

## MEETING WITH G-D

There was a great man I remember from my childhood, Jack Adjmi, of blessed memory. He was my best friend's grandpa. He gave substantial amounts of charity to the shuls I grew up in. I remember how, when eulogizing him, one of his sons quoted his father, using a statement I can't get out of my memory: "If you want to pray, you have to pay". I assumed that what he meant was that if you want to pray, you need to donate money to the shuls you are praying in. Otherwise, the shuls can't pay their bills.

But this week, I learnt that there is a deeper meaning to his words. If you want to pray, if you want to see G-d, you need to give tzeddakah. When a person gives a coin of tzeddaka to a poor person, he merits seeing the Shechina. Rabbi Elazar would first give a coin of tzeddakah to the poor, *and only then pray*, as it says in Tehillim, **אני בצדק אהוה פניך**, (B Batra 10a). And the Talmud compares giving tzeddaka to giving a present to a king, saying how much greater it is to give tzeddakah. Because when you give a present to a king, no matter how big the present, he can decide if he wants to see you or not. But when you give tzeddakah, no matter how small, you will certainly meet the King. Even if you are not worthy, G-d will accept your giving tzeddaka, no matter how low you may have fallen. Even Nebuchadnezar, one of the biggest resham ever, was advised by Daniel to give tzeddaka, as a good deed that would help him to attain G-d's grace. (Also see Sanhedrin 104b,105a)

This is why the Shulchan Aruch (92;10) writes that it is good to give tzeddaka before prayers. And the commentaries mention that the custom is to give during Vayebarech David, when saying **והעושר** **והכבוד לפניך ואתה מושל בכל**. This is why we stand during Vayebarech David, because it is the time that we give tzeddakah (Arizal) (see Yalkut Yosef Tefillah 92 ; 6 footnote).

It seems that giving tzeddakah, being generous, tapping into the altruism we all have inside of us, is a means for building our relationship with G-d. And, on the contrary, if a poor man asks you for tzeddakah because he needs food, and you do not give him even a minimal amount, that is like idol worship (Sheiltot D'Rabbi Achai, Terumah 63). What is the connection? Why is it that when someone gives tzeddakah, he gets a direct, personal meeting with G-d, and when he does not give tzeddaka, it is as if he is serving idols? Why is being altruistic a condition for being connected to G-d and serving Him?

The reason is that when you give Tzeddaka, you are showing that you believe in G-d. You believe that **העושר והכבוד לפניך ואתה מושל בכל** - that all the money and the honor in the world belong to You, G-d, and that You, G-d are in charge of everything. And if you hold on to your "hard-earned money", and you can't give a coin for a poor man's bread, you do not believe that G-d provides you with money. You believe that your boss, business plan, family relative, or client brings you your money. It is almost as if you believe in these elements as

sources of livelihood, more than you believe in G-d.

It is amazing that the founder of Emunah, Avraham Avinu, was known for his Chessed, more than anything else. He even asked G-d for permission to excuse himself to welcome guests. This is because Avraham saw the tzelem Elokim in people, so he perceived serving them as serving G-d. He saw that by doing Chessed, he was serving G-d.

It seems that the Parasha is highlighting this stark difference between the worldview of Avraham Avinu and the selfish, miserly, cruel people of Sedom. While Avraham saw an opportunity to worship G-d in every act of kindness he did with people, the Sodomites were rabidly anti-chessed, to the point that it was against their principles to deal kindly with any person. We know that Lot's wife, Irit, (see Baal Haturim 19; 26) turned into a pillar of salt for disobeying the angels' request and looking back at the people of Sedom. Why salt? Because the people of Sedom found out about Lot's having invited the "angel guests" through Irit. When the angels came, she went to the neighbors to ask to borrow salt. They asked her why she needed salt. "Didn't you know how much salt you need for supper?" She said, "Yes, but I have guests that suddenly showed up". She "spilled the beans" to the whole of Sedom, knocking on every door, asking for salt, and the whole city knew that Lot had transgressed their anti-chessed constitution. The Pesikta points to the words - ומצות אפה - and he baked Matzot. Only Lot prepared the Matza supper for the guests (as it was the night of Passover). Irit did not even put salt on the table. So, she was punished by becoming a pillar of salt. Again, note

the contrast. In Avraham's house, everyone got involved in inviting the guests.

The K'li Yakar asks why Irit got punished only later, when running away from Sedom with Lot, when she turned back to see what happened to her family. Why was she not punished right then and there, not only for not having invited the guests, but for having exposed her husband and the guests to the wrath of Sedom?

The answer is that when Lot left Sedom, he left with his hands on his head, and he could not take anything with him. Just his soul. המלט על נפשו (Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10;8). The Kli Yakar makes a twist on the words of the passuk, ונתבט אשתו מאחריו. The word מאחריו does not mean only that Irit looked behind Lot to see what was happening back home. It also means אחריי, after the end of Lot's life. Lot's wife looked at Lot's end, worrying about her Ketubah, knowing that she was not going to have any of the wealth they once possessed, as her inheritance. The fact that at such a crucial time she was concerned about money, viewing it as her source of living; the fact that her central concern was the same as America's greatest fear - the fear of retirement - her worrying about her ketubah at this time of judgment - joined together with her lack of giving tzeddakah to bring about her punishment. For the two are directly connected. Giving tzeddakah is an expression of the fact that you are not worried about how much you will be left with, which is a direct result of how much faith you have in G-d.

It is clear that doing chessed, giving tzeddakah, is a fundamental part of faith. Your constant giving charity is the litmus test for your degree of Emunah

## THE GREATEST TEST FOR MANKIND

A few years back, there was a small minyan that gathered in a room adjacent to the house of one of the neighbors. The intimate group in its cozy quarters used to invite a diverse choice of speakers between Mincha and Arvit Friday Night. One fellow shared the following idea, about 10 years ago. (see Har Tzvi and Beer Yosef)

The Sephardim have this beautiful, tear-rendering piyut (poem) that they chant on the High Holidays: *Et Shaarei Ratzon*. It describes, in great detail and emotion, the episode of the Akeidat Yitzchak. Sephardim recite this before the blowing of the Shofar. The paytan, author of the piyut, mentions that Avraham experienced somewhat conflicting emotions at the time of the Akeida – עין במר בוכה

ולב שמח, *eyes crying bitterly, but with a happy heart*. Of course, we can all understand how Avraham would be crying, as he prepared the knife to slaughter his son. But how can the paytan know that Avraham was happy in his heart at that moment of such a difficult test? Maybe Avraham was *sad* in his heart at the time of the Akeida?

Question two: Why didn't Hashem tell Avraham, from the outset, where he was supposed to take Yitzhak to sacrifice him? Avraham had to walk until he found a mountain upon which the Cloud of Glory rested. How can we understand this, and in what way does it add to the test?

The answer is so powerful, that I felt I had to share it with others. I feel that I won't do this thought justice by leaving it only in my own memory, as I was one of the few people who heard it in that small shul a few years back.

While Avraham was undergoing this test, seemingly the greatest test of all, there was a much deeper test that could conceivably go unnoticed. We are taught that a person cannot have prophesy or Ruach Hakodesh when he is not happy. אין רוח אין (ירושלמי סוכה ה,א) הקודש שורה אלא על לב שמח שכונה ואין נבואה שורה לא מתוך עצבות (פסחים קיז,א). Yaakov lost his Ruach Hakodesh during the years that he was dejected at having lost Yosef. Had Avraham been heavy-hearted when he was on his way to do this mitzvah, he would not have seen the Presence of G-d on the top of the mountain, for it could be discerned only through prophetic vision. The only way that it would be possible for Avraham to pass this test, to bring his son to the

#### PREPARED FOR LIFE

*Rav Abahu said, why do we blow a Shofar made of a ram's horn (on Rosh Hashana)? G-d said, blow Shofar of a ram before Me on Rosh Hashana, so that I will remember the Akeidah of Yitzhak, son of Abraham for you, and I will consider it as if you performed your own Akeidah before Me.* (Rosh Hashana 16a) I always wondered how G-d could consider that we sacrificed ourselves on the Altar to Him? How can anything we do be considered in any way like Yitzhak's self-sacrifice, even in the wildest stretch of imagination? And why does Rav Abahu mention Yitzhak *son of Abraham*?

altar and *almost* sacrifice him was if Avraham would be happy to do as he was commanded.

We can take this a step further. A more frightening step further. If Avraham would have been steeped in sadness up there on the top of the mountain with his knife in his hand over Yitschak's neck, he would not have heard the Heavenly Voice call out to him, telling him to refrain from slaughtering his son. And then, we would not be here today reading this article.

A person can live his whole life learning, praying, doing kindness - everything that a Jew is cut out to do. He can try so hard - but with a frown. And then, when he gets Upstairs, he will be told: "You passed all the tests *but* the biggest one!" עבדו את ה' - *To be happy when serving G-d*. To enjoy it.

How does one enjoy it, when he must go through so much? How could Avraham "enjoy it", when he had to give up his only link to the future of Judaism? The answer is because there is no greater pleasure in the world, nothing that can in any way compare to appreciation for the Creator. A relationship with the Creator. However much a person is willing to give up for saving his son's life, this pleasure is not in the same league as serving G-d with recognition of and appreciation for all that He gave us and gives us. So, we Sephardim chant , עין במר בוכה ולב שמח , an eye crying bitterly for losing a son, losing one of the greatest pleasures human beings can know, for a greater pleasure, one in a completely different league: following G-d's Will.

It's quite interesting. Out of the whole episode, it is the Akeida, of all things, that G-d remembers. Because that is all that a human being, even one as great as Yitzhak, can do. Prepare. Maybe your Akeida will not be considered as being exactly like the Akeidah of Yitzhak, but by preparing the way he did, that preparation will be considered a sacrifice, just as it was for Yitzhak.

You see, Yitzhak did not just jump onto the Altar and ask to get it over with. Yitzhak was very prepared. He asked to be tied. The Akeidah is the binding that Yitzhak asked of his father, so that he would not make any movement, causing himself

to be *pasul*, unfit as a sacrifice. Yitzhak was also concerned about the possibility that he could involuntarily hurt his father, out of a reflex action. Even in that fateful moment, his thoughts were concentrated on not causing his father to bleed. (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer) He was totally calm about the situation and prepared for it, so he was able to think about doing the job in the best possible way. Yitzhak asked to be bound, so that he could be totally prepared. For that is all that G-d wants from us. To be prepared to serve Him.

The Noam Elimelech derives the secret of Chassidut from here: if you want to *daven* well, prepare yourself to die *Al Kidush Hashem*. Vision yourself ready to die for the sake of G-d's Name, and your *kavvana* will soar. Each morning before prayer, visualize your very own Akeidah.

Your life is about how well you perform. There is a rule in performance. The 6 P rule. Prior Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance. If you made a parenting mistake, don't blame yourself. Just be more prepared next time. If you schmoozed through your learning Seder, don't feel bad. Just be more prepared next time. If you spaced out through *Shemoneh Esrei*, don't feel like a loser. Just be more prepared next time.

You see, your performance will be as great as your preparation. As a rebbi, I have learned this the hard way. When I am not prepared enough, even if the boys in *Shiur* don't know the Gemara well, they feel that I am unprepared. And they are insulted.

When your Shabbat table is not a Shabbat table - no singing, no connection with the kids, no divrei Torah, most of the time - it's because you, the father, are not prepared. You did not prepare what to say, you did not prepare what to sing, or you did not prepare a topic your kids are interested in. Your Shabbat Table can make the family reach a much higher spiritual level, if you just prepare. It's amazing what a bag of treats can do.

I am not blaming myself, or anybody else. I am trying to understand life. All we do, our whole life, is prepare. Think about what we do most of our productive hours in life. You prepare your house for better living. Prepare for work. Prepare for eating. Prepare for a good sleep. Of course, what ends up happening is always only in G-d's Hands. But He leaves preparation up to us and expects us to prepare.

Scary things happen when we forget to prepare for the important things in life. Preparation leads to making the right choices in life. You can prepare to bring up children, or just happen to have them grow up in your home. You can prepare the necessary attitudes and behaviors that make a tranquil home, or just happen to live there. You can prepare your children for leading a life of serving G-d, or just wait and see what happens.

The greatest things that human beings accomplish are usually the rewards G-d grants for the great efforts that were expended.

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