

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

תשפ"ג

This week's parsha talks about two massive tests in life.

Everyone is familiar with the nisayon of the Akeida.

What is a nisayon? The Rambam says 'nisayon' comes from the Hebrew word 'nes' which is a banner that is raised to show something.

There is a simple question. Hashem asks us to make sacrifices to show that He is the highest priority. But how much can Hashem ask? How big can the sacrifice be?

The Akeida teaches us that there is no limit to what we may be asked to give up. Hashem asked that Avrohom sacrifice his son, his only son, the one he loves. Yitzchok is the most precious and cherished thing he had in his entire life. Every child is precious and loved, but Yitzchok was unique. He is Avrohom's long-awaited only son from his wife Soroh who would be the only way his legacy would survive. If Yitzchok is gone, there won't be another one to replace him.

Hashem is teaching us that everything a person has in life is a gift from Hashem. Hashem can ask for it back – even the most valuable thing. We need to show that our relationship with Hashem is more important than anything we have.

How did Avrohom react? With zerizus. He woke up early in the morning. He didn't even order his servants to saddle his donkey for him. He did it himself even though he was massively wealthy. Not only was Avrohom willing to give up the most precious thing he had for his love of Hashem, but he did it willingly and with enthusiasm to show that his overwhelming love and devotion to Hashem went beyond anything else he had in this world. That is the point of a nisayon.

This is the Rambam's approach to the Akeida. The Ramban has a different approach and they are both true.

Many of us have potential, but it isn't real growth until that potential becomes actual. The Ramban says that people are given tests to bring out the potential greatness that they have and make it real and concrete. Avrohom is given a test of the Akeida to bring out his own development and growth to make his devotion to Hashem a real part of him.

Hashem told Avrohom to bring Yitzchok up to one of the mountains. Avrohom had to wander around until he senses which one it is. It took Avrohom three days reach the place of the Akeida. But it doesn't usually take that long to go from Chevron to Yerusholayim! It was because Avrohom didn't know where to go.

Another reason Hashem wanted it to take three days is because sometimes a person gets a rush of excitement to do something big, and over time, that enthusiasm can fizzle out. If a person has too much time, he will think it over more carefully and perhaps have second thoughts. Hashem wanted to see if Avrohom would be willing to go through with the Akeida even after having the extra time to think about how big of a sacrifice he is making and all the reasons not to go through with it – not just rush into it and get it done without thinking.

Yitzchok also had three days to think it over and hesitate. He didn't hear the command to be sacrificed directly from Hashem. He had to trust that his father was telling him the truth about this prophecy, and he had to be willing to give up his life based on that trust. That is Yitzchok's test.

There is an incredible midrash which records a dialogue Yitzchok had

with the Soton on the way to the Akeida when he realized that he was going to be sacrificed. The Soton made arguments to convince Avrohom and Yitzchok not to go to the Akeida. This is really their own yetzer horo talking to them and trying to convey how much they will be losing by doing this.

The Soton can't win over Avrohom so he started to work on Yitzchok. The argument which hit home the most was that Yitzchok was given toys made by his mother when he was a child. Yitzchok kept those toys all these years because he was saving them to give them to his own children when he married and started a family. But now that he will be killed and he won't have any children, those toys will be taken by Yishmoel and he will give them to his children instead. At this point, Yitzchok turned to his father for support to continue because he is faltering.

This is a very deep insight into human behavior. The message is that even though we may commit to making significant sacrifices, sometimes it is the small, emotional attachments we have which hold us back.

They finally reach the place of the Akeida and they build a mizbei'ach. They have the wood and the fire and Avrohom is about to slaughter his son, when an angel called out to tell Avrohom to stop. But this is almost impossible because Avrohom has been building up his willpower for three days straight in order to go through with it, and now it just got cancelled. So Avrohom asked to at least make a wound, make a little prick on Yitzchok's finger. But the maloch instructed him not to do anything at all. It is an incredible test – to just turn off all that psychic energy that has been building up for so long. But Hashem said no and that is that. Hashem's command is the basis for everything.

In the end, Hashem made a promise that Avrohom would give rise to a great nation, etc. It is problematic because when you read this promise, you see that it doesn't seem to be adding anything that hasn't already been promised before. What is Hashem offering? The Ramban explains that this promise is adding the fact that Avrohom's nation will always survive throughout history – no matter what. It won't be like most great nations and empires who rise and eventually fall and disappear.

How is this reward an example of middoh kenegged middoh? The Akeida was more than a personal nisayon for Avrohom to lose a cherished son. Killing his own son on Hashem's command after preaching about Hashem's middoh of chesed meant that his entire life's work of spreading the truth about Hashem would be going down the drain. You tell everyone you meet about Hashem's kindness, and this is what He asks you to do? Avrohom wouldn't be able to face anyone – to affect anyone after this. His whole life's mission is over. No present and no future. But, Avrohom was willing to give this up too. So he is rewarded with the promise that his life's mission of spreading awareness of Hashem through his future nation will never be terminated in the future.

Another aspect of the nisayon is that Avrohom could have argued that if he killed Yitzchok now, there will be no Jewish people who are serving Hashem. Doesn't Hashem Himself need a Jewish people to exist to fulfill His purpose for creation? How can Avrohom end it all by killing Yitzchok? Some people think they know how to serve Hashem better than Hashem Himself, and convince themselves that it is necessary to go against the will of Hashem for various important reasons. Avrohom

realized that if Hashem doesn't want a Jewish people, that is Hashem's decision to make and he cannot object. So as a reward, Hashem promised Avrohom that Klal Yisroel would never disappear.

Avrohom is showing that the only thing that matters is the will of Hashem and he follows it unquestioningly, despite all the excuses and arguments he could have given to not do it. The only thing motivating and driving him is the will of Hashem with no other cheshbonos.

There was another nisayon at the beginning of the parsha – a massive test. We discussed last week that the journey from Ur Kasdim to Eretz Canaan had to go through Turkey because you can't just cut straight across through the desert. Terach fizzled out there in Choron and couldn't continue. Hashem told Avrohom to cut himself off from his entire background and upbringing and go to this unspecified land. Avrohom continued to travel and eventually reached Eretz Canaan and is promised that this land will belong to his descendants and they will become a great nation here forever. All of a sudden there is a famine and Avrohom had to leave. He doesn't understand why he has to go right after arriving and he has to borrow on credit to afford his lodgings. In Egypt he and Lot become massively wealthy. They are now entering the test of wealth.

Lot stuck by Avrohom even when things were hard. He also left with Avrohom from Ur Kasdim and didn't stay with Terach in Choron. He went all the way to Eretz Canaan and even down to Egypt with Avrohom. But now that Lot is independently wealthy, he feels his relationship with Avrohom is expendable. If it becomes a choice between staying with Avrohom and his spiritual goals and increasing his flocks, Lot will choose to go to S'dom for greater economic opportunity.

In krias Sh'ma we are commanded to love Hashem with all our hearts, all our souls and all our possessions. Chazal ask, if we are already required to give up our lives for ahavas Hashem, why do we need to be commanded to give up our possessions as well? The answer is that some people are so attached to and identify themselves by their financial abilities that their money is actually more precious to them than their lives! They need to be commanded to also give up their possessions for the sake of ahavas Hashem.

There are interesting differences between the first parsha and the second parsha of krias Shema. The first talks in the singular and the second talks in the plural. The first includes 'bechol me'odechoh' and the second one does not. The Midrash Tanchuma explains that the first parsha is referring to individuals who uplifted themselves and serve Hashem on the highest level. For them it is appropriate to require they give up their possessions for ahavas Hashem. The second parsha is referring to the masses of the Jewish people and for the masses, you can't expect they will give up their possessions as easily. It is more valuable than their lives. It all depends on how you look at wealth.

Avrohom was given all his wealth by Pharaoh. Lot is kind of a hanger-on to Avrohom and gets wealthy by associating with him. He didn't earn anything himself. But once he got this wealth, something happens – he automatically starts to want more and more. Yes, Avrohom Ovinu is a great spiritual person dedicated to following the truth and preaching the truth to everyone and anyone he meets. But Lot is being swayed by his money and is veering away from Avrohom's values of truth and honesty. He got all of it as a gift but he starts to think he deserves more and more of it.

As we mentioned last week, archeological discoveries were made about the region of the Dead Sea. It used to be the most fertile and prosperous place in Eretz Yisroel until 3,500 years ago there was some kind of catastrophic event which showered fire and sulfur and burnt up the entire region. This was a direct confirmation of the story of the destruction of S'dom in this week's parsha down to the last detail. But the archeologists couldn't accept that and they theorized that a totally natural event happened first and afterwards people made up a legend of the people of S'dom and their divine punishment.

Lot didn't care that he was going to an evil place. He needs to follow the money wherever it leads. Honesty isn't going to get in the way. Lot convinced himself that he would stay a tzaddik and he actually kept up the chesed he learned from Avrohom Ovinu despite his evil surroundings. Lot apparently became a very respected person in S'dom. They made him a judge. He seems to be very successful because of his move. But the day of reckoning always comes. Eventually, Lot loses everything. Hashem gave Lot the money by associating with Avrohom and his honesty, but there are strings attached. He has certain demands about how to make it and how to spend it.

Of course, we need to engage in hishtadlus, but you have to really believe that success or failure in your efforts come only from Hashem. If you think you have no choice but to start partnerships with evil people and cut corners in honesty in order to make a living, it means you don't really believe Hashem is determining the outcome. You are not living with the emes.

Avrohom Ovinu had the two things in perfect balance, chesed and emes and massive wealth. Lot got a share of Avrohom's wealth, but he didn't want the chesed and emes that should come with it. What happens to Lot? It all gets destroyed along with S'dom. As he is running for his life – being saved in the merit of Avrohom – the malochim suggest that Lot return to Avrohom's household. Lot refuses. He claims he can't live up to Avrohom's standard. What about free-will? Why can't Lot push himself to rise to that level? He denied that he has that power to rise. The truth is that bechiroh works when you have the strong determination to achieve results. If you don't really want it, you won't make it.

There are two interesting gemoros about the power of free-will. Elisha ben Avuya was a tanna – a rebbe of Rabbi Meir – and all of a sudden went off the derech. He was given the title of "Acher". One day he was riding on his donkey and heard a voice declaring that all can do teshuvoh except for Acher. What happened to the power of bechiroh? Why didn't the bas kol address him as Elisha ben Avuya? It was because he decided to remain Acher. Once he is convinced that this is who he was, he can't do teshuvoh. If he would decide to make a fundamental change and go back to being the tanna Elisha ben Avuya, he would be able to use the power of bechiroh and do teshuvoh.

There is another gemoro in Avodah Zoro about Elazar ben Durdaya. He was constantly giving in to his impulses and lust for zenus with no restraints. It was his whole life. He heard about a woman far off and while pursuing her he realized his life was totally empty and he has to do teshuvoh. He asked the heavens and earth, mountains and seas, sun and moon, all the natural creations for help doing teshuvoh and they couldn't help him. He realized that it all depends on him and his bechiroh alone to take his life and change it. He did teshuvoh with all his might and he succeeded in getting into olom haboh.

The malochim are telling Lot to do teshuvoh and go back to Avrohom. Your life has turned into a complete failure. You left Avrohom Ovinu and pursued money and compromised your integrity and it left you with nothing but ruin. Turn it around! Go back to chesed and emes. Lot says he is not sure he is truly willing to make that kind of change in his life.

Lot died in disgrace – isolated from society because of his act of incest. Avrohom's legacy goes on forever. This is because Avrohom remained with chesed and emes even after he became fabulously wealthy. They can go very well together when you keep your values and your priorities of ruchniyus straight. Lot couldn't deal with the nisayon of money. It made him lose his sense of emes and made him leave Avrohom to associate with wicked people. The money distracted him and pushed him in the opposite direction and he ended in poverty and disgrace.

This is the stark contrast of Parshas Vayeira.