



Parashat Vayera



English version

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## THE ART OF PARENTING

Avraham Avinu was the first Mechanech, the first educator, וְיָרַק אֶת־חֲנִיכָיו. He knew that the most important part of Chinuch is not what you say, but how you behave. כִּי יִדְעֹתָיו לִמְעַן כִּי יִצְנֶה אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָוֹת יְקֹוֹק G-d said, I must tell Avraham, that I plan on destroying Sedom. *Because I know that he will command his sons, and his household, after him, to keep G-d's way...* One second. Why is the word, אַחֲרָיו, *after him*, mentioned? Isn't it superfluous? Just say that Avraham will command his sons! What are the words, "after him", coming to teach us?

The main thing in Chinuch, *what lasts*, is not what you say, as much as how the children will copy your behavior, *after you!* One word, אַחֲרָיו, says it all! The one word has two Chinuch definitions. 1. After you, or copying you. 2. After you are gone. After parenting is over. What lasts.

Chinuch does not happen right away. Children don't listen when you tell them what you tell them. They copy what they see in you. They follow you. Not immediately, but eventually. Of course, you have to let them know, in as few words as possible, what needs to be altered in their behavior, and you need to sandwich the salty criticism on both sides with sweet words of love, respect and understanding. But you can't turn your child's behavior like you turn a

doorknob. You need to make an order, and wait patiently, until the message is recognized. Rabbi Lawrence Kelerman put out the classic works of R Wolbe on Chinuch, that real Chinuch is Planting, Building, and Praying, all in the long term. Not forcing, lecturing, or manipulating. In the teenage years, the kids will do summersaults in the air... but eventually, the time will come when they land exactly the way they saw you as you brought them up with love. The apple won't fall far from the tree, even though it does not fall in a straight line.

Every child writes an imaginary letter to his Dad, from his subconscious. "Dad! You don't know it right now, but I am watching you! I am watching the things you do! I am watching the way you treat people... The way you treat me, my mom, my brother and my sister... The way you live your life is having a big impact on me... When it is time for me to choose a career and provide for my family, your work ethic will be on my mind... The time you spent with me, even doing simple things, will give me a sense of security... There will be times in my life where I will struggle with integrity, and I may not be sure what to do. But I will recall how you stood up for what was right, even if you could have looked the other way... The choices you are making, I will also make... Please don't be afraid to show me



your failures, to show me your mistakes. I will learn from them... Dad, are you listening? I am watching you! I am watching to see if you really believe what you say about G-d! I need your help to show me the way... To show me how to live life that isn't safe, but is good... I am watching you Dad, every day. You are teaching me how to live, whether you know it, or not!"

Stop! Read that letter one more time! Do I really believe what I say about G-d? About Olam Haba, about Him listening to my every word of prayer, looking into my heart, focusing on what I am focused on? והגיון לבי לפניך. Do I really believe what I say that the Torah is the most important thing? וחיי עולם נטע כי כך בטחנו ועל, Am I for real when I say, *I trust in You, G-d, and on Your great kindness, I am so dependent!* I know that G-d knows what I believe, but real Chinuch means that my kids also know what I *really* believe, even more than I realize what I believe!! *Dad, who are you fooling?* Just like if there was a stain on the back of your shirt or on the seat of your pants, that you can't see, but they can... they can see you more than you can ever see yourself! They can see what is in your heart from your moods and behaviors! Let me tell you one of my favorite Chinuch Stories. The story of Menashe, the wicked king.

Hizkiyahu, the righteous king, knew in his Ruach Hakodesh, that he would have a son who would be the most wicked king of the Jewish People, so he never married. The prophet Yeshayahu came to Hizkiyahu with the prophecy that he will die, because he does not want to have children, saying, "Why are you getting involved in G-d's future calculations!" Yeshayahu tells Chizkiyahu, he will die. Chizkiyahu says to the prophet Yeshayahu, "Let me marry your daughter;

maybe in the merit of both of us, we will have offspring that won't be so wicked." Yeshayahu ben Amotz, says, "Sorry, Chizkayahu. You are 'Game Over' - you have no hope." Chizkiyahu says to prophet Yeshayahu, "Ben Amotz! finish your prophecy, and get out of my palace! I have, handed down from my ancestor, King David, that even when a sharp sword is on your neck, don't give up on G-d's mercy!"

Hizkiyahu turned to the wall and prayed, from the deepest place in his heart, to get another chance at life. And he did. He married Yeshayahu's daughter. He had two sons, Rabshakeh and Menashe. He wanted to instill in his boys fear of Heaven, so King Hizkiyahu, would carry his two sons on his shoulders, each day to Yeshiva. One day, he heard one child saying to the other, "Dad's head is big, and it is perfectly suitable to sacrifice upon it for Avodah Zara." Hizkiyahu was furious and he threw his two boys to the ground. Rabshakeh died instantly, but Menashe survived. Menashe became Hizkiyahu's nightmare, as he grew to be a king that filled the land of Israel, and the Temple, with idols. He was so wicked, he even killed his own grandfather, Yeshayahu the prophet.

But then came the day, when the Assyrian king captured the wicked King Menashe, and put him into a copper pot with small holes. The pot was on a low flame, so that Menashe would die a painful, slow death. At those moments, Menashe remembered what his father had taught him. He turned to G-d and said, "I remember the passuk of my youth my Dad taught me, *בְּצָר לָךְ וּמְצָאוֹךְ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים וְשָׁבָתָ עַד־יִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלִי: When you will be in difficult times, and all these things happen to you at the end of days, (all the punishments of the Torah for disobeying G-d's word) and you will return to G-d and you will*

*listen to His voice... כִּי קֵל רַחוּם יִקְרָא אֱלֹהֵיךָ לֹא יִרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתֶךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁכַּח אֶת-בְּרִית אֲבוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לָהֶם: For G-d is merciful, He will never let go of you, and He will never destroy you, and He will never forget the treaty of your forefathers, that He swore to them... Menashe, then said, with audacity, “So, G-d, I am calling out to you now! If you answer me, great! If not, all the idols and gods are the same!” Has Veshalom!”*

The angels blocked this prayer from going up to G-d! They closed all the windows of Heaven! They said to G-d, “Master of the Universe! A person who put an idol in Your Bet Hamikdash,.. will You accept his Teshuva now, when he is desperate for Your miracles?!?” G-d said, If I do not accept His Teshuva, I am locking the door for all future Baalei Teshuva! G-d then made a tunnel under His Holy Throne, accepted Menashe’s prayer and returned him to Yerushalayim. (Pesikta DR’ Kahana, 24)

What I love about this story is that Hizkiyahu was right not to want a child like Menashe, but he was also so wrong! Look at the lesson for all sinners of future generations that came out from this sinful son! And look at how Chinuch can come out only years later in a child, when the child is up on center stage for his life Tafkid! His life’s mission! And what lesson did Menashe remember from his father?? Exactly what Hizkiyahu himself did, when he was in trouble and was supposed to die! He turned to G-d from the deepest place in his

Selfie steps for parenting:

1. Learn every day, something new, from experienced, and successful educators, about parenting.
2. Stop preaching about what was done. Instead, for the future, put up a sign of house rules that all members are to keep, that are appropriate to your household, on the refrigerator, in a place where everyone can see it. Signed by, “Yours truly, Mom and Dad”, and kept by

heart, at the last minute! With G-d, it is never “game over”, until it’s over!

The problem is we look at the child in the present, and we try to fix the present, not the future. But let us not forget the Midrash in Kohelet. *At one year old, a person is compared to a king: he is put in a cradle, and everyone is hugging and kissing him. Two- and three-year-olds are compared to a pig, that gets himself all dirty and sticks his hands in the toilet. At ten, a person is like a goat, as he jumps all over. A twenty-year-old is like a horse, standing tall, making himself look as good as he can, as he tries to find a wife. He gets married, and then, he is like a donkey, as he readies himself to carry the family load. His hairline goes up, belly goes down. He has kids, and now he is brazen like a dog, looking for bread and food to provide for his family, always sniffing out investment opportunities and new streams of income. He gets older, and he becomes like a monkey. Look at the old man’s shoulders. He tries to copy the youth, but he can’t!*

Allow your child to transition through his phase, it will pass along with the acne of the age! If you try to pop the acne of teenage, you will make scars for life. Just be gentle, as soft as cream, and let it all pass! If you feel the child is acting like a Rasha, it is not his fault! That is the way G-d made him! כִּי יֵצֵר לְבַב הָאָדָם כִּי יִצַר רַע מִנְעוּרָיו It is our job, as parents, to make this “naturally bad “Thing”, almost an animal, into a human being!

Mom and Dad. Your child needs to see, that being a grown up doesn't mean not having rules.

3. Say No as least as possible. Only say No, if saying Yes can hurt the child, or others, physically or spiritually.
4. מִנְתַּן וְחַיִּים בְּיַד לְשׁוֹן Life and death, are in the hands of the tongue. Never underestimate the might of your words, for good or bad.
5. Never threaten to throw a child out of the house! Avraham only sent Yishmael, because he was able to send Yishmael with his mom, Hagar! Yitzchak did not send Esav away! Instead, he sent Yaakov away, and preferred to keep Esav at home, to do whatever he could, to be Mekarev him!

### THE FEAR OF G-D BAROMETER

When the Torah introduces the test of Akeidat Yitzhak, it tells us **וְהָאֱלֹקִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם** *And Elokim tested Avraham*. Wait a second! Wasn't this just as much a test for Yitzhak as it was for Avraham? After all, Yitzhak was 37 years old, not a helpless, little child! And another question. We find that the words Lech Lecha, go for your own sake, by the last test of Akeidat Yitzhak, parallel the term Lech Lecha used in the first test. **וַיֹּאמֶר קַח־נָא אֶת־בְּנֶךָ אֶת־יִצְחָק** *What was the connection, what was the parallel, between the test when Avraham was told to leave home, to the test of when he was told to sacrifice his son?*

When G-d asked Avraham to offer up his son Yitzhak, G-d was asking Avraham to give up his whole future, the future of the entire Jewish Nation. **יְחִידְךָ** *Your only son*, Avraham prophesied that he would not have any more sons, if Yitzhak would be sacrificed. Yishmael was disqualified from being Avraham's continuation, **עַם הַדּוֹמָה לְחַמּוֹר**. This is the parallel between the last Lech Lecha and the first Lech Lecha. In the first command to Go, Avraham was tested to let go of his past. To leave behind all the people that he made an

impact on. Now, Avraham was being tested, to let go of his future. His eternity. His namesake.

The Rambam does not count the test of Avraham Avinu being thrown into the fire at Ur Kasdim as one of the ten tests. Why not? R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zt"l, explains that there are two types of Mesirut Nefesh, of self-sacrifice. There is the self-sacrifice of giving up your life for G-d, for your religion. For the BIG things. And there is the self-sacrifice for the small things, the everyday. Yitzhak's test to give up his life and Avraham's test at Ur Kasdim, and even the test of Avraham being told to sacrifice Yitzhak itself, were not considered, by G-d, to be indications of Fear of G-d. As we mention in Selichot, Yitzhak said to his father, **אִם תִּמְנַעֲנִי סוּף – רוּחִי וְנִשְׁמַתִּי אֵלָיו** *Don't have mercy on me when you fulfill your prophecy to sacrifice me; for, after all, if you prevent me from meeting my end, if you don't slaughter me, my spirit and my soul, He will gather to Himself*. The test of the Akeidah was to see if Avraham could do the Mitzvah with happiness, with alacrity and enthusiasm. It was in the how they self-sacrificed, not in the sacrifice itself. As the way the Piyyut describes Avraham's emotions, **עֵין בֹּמֵר בּוֹכָה וְלֵב שֶׁמֶח** *Eye crying bitterly and with a happy*





*heart*. It is evident that Avraham was happy at heart, for if he was sad, he would not be able to prophesize. (Shabbat 30b) He would not have seen the Cloud on top of Mt. Moriah. And even worse. He would not be able to hear the angel telling him not to slaughter his son!

The Fear of G-d barometer is not a one-time display of spiritual strength, but it is a constant; it is displayed in your everyday living. The barometer of your spiritual connection measures not if you pray, recite the appropriate blessings, or do Mitzvoth. The fear of G-d barometer measures how you pray, how you wake up and how you go to sleep. How you speak, how you bless before and after eating and after going to the restroom. It measures if your behavior reflects your constant awareness of standing before G-d, and if you demonstrate, in your actions, that **כל זמן** שהנשמה בקרבי מודה אני לפניך יקוק אלקי ואלקי אבותי אתה הוא רבון כל המעשים אדון כל הנשמות *As long as my soul is within me, I confess in front of You and praise You, YKVK my G-d, and the G-d of my fathers, Master of all actions, Boss of all the souls*. The barometer is a constant one, כל זמן. This is what we mean when we say וקדושים בכל יום יהללוך סלה (the ones who are separated from the regular and mundane) *every day, praise You, Selah*. What does the word Selah, mean? Selah means every moment, forever. Constant and consistent. Only those who serve G-d with consistency can fathom how קדוש, separate and holy, G-d is.

For Avraham to sacrifice Yitzhak would mean to *live* with the pain, the constant pain, that he had given up his entire future, hundreds of millions of Jews, throughout the generations! Sarah might never believe him, that he received a prophecy to sacrifice her son. After all, unless G-d prevents it, when one prophet receives prophesy, the other prophets also know about it. (Sanhedrin 89b) Being that Sarah was a greater prophet than

Avraham,(Rashi 21;12) how could it be that Avraham would be commanded to sacrifice her Yitzhak and she did not know about it? Maybe Avraham made a mistake in his prophesy, especially, because **G-d never wants people sacrificing people!** Avraham would have needed to face all this doubt, all this insecurity, constantly, for the rest of his life, alone! He would have needed go to sleep with this pain each night, and wake up with it, each morning.

Why does G-d only want animal sacrifices and not human sacrifices? We say in Hallel לא המיתים יהללו י-ה. *The dead will not praise G-d...* Of course, the dead will not praise G-d!?! But the meaning of these words is that when someone dies for a great purpose, it is over. Although he died for a purpose, and the memory lives on with impact on the living, the person's connection with G-d as a human is over. But when someone lives a life of purpose, a life of transcendence, a life of overcoming natural tendencies and everyday life adversities - that is the greatest praise to G-d. This is why the tests counted as part of the ten were only the constant tests and not the BIG, one-timers. Because the everyday tests are the ones in which you need to go against your nature and change it. The fear of G-d barometer measures the constant. It is harder to live like a servant of G-d, than it is to die like one.

To me, this has so many powerful messages. Every time I go for a walk in the Jerusalem forest near my house, I pass the holy cemetery of the IDF soldiers who gave up their lives for Israel and the Jewish Nation. Whenever I think about it, I cry, as I am awe-inspired by people who gave up their lives Al Kiddush Hashem, and made an eternal impact on Jewish History and the Jewish Nation. But then, I realize that I have to respect no less the Yeshiva students, the Torah scholars, the orthodox Jews, the Jews who are willing to be a walking and

talking, who fight the everyday struggles, for their Fear of G-d and Love of G-d. They are the living Kidush Hashem, constantly, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day.

On Erev Yom Kippur, I went to cry to my Rabbi, saying how I wish I were holier, more connected to prayer, more connected to learning. If only people would know who I really am, that I am not on the level of my own writings, they might not want to read what I write! My Rabbi said that the holy people, the

ones who are connected to learning and to praying, who have a connection, are the ones who cry for it, who are in the constant battle to achieve it. Those who pray for spiritual success each day. As long as you are fighting for it, it means you are spiritually alive and kicking. People teach best and write best what they are presently working on. The spiritual danger begins when you become complacent, either when you feel you have already achieved that special connection or feel that you have no chance of achieving it.

Selfie Steps to constantly implement spiritual connection:

1. To be connecting spiritually, constantly, you need to master being present. To get in the Now, you need to leave your past behind, and to forget about your future. Let go!
2. The secret to implementing anything consistently is by getting into the routine of learning about it. And the secret to connecting to G-d while doing Mitzvoth is the habit of learning Torah. שתרגילני בתורתך *That You get me into the routine of learning Your Torah.* ותדביקני במצותיך *And (by being in the habit of learning,) You will connect me with your mitzvoth.*
3. Learn the balance of fast and slow thinking to keep your mind focused both on the general, overall idea, and on the details and specifics as well. Yaakov referred to prayer, to piercing the Heavens, as בַּחֶרֶב־וּבַקֶשֶׁתִּי *With my sword and with my bow (and arrow).* On the one hand, the faster you move a blade or sword, the more power it has. To stay focused on the general *idea* of what you are praying, you need to keep moving in your prayers. But to focus on the word, you need to slow down. As America's top sniper once revealed his sharpshooting secret. "You have to slow your heart rate, stay calm. You have to shoot in between your heartbeats. "
4. Although the world is fast-paced and you need to speed up in your outside world performance, slow down in your inside world. Haste makes waste. Pray, bless, learn, and live right the first time around. As Abraham Lincoln said, "I am a slow walker, but I never walk back."

## SAVE THE MOMENT

In 1974, Cat's in the Cradle was the hit song of the day, a song that hit the cords of the hearts of many dads. Here are the lyrics - a real tear jerker. If you know the words, sing them again, so you won't forget them!

My child arrived just the other day  
He came to the world in the usual way  
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay  
He learned to walk while I was away

And he was talking before I knew it and as he grew  
He said, "I'm gonna be like you, Dad,  
You know I'm gonna be like you"...  
When you comin home, Dad? I don't know  
when,  
But we'll get together then,  
You know we'll have a good time then.

My son turned ten just the other day

He said "Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let's play  
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today,  
I got a lot to do" He said "that's okay"  
And he walked away but his smile never dimmed  
And said "I'm gonna be like him, yeah  
You know I'm going to be like him"

Well, he came from college just the other day  
So much like a man, I just had to say,  
"Son, I'm proud of you, can you sit for a while?"  
He shook his head, and he said with a smile  
"What I'd really like, Dad, is to borrow the car keys  
See you later, can I have them please?"  
When you comin' home, Son? I don't know when,  
But we'll get together then, Dad  
You know we'll have a good time then.

Now I've long since retired, my son's moved away  
I called him up just the other day  
I said "I'd like to see you, if you don't mind"  
He said "I'd love to Dad, if I could find the time.  
You see my new job's a hassle, and the kids have the flu.  
But It's sure nice talking to you, Dad,  
It's been sure nice talking to you.."  
And as I hung up the phone it had occurred to me  
He'd grown up just like me, My boy was just like me...

Shame that we dads haven't changed much, since. Why do so many dads forget this song of the generations?!

Many people are ready to "save the day". But not so many people are ready to "save the moment". To be a hero when things are

haywire and for the big things in life - for that, we are ready, we have the energy. But for that everyday smile, nice gesture... to hear someone out, to feel someone's awkwardness, that is not on our radar. Fathers like to say, "Contact me for the BIG things, when you need a hero to "put out the fire". Like helping marry off the child, paying their tuition and getting them a job. Otherwise, I am unavailable! I can't waste my time for the little things! If I do, how do you expect me to be able to be the hero when I am most needed?"

It is so ironic, though. I keep learning in life, the hard way, that NO ONE *really* wants you be their hero. No one *wants* you to SAVE them. People, deep down would rather be their own hero, of their own life stories. All they really want from you, NEED from you, is for you to be a nice person, and share their special moments with them, and to experience with them what they are going through. To feel what they feel. Teachers, Coaches, Dads, Moms - ask those who are dependent on you the real truth; they will tell you. They need you more to save the moment, than they need you to save the day. And for the big things, they would rather depend on G-d. But it is you whom they need to be with them through their everyday emotions...

Everyone knows that giving is the key to happiness, but not everyone realizes that there are two ways to give: חסד, kindness, and רחמים, mercy. We see in the beginning of Birkat Hamazon, in the end of the Amidah, in Nishmat, in Tahanun, that kindness and mercy are two different words, two different behaviors. What is the difference? Also, we know that Avraham Avinu was the pillar of kindness. **תתן אמת ליצקב חסד לאברהם**. What is kindness? And how does it differ from mercy?

Mercy is to fill a need, to solve a problem, to heal a pain. Kindness is that even if there is no call for mercy, but there is אהבת חסד, a love and a desire to give.

Avraham's tent was situated to the side of the road that people traveled to and from Sedom and Amorah. After Sedom and Amorah were destroyed, no more traffic would pass near Avraham's house. So, Avraham moved his tent to a place where there was more traffic, so that he could continue to do kindness. (See Rashi 20;1) But Avraham! Finally, you can go on vacation! Why look for more people? For more problems? No one ASKED you to open another chessed organization?!?!

That is Kindness! Kindness is even when no one is asking, no one is crying, there is no fire to put out, there is no saving the day,... there is just a desire to give, to love, to be a nice person and be there for people on their journey through life. Avraham believed that G-d brings the rain, even without anyone asking! G-d supports people, even without them asking. Not out of pity, but just to be nice! And if G-d acts in this way, we are to emulate His behavior.

It is easier to get people to be Merciful than it is to get them to be Kind. It is so ironic, though, how people forget what you *do* for them, and remember only how you make them feel. People forget the heroes that saved them. But people do not forget the someone who put his arm over their shoulder, when they felt lonely.

All during my youth, my parents assured me that before my wedding, they would see to it that I would have a beautiful smile. Braces, if needed; bite plate, whitening, etc. But B'H, I got engaged to the first girl I met, while learning in Israel, before coming back to New Jersey for Pesach. Although I wore a plate that helped my teeth straighten up, I still had a gap between my two front teeth. My wedding was going to be in Israel, and I had only 2 weeks in USA to do "bonding", a procedure in which Mercy is a must in our relationships. But kindness is the glue. Here are the Selfie Steps, the self-help steps to becoming a kind person.

the orthodontist would need to add to each tooth, to close up the gap for that perfect smile. But when I showed up at the family orthodontist, I was informed that he had taken an early leave for Passover. The secretary, instead, referred us all to another orthodontist, Dr. Levy, a fifteen-minute drive away. Someone my family had never heard of.

When Dr. Levy saw my teeth, he said that first, I needed to whiten them to match the color of the bonding. I did not have enough time for whitening strips. Dr. Levy said that, with the latest technology, for 1,200 dollars, he could make my teeth as white as my shirt, in an hour and a half. But my mother was not ready to pay that kind of money for whitening.

As I got up from the chair, frustrated, Dr. Levy sat me down. "I want your teeth to be perfect for the wedding. I will whiten your teeth at a loss; it will cost you only 450 dollars." My mother was on board. After my smile was perfect, I asked Mr. Levy why he was so kind to me.

"20 years ago, in Hillel yeshiva, your father was my son's Rabbi in second grade. Hillel Yeshiva, at the time, had a majority of Sephardic students. All the boys were getting a Tallit for Shacharit prayers, but my Ashkenazi son was the only child in the class who would not be wearing a Tallit. Your father called me up, asking me if it would be okay to get my son a Sephardic Tallit, so that he would not feel out of place in the Sefardic class. This has helped my son feel mainstream, which, ultimately, helped him excel in all of his studies! All because of your father's thoughtfulness! When you said you were a Farhi, I thought that it would be my privilege to pay back Rabbi Farhi's son, white teeth for a white Tallit!



- 1- Get Your Smile On
- 2- Make People Feel At Home
- 3- Give Off Confident and Optimistic Vibes
- 4- Dish out the Compliments.
- 5- Show That You're Actually Listening.

### 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?*

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.

## THE METHOD TO GREATNESS

The most confusing thing about humility is the misconception that humility means to be submissive, passive, shattered emotionally, bashful...But it’s the exact opposite! The Jews who made the most notable changes to our nation were those who were most noted for their humility. Avraham Avinu. Moshe Rabenu. David Hamelech.

In this week’s *parasha*, Avraham said about himself, – וְאָנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר *And I am like dirt and ashes* (Bereshit 18; 27). What?!? The Father of Nations? The man who won the first world war, solo? He is nothing? The man who was thrown into the furnace of Ur Kasdim and came out alive! He is nothing?? Also, truly humble people don’t call themselves humble, if only because they’re too humble to ever say it. What did Avraham mean, then, when he said, “I am like dust and ashes”?

*Avraham told G-d, “I owe You everything!!! If not for you, G-d, I would have been burnt to ashes in Nimrod’s furnace. And without You, G-d, I would have died at war in the hands of King Amrafel and deteriorated into the dust of the desert”* (Yalkut Shimoni). These words are

the key to Avraham’s humility, and the key for us to access humility. Avraham wasn’t saying, “I am nothing.” That is false. He was saying, “I am nothing without You.”

This reminds me of a joke my Rabbi told me a few times.

*A non-religious driver in Tel Aviv has difficulty finding a parking spot. He goes around the block a few times but every space is taken, even the parking on the sidewalk. He is late for his meeting. He turns to G-d and says, “Master of the world! If you find me a parking spot, I swear to You that I will put on Tefillin today!” As he turns the corner for the fifth time, there it is! An open parking spot! He turns to G-d and says, “Thank you G-d, but no need to find me a parking spot. I managed without You.”*

This is an awesome thing to meditate on. Think of all the great things that you have done, all the strengths that you have, all that you own. And then think how the worst things *could* have happened to you and all that you call yours, and how

everything, *somehow*, is fine. Then, you will be humble (See *Orchot Tzaddikim*).

The next humble person was Moshe Rabbeinu. At the height of his “career” in *Parashat Beshalach*, after he took the Jews out of Egypt, split the sea, and brought the *mannah*, Moshe said, וְנִגְהַנּוּ לָהֶם, – *and we are nothing* (16;7). But that was after a lot of working on himself to achieve humility.

*When Moshe wanted to become great, like his great grandfather Avraham, he knew that the only way was to first become small. But G-d told Moshe that he was far from reaching Avraham’s humility. For when I asked Avraham to bring up his son on the altar, he said the word, הִנְנִי. Here I am. I am ready to do anything you ask of me, even if I will never understand Your reasons (See Midrash Sechel Tov, Vayera 22:1).*

Rashi comments that this word, *Hineni*, refers to being humble. What? How does being ready to give up his son mean that Avraham was humble? *Because when you really, truly feel that all you have has been given to you by G-d, you are ready to give everything back.* If you are not *constantly* working on being ready to give back to G-d, you are not humble. Humility, in its greatest form, is about being ready to give all you’ve got. Hashem was telling Moshe, *If you’re trying hard to be humble, you’re not being humble.* Humility is not something that you do. Humility is something that you are.

Avraham was the king of humility, for he was the most ready to do whatever G-d hinted that He wanted. וַיְהִי אֶחָד הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֵלֶּהִים נִסָּה וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים – *And it was after these things, and G-d tested Avraham and He said, Avraham. And he said, Here I am (Bereshit 22;1). After what things? After the Ministering Angels said in front of G-d, “Master of the world, this Elder, you granted him a child at the age of 100, and from*

*all of the feasts that he made, he did not bring before You even one turtledove sacrifice?” G-d answered them, “All that he has done, didn’t he do everything for his son? If I would ask him to offer his son as a sacrifice, he would do it immediately!” (Pesikta).* R Yisrael Salanter asked: What exactly was the big test of the *Akeidat Yitzhak*? If G-d told Avraham to do something, Avraham had better do it, or else G-d, the Big Boss, could take Yitzhak and Avraham if He wanted to!? What was Avraham’s alternative?

The test was to see how *ready* Avraham was to do the will of G-d. So, G-d did not tell Avraham to slaughter Yitzhak; He asked Avraham only to bring Yitzhak up to the Altar. The test was to see if Avraham was really ready to do G-d’s will, on his own, even if that means being ready to slaughter, if that is what G-d *maybe* meant. This is why the Torah emphasizes, וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלָת, לְשַׁחֵט אֶת-בְּנֵוֹ – *And Avraham sent his hand, and he took the knife to slaughter his son.* Of course he sent his hand! How else could he slaughter his son? When G-d told Avraham that he passed the test, He said, אַל-תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ, אֶל-הַנֶּעֱרַר – *Do not send your hand to the lad...* Why? Because the whole test was to see how *ready* Avraham was to do G-d’s will. The sign of your humility, the gauge of your humility, is not what you say. It is not even what you do. It is how ready you are to give back because of a recognition of how much you owe. The magic is in the word הִנְנִי. Here I am, G-d. I am all Yours.

We all want a better relationship with G-d. And we all want to make our homes into a better place, a place that G-d calls home. But the only way G-d will enter our homes, the only way G-d feels comfortable in our homes, is if we are humble. As we see in the words, וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְקֻנָּה בְּאֵלֶיךָ מִמְרֵא – *And G-d appeared to him (to Avraham) in the planes of Mamre.* The commentators ask: Why didn’t

the Torah just say that G-d appeared to Avraham? Why say, to “him”? The Kli Yakar answers that Avraham received this amazing prophecy in the merit of his being humble, and not taking credit for his greatness.

To become the greatest father, you need humility. To become the greatest teacher, you need to be humble. And to be the greatest king, you need to be the most humble. Avraham, The Father of All Nations, was able to be the patriarch because of his great humility. Moshe was able to be the great leader and teacher of the Torah of our nation because of his great humility. And King David was the greatest King, for he was the most humble king. וְאֶנְכִי אִישׁ תוֹלַעַת וְלֹא אָדָם *And I am a worm, and not a man (Tehillim 22:7).*

The humility in these men brought about such a change in humanity, and caused such great ripple effects. How so? *It has been said, that every action that is real and holy causes a chain reaction* (Shlomo Carlebach). To be a leader, to cause a ripple effect, you need to be real. The only way to be real is to be humble. Because the real you is the humble you. Why?

To be humble is to accept being human, and to accept that we are powerless in so many areas. We make mistakes. We are dependent. And all we have is solely what G-d has given us. And all that we do not have is all that G-d has decided is not good for us to have. Being human is accepting that there are so many

things that we just don't know the answers to. Haughtiness is like a mask that conceals one's being “human” and real, and being human is something that the haughty one can't accept. This mask of haughtiness fits so well that the haughty one forgets how beautiful being human actually is.

This being said, we can better appreciate the words of the Orchot Tzaddikim. *Most problems in life are solved with humility. The greatness of a mitzvah is as great as the humility of the one performing it. Just as a small mitzvah done with humility is worth a thousand times more than a mitzvah done with haughtiness, a mitzvah done with haughtiness is despicable to G-d; it is an abomination in His eyes and He doesn't want it. G-d rips up the prayers of those who are haughty. The humble one gets all the good in life, for grace is G-d's present to the humble. Once one has humility, G-d answers his prayers immediately. G-d has such pleasure and happiness when the humble person does a mitzvah; this is what G-d desires...*

Let us not forget our great grandfather Avraham Avinu and what made him so great. And let us not forget the Jewish Greatness Method. Humility makes you Ready, and Humility makes you Real. And when you are Ready, and when you are Real, you cause great Reaction.

## 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. Rebbi Elazar would first give a coin of tzeddakah to the poor, *and only then pray,*



as it says in Tehillim, אָנִי בְצַדֵּק אֶחֱזֶה פְּנֵיךְ (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 tzedakka, no matter how low you may have fallen. Even Nebuchadnezzar, one of the biggest reshaim 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 אחריו, after the end of Lot's life. Lot's

### HOW TO PUT ON YOUR THINKING CAPS

What did you do when your teacher or Rabbi asked you, in grade school, to "put on your thinking caps?" What does a thinking cap look like, anyway? After reading this, you will know the dimensions of the thinking cap and will be familiar with its instruction manual.

The first person to have a thinking cap was none other than your great grandfather, Avraham Avinu. The Sefer Yetzirah (6;7) writes that when Avraham came into the world, וראה וחקר והבין והצב והקק ועלתה בידו, הביט, וראה וחקר והבין והצב והקק ועלתה בידו, וכו' להבין הבריאה וכו' *He gazed, and saw, and examined, and he understood, ... and he grasped the Creation.* Born to Terah, who was an idol manufacturer and a top-ranking officer in Nimrod's pagan kingdom, there was no way that Avraham could have known that G-d exists. He would have to draw that conclusion and recognize His existence on his own. He needed to "invent" a religion. There was no Aish website, Chabhad, outreach, birthright fellowship, or Shabbaton. Avraham had to

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 tzedakah to bring about her punishment. For the two are directly connected. Giving tzedakah 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 tzedakah, is a fundamental part of faith. Your constant giving charity is the litmus test for your degree of Emunah...

figure it all out himself. He needed to think. And the Sefer Yetzirah tells us exactly how he did that. Six elements to the thinking cap:

הביט means *to gaze*. You cannot make any observations until you choose a subject to focus on, and then study it. If you need to think about something, make sure that you can "gaze", or focus, at its properties, to the best of your ability. If you have a riddle you need to crack, if you need a solution to a life problem, put it all down on paper, in its finest detail, in its rawest detail. If you need to focus on what someone is saying and give him carefully considered feedback, write down notes on the conversation. Only then can you gaze at the matter or concept and an intelligent remark may just occur to you. Only if you put down the questions on paper, can you begin to think. The motor that gets thought moving, that brings about focus, is the art of asking the right question. Avraham asked a few questions, Who created the world? Who was first in the

world? Who is the strongest in the world? Why is there a world? That's how he arrived at the first step of the thinking process, enabling him to come up with the true answer.

וַרָאָה and *he saw*. You can understand something only when you translate it into your own words. "In other words, ...". We all share the same world, but each person has a different perspective from which he views it. Avraham did not just ask a question or look deeply into something. He came up with an explanation of Creation, the only one that can be true. Part of the thinking process is noticing what is important and significant to you, and how you see and interpret things. One needs to be ready to fail in his first perception, in order to go on to step three...

וַחֲקַר and *he examined*. After you take your stand, forming your view and perspective, you need to examine it. Is there another way to look at this? Which explanation do I feel is the truest?

וַהֲבִיֵן and *he understood, he comprehended*. He was able to understand it at a level from which he could make deductions. מְבִיֵן דָּבָר מִתּוֹךְ דָּבָר. Allow me to explain, with an example.

Let us take flight, for instance. One of my favorite museums is the Smithsonian Air and Space museum in Washington, D.C. Aviation pioneers pondered for generations how to make the first form of flight. Birds fly, but till the Wright brothers came around, people believed that the unique element necessary for aviary flight was *flapping wings*. Once humans discovered that the decisive element of flight is air pressure, the gentle curve of the top of the wing that matters – that the air traveling faster over that curved top creates lift- they revealed the real essence of flight. Now, all we need is a propeller and wings, and up we go! We can

leave the flapping to the birds, who never discovered engines. It took us humans many years till we comprehended the essence of flight, i.e. aerodynamics, and disregarded the flapping of the wings.

So, וַרָאָה would mean – *How can we fly?* וַחֲקַר would mean – *I see that birds can fly. I assume that it is because they can flap wings, and I can't.* וַחֲקַר would mean to examine the essence of flight- *Is it the flapping wings or the aerodynamics?* וַהֲבִיֵן – would mean to *try the aerodynamics without the flapping wings and see what happens.*

Whenever we come across a "blank wall" in life, in any area, life issues, learning blocks, lack of creativity, it is because we are not going through these steps properly. We are either not asking the right question, not taking a perspective but just saying "I have no idea", not examining our perspective and beliefs, or not understanding the essence of what is bothering us. Once we figure out the essence of what we need to think about and discover, once we have one part of the solution, we are ready for stages five and six...

וַחֲקַר - similar to the word stonecutting, and חֲקַר to inscribe in stone. There is no better way for you to comprehend something than by writing it down. Arranging your thoughts, your conclusions, provides you with a deeper understanding than you have when your ideas are in disarray, floating around in your head. Writing is also a form of passing on the information to others. If you want to know something well, teach it.

What does it matter if we use our thinking caps or not? One of the proofs brought in the Hovot Halevavot that we are the Chosen Nation is that the average Jew is always more successful than the average gentile. The percentage of



Jews who won the Nobel Peace Prize is much higher than the percentage of Jews in the world. Gentiles wonder why such a small percentage of Jews, out of the world's population, have been responsible for a disproportionately large number of inventions. I believe that G-d allows His People to be more successful within the laws of nature, in line with the aforementioned elements of the thinking caps.

Have you ever noticed that a Jew always answers a question with a question? Jews love questions, and questions are the springboard

### HOW TO FOCUS ON PRAYER

We all want to pray with full concentration, yet our minds wander so often. This makes prayer pretty frustrating. The truth is that today, more than ever before, staying focused is a difficult goal for much of humanity. Is there any effective technique that will help us to stay focused when we pray, and keep us from thinking about the things on our minds?

I would like you to focus for a minute and observe minute details. Go ahead and focus.

Of course, you are probably having trouble since you were not asked to focus on anything in particular. It turns out that this is very largely the difficulty of focusing in prayer as well. Unfortunately, we often forget to focus on communicating with G-d, and focus instead on the next word in the siddur. We try to focus on the words, but this is like trying to communicate with someone when you are thinking mainly about which words to use rather than the topic of the conversation. In order for us to understand and appreciate what is really being said, we have to be able to focus in on the conversation. Allow me to elaborate.

for thinking. It could be that Jews adapted this style of thinking from the way of the Talmud, which is in question-answer format. South Koreans teach Talmud to their students to demonstrate this way of thinking, for they believe that this method is our secret to making inventions and thinking effectively, our secret to success. עדות ה' נאמנה מחכימת פתי. The Torah is *truthful, enlightening the simpleton*. In fact, the six elements of the Jewish thinking caps forms the essence of Talmudic back and forth discussion. What could be a better inheritance than a great grandfather's thinking cap?

Our Forefather Avraham was the first person to come up with the concept of praying to G-d on a daily basis. He conceived the Morning Prayer. Furthermore, the Talmud (*Berachot* 6b) tells us that Avraham had a set place for prayer. In its discussion, the Talmud also tells us that the word *standing (amidah)* is a synonym for the word *prayer*. Why is this so? The answer is that the word *amidah* actually has a double meaning. It means *standing*, but it also means *standing still* – as opposed to moving. And this is central to the idea of prayer: standing still and stopping in order to focus. This means realizing that we are standing in front of G-d, and we are addressing our Maker as “You” (אתה). Thinking about other things, such as items on our “To do” list, is simply not appropriate at this time. That is not standing still, but rather being on the way to do something else.

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In the episode in which Avraham prayed for the people of Sodom, we also find our great Forefather *standing*: ואברהם עודנו עומד לפני ה' (יח, כב) (*Avraham was still standing in front*



of G-d).. Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik deduces from the Rambam that forgetting that we are standing in front of G-d at any time in prayer actually disqualifies the prayer. It turns out, then, that the requirement to be aware of standing in front of our Maker is much more strict than the requirement to concentrate on the words we are saying in prayer: missing concentration disqualifies the prayer only regarding the first blessing of the *Shmoneh Esrei* (not the other blessings), but failing to remember that we are talking to G-d disqualifies the prayer at any point. This is what the Torah is hinting at when it tells us that Avraham was still standing in front of G-d. He did not forget for a second where he was.

### 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 7 years ago.

The Sephardim have this beautiful, tear-rending 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 שמחה , *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?

This insight can help us in maintaining our concentration and proper intention in prayer. The way the mind focuses is through associations. If we try to understand the words we are saying without focusing on where we are and what we are in middle of, it is much more difficult for the mind to keep focused. But if we always bear in mind that we are standing in front of G-d, and remind ourselves whom we are talking to each time we say “You” (אתה), then we have a much better chance of focusing on the comprehension as well.

Question two: Why didn't Hashem tell Avraham, from the outset, where he was supposed to take Yitzchak 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 הקודש שורה אלא על לב שמחה ; (ירושלמי סוכה ה,א) אין שכינה 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 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!” –*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 שמה , 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.

## LEARNING FROM OUR PATRIARCHS AND MATRIARCHS

It is naive to think that men and women communicate in a similar fashion. It is even more naive to think that we can explain the conduct of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs in terms of our own perspective on life. Allow me to expound on these two common misconceptions, and how they overlap in this week's *parashah*.

The Torah and the Midrash tell us that Sarah noticed the immoral actions of Yishmael, the son of Avraham and Hagar. Among them was his new sport of shooting arrows over the head of Sarah's son, Yitzchak. The teenaged Yishmael claimed that he was only playing, and that no harm would come of it. Yishmael would also mock Yitzchak by pointing out that he himself was the first-born, and therefore entitled to a double share of the inheritance.

Sarah could not sit idly by, and requested that Avraham “*send away this maidservant and her son, for this maidservant's son will not inherit with my son Yitzchak.*”

Many people misinterpret the ensuing disagreement between Avraham and Sarah about whether or not to send Yishmael and Hagar away. They see it as something personal. But the Tosefta (*Sota 5*) makes it quite clear that this was not the case at all. Both Sarah and Avraham were concerned about possible damage to G-d's honor and “reputation” – what we call *chillul HaShem*. Sarah meant to communicate: “If my son Yitzchak learns from Yishmael's behavior and habits, *wouldn't the name of Heaven be desecrated?*” Sarah was concerned that the Name of G-d would be disgraced if her son, a





future Patriarch of the Jewish Nation, would pick up any Yishmael-like traits. Avraham responded that he had great difficulty fulfilling this request: “After we upgraded Hagar from maidservant to housewife, *what would people say* if we drive her from our home? Avraham was concerned about their stature as Patriarchs and about possible desecration of Heaven’s Name as well. Sarah answered that since there are differences between us, Heaven should arbitrate. And, indeed, G-d ruled in her favor. He said to Avraham: “Whatever Sarah says to you, heed her voice.” Now, this terminology is a bit surprising, as Rashi notes. Why did G-d say “heed *her* voice,” and not “heed *her* words“? Isn’t a voice without words just incomprehensible sound?

G-d was hinting to Avraham that Sarah was a greater prophet than he. *Her voice* was her prophetic voice, her power of prophecy. However, there is a further peculiarity in this verse which actually speaks volumes if we can just tune in to the Hebrew. Avraham is told to “*heed/listen to her voice*” – שמע בקולה. Wouldn’t it be more grammatically correct to say לקולה שמע? By using the letter (actually a preposition here) ב, G-d seems to be suggesting more than just *heeding/listening*.

I think the deeper meaning is something along the following lines: When a husband or son hears his wife or mother saying something, he may tend to listen mainly to what is specifically verbalized, but be less tuned in to the emotions being communicated. He forgets that women tend to use non-verbal cues such as tone, emotion, and empathy when conveying what is on their mind. This is what G-d was telling Avraham. When listening to Sarah, *listen not only to what she says, but to the way in which she says it* .

Now let’s take a closer look at Sarah’s request that Avraham send away Yishmael and Hagar: “Send away this maid servant and her son, for this maidservant’s son will not inherit with my son with Yitzchak.” At first glance, it may seem that Sarah was being over-protective of her son Yitzchak and jealous of Hagar’s relationship with her husband Avraham. From the Midrashim, however, it is obvious that this is not the case at all. Sarah felt that Hagar had to be sent away as well for if she did not know how to raise Yishmael properly, she could not be a mother in the house of Avraham – a house where people were trained to serve G-d. Sarah was focused on values and morals, not personal considerations. To sanctify G-d’s Name was her highest priority. These inner feelings and sense of judgment were actually a result of her high level of prophecy. Out of respect to her husband, she still was careful not to say to Avraham that she knew she was right as a result of her higher level of prophecy. So she found a way of saying it as if it were something personal.

Going one step further, it is a fact of life that most women do not answer “Yes” or “No” to questions that men routinely handle with short answers. Women in general, and modest women in particular, tend not to state their feelings explicitly. They need a chance to express themselves. If not given this chance, they might well avoid committing themselves. And even after they do express themselves, they might still say: “I don’t know; do whatever you feel.” A man must therefore listen perceptively to a woman’s voice, and feel her feelings, and figure out exactly what she wants on his own. This is essentially what G-d said to Avraham שמע בקולה and not שמע לקולה – “listen into” her voice, not just to what her voice is explicitly saying.

The *Chatam Sofer* brings evidence for this concept from Lavan's remark to Eliezer concerning giving Rivkah's hand in marriage to Yitzchak: נקרא לנערה ושאלה אם פיה – "We will call the girl and ask her *mouth*" (*Bereishit* 24:57) . On the surface, the word פיה (*her mouth*) seems superfluous. The *Chatam Sofer* explains: Lavan was willing to do whatever possible to prevent his sister

from marrying Yitzchak and building the Jewish Nation. Lavan figured that if they put Rivkah on the spot and asked: Do you want to marry him, Yes or No? – she would not be willing or able to give a direct response. Lavan would then explain that she does not want to go. Instead, *a miracle happened*, and Rivkah gave a clear "Yes!" to the question.

## THE GREATNESS OF A MENTOR – THE GREAT LOSS IN LOSING ONE

This week's parasha opens with our Forefather Avraham, sitting at the entrance of his tent. At the age 99, he is in tremendous pain, three days after his Brit Milah. G-d does not want Avraham to exert himself taking in guests while in such pain, so He increases the usual strength of the sun's rays so that people would stay indoors, and there would be no wayfarers. Everyone remains indoors. G-d Himself visits Avraham, Himself performing the mitzvah of Bikur Holim, visiting the sick. Suddenly, Avraham sees three men in the distance. They appear to be Yishmaelim, simple people. They are actually angels disguised as people. (It seems that G-d sent the angels to Avraham in the likeness of people because the absence of guests *also* caused him pain.) Avraham cannot bear to see people walking by his home without inviting them in. So, in the middle of this divine visit, he asks G-d if he can be excused for a moment, in order to host his potential guests.

How can Avraham do that? He is in middle of talking to G-d... מקבל פני השכינה, and the whole idea of מצוות is to get close to G-d! (מצוה מלשון צוותא, the word Mitzvah has a root from the word *bonding, or together*.) Avraham was already there! He was already talking to G-d! And not only did he leave Him,

but he ran to the "guests", with his back to G-d!

The Talmud teaches us (Shabbat 127a) גדולה הכנסת אורחים מהקבלת פני שכינה *The mitzvah of having guests is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence!* And Avraham knew this on his own. How? Because Avraham was so close to G-d that he instinctively knew that the way one becomes close to G-d is by going in His ways. As Rashi says (*Devarim* 13; 5) on the passuk *ולדבקה בו* *to cleave to G-d*, the way to become close to G-d is by going in His ways, to mirror and replicate His *מדות* and characteristics. There is no getting closer to G-d than that. This is because a person is created in the image of G-d *בצלמנו כדמותנו*, and just as He is merciful, so should you be. Just as He behaves with grace, so should you. *This is the way one connects with G-d*. Connecting with G-d in this way creates an even greater closeness than what would be by having G-d visit you in your home.

And its deeper than that, as well. There is a part of G-d present in every person, חלק אלוהים ממעל. A person is also created in G-d's image, צלם אלוהים. When Avraham got permission from G-d to run to the guests, he was actually running to the Shechina, the Divine Presence, in the other person. For each and every person,



even a Yishmaelite, has within him a portion of G-d's essence. Avraham didn't care if a person was rich or poor, clever or simple, famous or unknown. He saw the godliness in everyone. That is the way he invited guests. He connected with them in a very deep way; he recognized and addressed their **צלם אלקים**. He did not just go through the motions of inviting people; he did so with genuine, great respect.

There was another person in this week's parasha who invited guests into his home: Lot, Sarah's brother, Avraham's nephew. Looking closely at the two instances, one can notice the contrast between them. Lot learned to invite guests in from Avraham Avinu. But he did not believe in this **צלם אלקים** concept. If he had, he would not have been able to live in Sedom, a place where the people were extremely cruel to others. We see how Lot was willing to be **מוסר נפש**, make a tremendous degree of self sacrifice to take in the guests in Sedom. He even went so far as to put his life and the lives of his family members on the line. And yet, this did not afford him with enough merit to have his life saved, to except him from the decree of annihilation of Sedom. Rather, as Rashi comments on the passuk **ויזכר אלקים את אברהם** *And G-d remembered Avraham*, (19:29) that Lot was saved from the destruction of Sedom only in the merit of his silence, years earlier. Before entering Egypt, Avraham asked Sarah to tell the Egyptians that he was her brother and not her husband. Had Lot revealed the truth to the Egyptians, Avraham could have been in grave danger. Lot was rewarded for his silence. Not for his self sacrifice in taking the angels into his house in Sedom. Why?

The Maharal answers that Lot learned from Avraham only the physical, external, and technical details of having guests. *It was not the real thing.* We can also notice the

difference in the word describing the guests. In the case of Avraham, the Torah called the guests "people, **אנשים**". In the incident with Lot, they are called "**מלאכים**, angels". Why the switch? The answer is that Avraham accepted everyone with generosity, even simple people who were, for one reason or another, detained in the desert. Lot, on the other hand, also gave five star accommodations, *but only for angels.* Important people. This type of Hachnasat Orchim was not a mitzvah that merited his being saved from the decree of his townsfolk, the people of Sedom.

There is something else that we must notice. Although Lot was very diligent about his mitzvah of Hachnasat Orchim, when the entire town of Sedom threatened to break down the door and take the guests, Lot faced the angry mob, trying to calm them down by offering them his engaged daughters. *Do with them whatever you want; just leave my guests alone.* How could Lot make such an inhumane offer, just for the sake of sparing his guests? Where and what was his value system? The answer is obvious. Lot was exposed to Avraham during the period when Avraham was childless. Lot learnt from Avraham the technicalities of how to host guests. He never had the opportunity to observe a healthy parent-child relationship in Avraham's house. When we do not have proper mentors, even the good actions we do might not be done in the correct proportion. Without a mentor, one might even come to great self sacrifice with good intentions, but err completely in the broader context of life.

The world has just lost a great, great man, Hacham Ovadia Yosef, zt"l. He was the ultimate mentor of many who act as mentors in the world today. I was there, in Jerusalem, on the streets of Geulah, at the funeral. Close to a million people crying. Ripped shirts. Over the



passing of a great, 93-year-old Rabbi. Over and over, the loudspeaker wailed in Hebrew, *“Woe is to the generation who has lost its father. Woe is to the ship who has lost its captain.”*

From the time of the funeral, I asked everyone I knew to tell me the story of the Rabbi that made the greatest impression on their memory. I got the most amazing, inspiring, and often personal stories. Stories of things that most people do not know about R’ Ovadia. I collected about 30 of those stories, but I still felt it was not enough. I sat down to put together *the thoughts* of this weeks parasha that appear in the beginning of this article, and then... I felt it. When we lose a leader, we lose guidance in *how* to do things. Lot lost his

connection with Avraham and had no model, no instructor and no instruction as to how things should be done. We have lost a Gadol, and we can easily forget the way a Jew is supposed to look. R’ Ovadia respected everyone equally. He saw the **צלם אלקים** in everyone and connected to so many, many people. He lit up their lives with Torah. He valued every single minute of his own life, which was totally dedicated to Torah. We have lost that figure in our lives. And so, I finish this article with a tear in my eye over the loss of a great tzaddik, and with the words of the loudspeakers echoing in my ears...

*“Woe is to the generation who lost its father. Woe is to the ship that has lost its captain...”*

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[rabbiyoseffarhi@gmail.com](mailto:rabbiyoseffarhi@gmail.com).**

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A”H**

**Leiluy Nishmas Hagaon HaRav Yaakov Busel zt”l**

