

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

תשפ"א

Parshas Vayeira has many different elements and aspects.

In last week's parsha we read about the bris bein habesorim where Hashem told Avrohom Ovinu that he would finally have a son. The legacy of Avrohom will not go to Yishmoel. The mesorah of the Ovos and receiving Eretz Yisroel will go to the child born from Avrohom and Soroh only.

Chazal told us that this bris Hashem is making is an absolute commitment and it will be fulfilled – come what may. Normally, Hashem works within the laws of nature to bring about specific events. Occasionally He works outside of nature. Here, Hashem is absolutely committing Himself to fulfilling His side of the bris – even if it means defying nature in a dramatic way and making Soroh who is completely barren into a fertile woman.

Hashem told Avrohom to go outside and see the stars. Chazal interpret this to mean that Avrohom has to take himself out of the limitations of natural causation and realize that Hashem isn't bound by any natural forces. Only after this realization is made, Avrohom and Soroh can have a son together. The Torah says Avrohom believed it and it became absolute fact in Avrohom's mind.

But then Avrohom asked – in what zechus will I merit the fulfillment of this bris to inherit Eretz Yisroel? In other words, after Avrohom was completely confident that Hashem has no physical limitations in fulfilling the bris, He still realizes that the bris is a two-way street and that there has to be a zechus from his side to justify Hashem's commitment. There is no free lunch.

Hashem responded that it is in the zechus of korbonos and serving Hashem generally. But there is golus and persecutions which are necessary to purify Klal Yisroel so they deserve the gift of Eretz Yisroel.

Avrohom is then told to undergo bris miloh. It is a separate bris which bestows kedushoh to each male individual of Klal Yisroel. It is not related to the bris of receiving Eretz Yisroel. After Avrohom is told about the bris, Hashem informed him that his wife is now called Soroh and he will soon have a son with Soroh. The mesorah is going to continue through that child. Before Avrohom could merit having a son and carrying on his legacy to another generation, he needed to elevate himself to a higher level. He needs a bris miloh.

This was last week's parsha.

The bris is a painful and physically debilitating operation for someone at Avrohom Ovinu's age. He needs time to recover. At the same time, Avrohom isn't capable of not doing chesed. On the agonizing third day since his miloh, Avrohom still needs to find guests to serve. He sits outside in the hot sun waiting for people to come by – even though Hashem intentionally made it impossible for people to be traveling in such heat. Avrohom doesn't care. He needs to do chesed. This is another level that Avrohom rises to, and as a result, Hashem now sends angels to inform Avrohom that he and Soroh will have a son a year from today.

Then we have the flip-side of Avrohom's chesed – Sdom. The dramatic punishment of Sdom teaches us that Hashem will not tolerate the existence of societies that become irredeemably evil. He lets them go for a while for various reasons, but ultimately they cannot be sustained. It happened to the dor hamabul and dor haflogoh – for different reasons – and now it is happening to Sdom. This society is the antithesis of Avrohom's dedication to chesed. Sdom passed laws which punished people for doing kindness to others! They perpetrated unbelievable cruelty to those who requested assistance. Hashem will not allow such a society to exist any longer. This sends us a frightening message. Hashem keeps tabs on every society and culture in the world and will reward it or bring about its destruction if it sinks too deeply into evil.

In the zechus of Avrohom Ovinu, Hashem saved Lot. But Lot himself is hesitant to leave Sdom and go back to Avrohom. Even after all he saw in front of him – Sdom in total ruin, absolutely penniless, with only two family members who survive with him, Lot refused to take the message. Hashem is showing him that everything he left Avrohom Ovinu for has disappeared overnight, and he has a chance to return to his former high level living with Avrohom! But Lot insisted on finding some mountain cave to live in instead. He falls into total disgrace.

But why? Hashem gave him such an opportunity to restore his former level! But being with Avrohom is going to make demands on him that he doesn't want. One can be given all the opportunities in the world, but you have to take them and carry them out to the end.

Avrohom has an older son Yishmoel who is raised by Avrohom and has all the opportunities for achieving greatness. But everyone has free will and for some reason, he too, doesn't want to live up to the level that is necessary to remain in Avrohom's household. So he is thrown out. This is very difficult for Avrohom to accept – it is his own son – and he invested a lot to bring him up properly.

Later, Avimelech and Phichol his general come to make a treaty. After all the troubles Avimelech has given him, he can still recognize that Avrohom is special and Hashem is with him. Most people prefer to take all the credit for their success and puff up their ego. Avrohom radiated the attitude that all his material success came from Hashem and that he was inconsequential to what happens. Avimelech eventually picked up on this attitude and admired Avrohom's greatness.

At the Akeidah, Avrohom Ovinu is pushed to make the most difficult decision in his life. Everyone is given kochos hanefesh that are full of potential for greatness, but we have to bring out that potential by overcoming challenges and tests. Everyone is given brochos and special talents and abilities, but we have to be willing to channel those gifts and talents in the direction that maximizes the ruchniyus potential of these gifts.

Lot is always squandering all the opportunities he is given. He comes back from Egypt with great wealth, but he can't make peace with living under Avrohom Ovinu's shadow. Sometimes we are faced with extreme opposing directions in life. Lot had to choose between Avrohom on the one hand, and Sdom on the other! This is a very stark difference and the correct path should have been obvious. But Lot rationalized to himself and convinced himself that he can maintain the same level even when he goes to Sdom. His hankering for wealth twisted his reasoning and skewed what should have been very clear priorities. He gave up the opportunity for greatness. What is even more tragic is that even after Lot is shown how great a mistake he made and he is given a chance to recoup his loss, he can't bring himself to climb back up.

We get all the opportunities, but we have to bring it out in practice. Avimelech's admiration of Avrohom shows us that when you persevere and continue to follow your values and principles despite all the setbacks and opposition, and you radiate the conviction that Hashem is guiding you every step of the way, people will notice. People will want to connect with you and learn from you. Avrohom translated all his qualities into action and he made an enormous impact in the world.

Hashem doesn't let us off so easily. He gives us enormous potential and He doesn't give up on us until we actualize that potential. We always have the choice to decline and fail to live up to the challenge, because we have free will.

The ultimate treasure that Avrohom had at this point in his life was his precious son Yitzchok. So Hashem put him to the test. Is avodas Hashem really the be-all-end-all of Avrohom Ovinu's life? Is the will of Hashem

the source of all value, and is he willing to give up everything else for that value – holding nothing back? The only way to make it real in your life is by being challenged. Hashem asks Avrohom to give up everything he holds dear.

Yitzchok isn't just a son – a cherished member of his family. He is also the long awaited culmination of Avrohom's entire life's work! Avrohom was constantly anxious about whether he will have a son who will carry on his mission in bringing awareness of Hashem to this world. He finally has that son and the future of Klal Yisroel is finally secured, and now he is being commanded to throw it all away? Yes, no more Yitzchok and it will be all over. What about the bris? What about the promises Hashem gave? It doesn't make sense! But it didn't make sense before either when Hashem told Avrohom that he will have a child with Soroh. Avrohom always accepts it fully and was tomim – no questions, no doubts.

At the end, when Avrohom went through the test of the Akeidah, Hashem makes another commitment to bringing Klal Yisroel to the world. What is special about this promise if was already promised at the bris bein habesorim?

The Ramban answers that the Akeidah is coming after Avrohom believed the first promise and built his entire life work of 50-60 years preparing for continuity. Now Hashem called it all off. It is canceled! All the work is going down the drain. So Avrohom is put to a serious test. Was Avrohom's commitment all these years purely l'shem shomayim – only because it is the will of Hashem? Or is there also a bit of ego and self-gratification involved – working towards building a personal legacy at the same time? Avrohom claimed it is all l'shem shomayim – no ego involved at all. So Hashem tests this by saying: "you are doing it all for Me and not for yourself? So now I'll say I don't want Klal Yisroel and you shouldn't be bothered – since this is also the will of Hashem." Avrohom accepts this.

If Hashem wants a Klal Yisroel, He will arrange for it. If he doesn't want, He will take it away. It's not about me and investing in my personal legacy. Because Klal Yisroel is about being dedicated to spreading Hashem's message and fulfilling Hashem's will. So if Hashem's will now is not to have a Jewish people, that is also part of the mission.

Once Avrohom passes this ultimate test of personal sacrifice to give up Klal Yisroel for the will of Hashem, Hashem responds middoh keneged middoh and guarantees that there will be Klal Yisroel forever.

There is another dimension of the nisoyon in the Akeidah.

The midrash describes what must have been going through Avrohom's mind when he is told that Hashem wants him to slaughter his own son. All this time, Avrohom has been preaching to thousands of geirim that Hashem is full of ahavoh and chesed, and His decrees are always just and righteous. So what is Avrohom going to tell all his talmidim when he comes back from the Akeidah and they ask him: "Where's your son Yitzchok?" What is Avrohom going to say? That he killed him for no reason other than Hashem told him to do it? The same Hashem who he has been preaching about as being full of kindness and justice just tells Avrohom to slaughter his only innocent son? He won't be able to face anyone after this!

Avrohom Ovinu is looking forward to an empty life. He will have no future. His life has no present. He will be a lonely man with nothing to look forward to.

Hashem is pushing Avrohom to the limit of absolute submission to the will of Hashem in ways we can't possibly imagine, and Avrohom accepts it all without question. That is kabbolas malchus shomayim – no ego, no pride, no saving face, only pure avodas Hashem. So at the last minute, Hashem tells Avrohom to stop – don't carry through with offering Yitzchok.

But after Avrohom has psyched himself up for three long days to overcome all the nisyonos and prepared himself to actually go through with it, now Hashem suddenly says no! It is very hard to just let go and not express all this built-up commitment in some kind of action! But the angel warned Avrohom – don't do anything to Yitzchok. Not even some symbolic act. Let him at least do something. NOTHING!!! Avrohom complied. Complete submission to the will of Hashem despite the super-human difficulties.

Hashem guarantees that there will be a Jewish people only because

Avrohom was so dedicated to the will of Hashem that he was willing to give up having a Jewish people – if that is what Hashem wants. It wasn't about him. The be-all-and-end-all of life is submission to Hashem. That is it – there is nothing else.

Then the posuk reports that Avrohom returns to the lads waiting at the foot of the mountain – alone. The midrash asks: where is Yitzchok? He went to Yeshivas Shem and Ever. Why? Because Yitzchok is going on his own path of avodas Hashem. The nevuah to sacrifice Yitzchok was only given to Avrohom. Yitzchok complied and put himself in danger because he had absolute trust in his father's nevuah. Yitzchok is a grown man of 37 years old – not a child. He could have resisted and refused to follow along unless he received his own person command from Hashem. But Yitzchok is totally trusting of his father's integrity and put himself up on the mizbeich as an olah temimoh.

He overcame a different set of nisyonos and experienced a different kind of aliyoh in ruchniyus. So he needed to concretize his experience by going to learn in an undisturbed environment which was Yeshivas Shem and Ever. Avrohom's house was in Chevron, the center of the country, open to the entire world. People came from all over to hear Avrohom's teachings about Hashem. Shem and Ever were secluded in Be'er Shevah sitting and working on themselves individually. This is where Yitzchok and Yaakov went to solidify their growth.

Some people are like Avrohom Ovinu – they could maintain their level and be completely connected to Hashem even as they are deeply involved in the material aspects of the world. This is why Avrohom didn't have to go anywhere after the Akeidah. Yitzchok wasn't on that level yet and he needed to seclude himself away from distractions at this point of his life in order to develop his ruchniyus further.

We finish the parsha with the Torah telling us that Avrohom was informed that his brother had children and grandchildren. We read these pesukim on Rosh Hashono as part of the kriyas haTorah about the Akeidah. I once asked my Rebbe, why do we finish off this dramatic story of extreme sacrifice to avodas Hashem with such a seemingly unrelated set of facts? What does it have to do with Rosh Hashono? My Rebbe answered that it is brought here as a contrast. Avrohom was working and dedicating his entire life to build a nation worthy of being Hashem's chosen nation for all of human history. He barely manages to produce a single son after many decades of infertility and tefillos. In the end, it was almost all taken away from him. Here, we have Avrohom's brother who has no problem with fertility. They have a whole bunch of children right away with no problem. But they didn't have any struggle, so it isn't very valuable in Hashem's eyes. Hashem wants you to work and persevere and sweat to build something important. If it comes too easy, without challenge, it isn't worth much. If you want to carry Hashem's message in this world, you have to be totally dedicated and willing to sacrifice everything not to deviate one iota from the will of Hashem.

This part of chumash is showing us how different personalities respond to different situations and dilemmas. What kind of decisions people make when faced with tremendous opportunities and difficult pressures. Hashem pushes people into situations which challenge them to grow and bring out their potential greatness. Sometimes a person makes a practical decision to opt out of the challenge – to go the easier route – with rationalizations and excuses to justify it. But at the end of the day, Avrohom Ovinu teaches us that the decisions that are made l'shem shomayim with complete sincerity and an honest submission to the will of Hashem, are the ones which ultimately grant unbelievable success – even in this world. Those are the real practical decisions which make a person get ahead in life.

The legacy of Avrohom Ovinu still lives on in us today – in Klal Yisroel fulfilling its mission of representing Hashem in this world in kedushoh and taharoh. It is a challenge to live our lives according to those lofty ideals, but it is all worth it. Lot, who compromised his values and went for the riches and the easier path, ultimately ended in disgrace.

Parshas Lech Lecha and Vayeira is the story of contrasting between Avrohom and Lot – different personalities and priorities, different decisions and vastly different outcomes.