



Sefer Bereishis - Parshas Vayera

True Conflict

Avraham's ultimate test was Akeidas Yitzchak, but the test runs much deeper than it appears at face value. It seems the basic difficulty was that he had to sacrifice his son, although Hashem had said that this very same son would be his heir, and the future of Avraham's covenant.

The Ran explains that there is much more to it, and points out a major subtlety, that adds a whole new dimension into what was required of Avraham. Hashem says: **קח-נא את-בְּנֶךְ אֶת** – **יחידך אשר-אהבת, את-יצחק, ולך-לך, אל-ארץ המְרִיה; והעלהו שם, לעֹלָה** – Please take your son, your only son, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go, for yourself, to the land of Moriah, and sacrifice him, as a burnt offering. (22:2).

The Ran point out that Hashem said “ – **קח-נא** please take”. This was a request. It was not a command, it was not an instruction; sacrificing his son was something Hashem desired, but did not demand. It is quite possible that if Avraham had refused, he would not have violated Hashem word, as Hashem had not issued an instruction.

This enhances our view of the difficulty this task posed. Hashem did not require it, and Avraham did not “need” to go through with it. It would just please Hashem were he to go through with it, it ideas his choice. He was not compelled to do it at all.

The Slonimer Rebbe adds a further subtle reference to the turmoil he faced. The pasuk says that as Avraham approached the place, **וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרַחֵק** – Avraham lifted his eyes, and saw **הַמָּקוֹם** from a distance. (22:4)

Classically, this means that he literally “saw the place”. But **הַמָּקוֹם** is also a name of Hashem – He is “The Place”, He is everywhere, the Omnipresent.

In this context, **וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם-מֵרַחֵק** means that Avraham looked around, and felt a distance between himself and Hashem. Avraham was doing what he felt he ought to do, when he knew that what he was doing did not feel right. It tore him apart – he'd spent his whole life fighting idol worship and sacrifice, and yet here he was, about to sacrifice his son, throwing away his entire future, and Hashem had not even demanded it.

וַיִּרְא אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם—מֵרַחֵק - Avraham looked around, and felt a distance between himself and Hashem.

We read this on Rosh Hashana, and perhaps, apart from the obvious merit this story brings, perhaps we can also relate to this on a personal level. Things aren't always clear cut what we have to do, what's right. We don't always "feel it", but sometimes, we have to persevere with what we have to do, and we will come out better for having done so.

Running

As Avraham recovers from his circumcision, the temperature gets blazingly hot, with the goal that Avraham relax and recuperate from. Avraham was not to be held back:

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי ה' בְּאֵלֵי נֵי מַמְרָא וְהוּא יָשׁ בַּפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם. וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּרְא וַיִּרְץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה – Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre; and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent when the day was hot. He raised his eyes and noticed three men were approaching him, and he saw them. He ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and he prostrated himself to the ground.

His location, "from the entrance of the tent" is established when the setting is described, yet repeated when he departs. Why?

The Kehilas Yitzchak explains that the Gemara in Brachos teaches that one who leaves a synagogue should not take large steps while leaving – he shouldn't appear happy when departing a mitzvah. There is also a halacha in the Shulchan Aruch that it is a mitzvah to hurry towards any mitzvah.

If someone is switching from one mitzvah to another, should he run or not? A potential paradox appears: if he runs, it appears to devalue the first mitzvah; if he doesn't run, then he isn't doing the mitzvah of running to perform the second mitzvah!

The resolution is that if the first mitzvah is greater than the second, then he shouldn't run; so as to not devalue the first and greater mitzvah. If the second mitzvah is greater, then he should run in order to fulfill the second greater mitzvah with haste and zeal. What if the two are equal? He should walk the first half of the journey and run the second half, in this way he fulfills both obligations.

The Gemara in Shabbos teaches that receiving guests is greater than speaking to Hashem. Accordingly, when Avraham went to bring in guests, although having been speaking to Hashem, the second mitzvah was greater than the first; Avraham had to run the entire journey. Therefore, the Torah records that he ran towards them to praise his eagerness to run towards the second mitzvah the entire journey; "from the entrance of the tent".

On Relativity

Hashem sent two angels to Sedom, one to destroy the city and the other to save Lot. The people of Sedom had become so evil and corrupt that Hashem had to destroy the entire city. It is taught that Sedom were familiar with the concept of kindness; they just twisted it in the most perverse way.

Chazal teach that if poor people appeared in the city, they'd receive charity, not let the pauper spend those coins to buy food and lodging in the city. Sedom took the attribute of chesed and warped it to what they saw as ethical, what they believed kindness to be.

Lot brought the angels, disguised as travelers into his home, which was prohibited by law in Sedom. He offered them food and refuge, punishable by death. A mob gathered outside to dispense Sedom's form of justice, and demanded the release of the travelers to meet their fate. Lot attempted to buy off the mob, but offering to send out his two daughters in their place, to be done with as they please, and was willing to sacrifice his own life to protect his guests. At this point, the angels interceded, striking their attackers with blindness. They inform Lot that he must flee from Sedom to save himself. This is the Torah's record of the story.

Rashi (19:29) says that Lot merited from being rescued from Sedom, because when Avraham hid Sarah in a box before entering into Egypt, Lot didn't inform the Egyptians that Sarah was hidden inside. Lot could have told the Egyptians who would then kidnap Sarah, kill Avraham, and Lot would inherit all of Avraham's property; but instead he kept his mouth shut.

Lot's only true merit was from not informing on Avraham and Sarah; this made him salvageable from Sedom's sentence years later.

Lot was willing to give up his life for hosting guests in the incredible manner delineated above; is it reasonable that his saving grace came from not getting his own uncle killed?

Rashi (19:17) also says that the angels warned Lot not to look at Sedom being destroyed because Lot himself wasn't fit to be saved through his own merit, but only through Avraham's merit which is controversial to what I just said above.

Rav Dessler explains the difficulty of a mitzvah isn't the same for two people. It isn't even the same twice over for the same individual! If as a child, one learnt all the laws of Shabbos, and he grows up in an observant home, then not much credit is due for not cooking lunch on Shabbos. Its instinctual knowledge not to (and perhaps even why not to) violate Shabbos. Additionally, the potential disgrace he'd be to his friends and family stop the thought from occurring. Such a person's struggle in life doesn't include the will he/won't he of cooking on Shabbos, but something more sophisticated; such as will he study

Torah regularly while juggling a family and career? Will he be haughty; or gossip? The salient point is that every Jew is on their own level with their own respective trials and tribulations. But if you become so accustomed and acclimatized to something, it stops being a thought process, it isn't a test – it literally becomes natural. The Evil Inclination has no pull over something so naturally instinctual to a person.

Lot grew up in the house of the kindest man who ever lived – the epitome of chessed. After living with Avraham for so long, and following his example day by day, Lot was accustomed to hosting guests. Lot couldn't not be kind to people, he'd been living that way for so long. If so, Lot's conduct of self-sacrifice is not as valuable as it seems. There is still merit received for mitzvos done with no choice, but not necessarily enough to save Lot. It is demonstrably not genuine kindness – what sane individual offers his own children to a baying mob?!

An analysis of Lot sheds light on the matter. Lot had extreme passion for financial success – he was the manager of Avraham's farming businesses. They part due to a financial disagreement. In this vein, not informing on his uncle takes on a new dimension.

If Lot would have informed on Sarah, he would have been fabulously wealthy. He would take ownership of all Avraham's assets and live a carefree life. This was truly a difficult test for Lot; in a field he had no training or experience. But Lot conquered his inclination for money, and didn't tell on Sarah.

It is this act, which appears fairly insignificant to the untrained eye, which turned the balance in his favor, enabling his rescue from the doomed city of Sedom. Clearly then, the value of our actions is directly proportional to the effort required to perform them.

Embittered Lives

Hashem told Avraham that his children would be enslaved in a land not their own for 400 years. Yet we find that they left after just 210 years of actual enslavement. Where is the missing 190 years?

There is an answer suggested that Egypt treated the Jews much worse than they should have, so as we say in ברוך המקום during Seder night: ש"הקבה חשב את הקץ - Hashem calculated the end. What "end" is this talking about? Hashem hastened the גאולה and reckoned off 190 – קץ (from 400)- leaving us with 210.

In the Haggada we read how – וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם They embittered their lives (Shemos 1:1) The Vilna Gaon points out how this is very subtly hinted to by the notes. The notes on וַיִּמְרְרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם are קדמא ואזלא, which literally means "they got up and went". Additionally, the numerical value of this is 190! They were over-embittered to a value of 190, so they got up and went!

R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld points out that the redemption from Egypt was only completed 7 days after it began, when the Red Sea parted and when Paroh and his army were destroyed, so where is this reflected in historical events?

He answers that the 400 years were counted from Yitzchak's birth. The extra week is found at his circumcision. Yitzchak was only circumcised 7 days after his birth – so only became Jewish then, and only 400 years from then were the Jews genuinely free.

Context is Key

When Hashem first speak to Avraham, he is humbled: וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא הוֹאֲלֵתִי – וַיֹּאמֶר וַיֹּאמֶר – לַדְּבָר אֶל אֲדֹנָי וְאֲנִי עֹפָר וְאֵפֶר – And Abraham answered and said, “Behold now I have commenced to speak to the Lord, although I am dust and ashes.”

The Gemara in Chulin says that for displaying such humility, his descendants would earn the mitzvos of the ash of the Para Adumah – Red Heifer; and dust of the Sotah – a woman brought to the Temple accused of adultery was forced to drink a concoction which had dust from the foot of the Altar in it.

There is an obvious yet superficial connection of dust to dust, ash to ash; how are Sotah and Para Adumah a relevant reward to his humility for saying Afar v'Efer?

The Dubner Maggid tells a story of an influential member of society who invited the townsfolk and leaders to his son's lavish wedding. A great rabbi arrived, wished congratulations, but felt unworthy of sitting on the designated rabbis table; and quietly took his seat in the corner of the room. The host noticed, and he requested that the whole table of rabbis move to the table in the corner to join this great rabbi. He manipulated the context to make the insignificant corner table into one where great rabbis sat.

The Dubner Maggid explains that this is precisely what Hashem did; He took what Avraham said, and changed the context from dust and ash as worthless matter, into dust and ash as Mitzvos, incorporating them into Torah, making them building blocks of the universe.

Another explanation is suggested by the Beis HaLevi: Dust of the earth has no past, but immense potential for the future, it is the cradle of life, at the very bottom of the food chain; it grows plant life, which in turn sustains animal life and so on. Ash has no future whatsoever, but has a detailed past, being the charred remains of something that once lived. Avraham intended to mean that he had no past, like earth, and no future, like ash.

Hashem inverted this, by giving the Mitzvah of Sotah, which cleans the woman's past through dust, and Para Adumah which purifies the person's future through ash.

Breaking the Chain

The Shalshelles is a rare cantor's note, a tremendous literary device, which makes just four appearances in the entire Chumash— in Lech Lecha 19:16; in Chayei Sarah 24:12; in Vayeshev 39:8; and in Tzav 8:23.

In Chayei Sarah, we find that Eliezer, Avraham's most trusted servant, is charged with finding a wife for Yitzchak. He is not allowed to take a wife from Canaan. The Midrash tells us that Eliezer had a daughter and it could have been that he might 'just not have found' a suitable wife outside Canaan. This could have left the path open for his daughter. Nevertheless, Eliezer overcomes any personal attachments and prays that Hashem heed his master's request. This triumph over his own desires is signified by the Shalshelles on the word – ויאמר the opening word of his prayer.

In Vayeshev we see the tremendous personal struggle that Joseph had to overcome. Indeed, by running out and leaving his coat behind in the hands of his master's wife, he got himself into more trouble in some ways. But on a personal level, he could not afford to be in the house a moment longer, refusing his master's wife's advances. That very word – וימאן (and he refused), has a שלשלת on it, denoting the breaking of his own potential negative desires.

As for the final appearance – in Tzav – the Midrash tells us that Moshe Rabbenu was the Kohen Gadol until the end of the Miluim, the first week of the Mishkan's use, at which point he had to hand over the position to his brother Aharon (according to various sources, because he had argued at the burning bush). It must have been hard for him. Yet he overcame any personal desires and handed over the baton wholeheartedly. His final act as High Priest was וישחט... no surprises about the musical note on this word, at the point of his breaking with his own emotion.

Looking back at Lech Lecha, we see from Rashi that the Torah tells us that the angels had to grab hold of Lot because he was tarrying... leaving behind all his possessions. The first word of the Pasuk, which means he hesitated, contains a – שלשלת he overcame his physical desire for wealth and grabbed reality with both hands... literally.

It is no accident that Shalshelles actually means a chain. Furthermore, if you listen to its sound, it is elongated (3x a – פזר Pazer, another musical note – which is long already), yet comes to an abrupt end, thus breaking the chain. The person it is used about has transcended.

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