroom, which he did. Many people wouldn't have said anything, had they even noticed. But this institution has trained me and thus turned me into someone who nurtures others—who speaks up when he has something to say, who now knows how to approach these moments the correct, dignified way, via enough practice of modeling the pastoral care he had watched, recognized, and appreciated.

The teenager was startled by the suggestion, tugging at the front of his sweater for a bit before he stepped outside. His father was leading prayers at the time, and I got the distinct impression that he wanted to remain in the sanctuary for the duration of his father's offering. Sure enough, as soon as his father returned to his seat, the kid exited for a brief stint. When he came back in, retaking his seat, the sweater was worn in its proper form.

I thought about another teenager whose father told me years ago that, during a yeshiva interview, his son cited me as a role model. I didn't have anyone like that at his age, and my life's mission—after the pandemic passed and permitted us to gather again—is to display good and moral decision-making for kids and adults alike. I wish to exhibit the enthusiasm I crave. Someone once told me that you have the company culture that you create. I have recentered myself—via a midlife reset that only a pandemic could deliver—by surrounding myself with those who live with intentionality first, spirituality second.

The type of people who formed and founded this *shul* are go-getters—kind and serious people. I recall walking home for a while after services each Friday night with someone I never had a Shabbat meal with in all his years in Riverdale. In the spring of 2021, he and his family moved to a nearby suburb. I was happy for them to get more space to stretch out, but I was sad that he left without a goodbye. Our kinship vanished when he left the neighborhood. Those small yet meaningful points of connection matter dearly. Find someone to walk with, to get to know them a bit better. Be a brother to them, never a bother to them.

At the close of prayers that final morning, a board member led a program that began with her own reflections. She called up others to reflect: first a woman—Chinese and a convert—to speak about finally finding a place where she belonged. A teenager followed, outlining how she had come of age at our youth groups and later graduated to provide guidance and commentary to the next generation as a proud counselor. In her remarks, she pointed out that it's the Jewish way to evolve with unexpected change and to relocate to new places as well.

The appointed emcee read off a series of thank-yous for those who have contributed heavily, both in the front of the room and also behind the scenes. As she concluded, she encouraged all of us at the reception to meet and greet someone they didn't already know. I was delighted that this would be the lasting message of this community, confirming that I'd chosen well and right. These are my people, who stay in motion.

Just then, to my surprise, she awarded me the final shout-out, labeling me as someone who encapsulated what this congregation and its community were all about. I was moved to tears by the mention. The crowd applauded me for my contributions. I never held any official title or responsibility, yet I had made my mark.

Memories at synagogues flow most often from individual meditation or personal family circumstances, not from communal camaraderie. For most, the truth is that their hope—in both their prayers and their purpose—is never to run into any grave issue that would require communal support. They have their friends, and that’s enough.

Perhaps because it’s so uncommon, I could tell from the several years of approaching strangers at my synagogue and asking their names that more were skeptical than accustomed to such behavior. They’d balk at the suggestion that any lay leader would come over. It was a novelty, an anomaly. And after a moment of hesitation, I’d see them loosen their shoulders and understand that the norm they were used to wasn’t actually all that normal. The message of one handshake and smile would penetrate: We were happy to have you among us. We saw you.

No *shul* should be loud. And no *shul* should be totally silent either. That nobody at other synagogues is doing this influential work perplexes me. It is the foundation of being a giving person: keeping your eyes open for opportunity, because you never know how ignored that person might

feel—then and always. In truth, people should be kinder and gentler with one another overall. We live amid difficult times; it’s incumbent on us to add a little bit of ease where and when we can.

On my final Saturday walking through the crowd, I found four people I’ve never set eyes on before: Michael, John, Hector, and Etan. If I wind up reintroducing myself to one or more of them later at another local synagogue both call home, I’ll be fine with it. They can remind me that I’ve done it before, and I’ll remind them of the synagogue where, against all odds, I became a *mentsch*.

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