

Sefer Bereishis contains a lot of interesting personalities, and they teach us a lot about human nature. We spoke about Avrohom Ovinu, Terach, Horon, and Lot. Avrohom Ovinu had unbelievable kochos hanefesh. By the age of 40, he recognized Hashem after a long time of careful thinking, and he came to the conclusion that only Hashem is emes and all avodo zoro is sheker. He was so certain of this that he was able to go against his entire civilization and the culture of his time. He stood up for the emes with mesiras nefesh. There are two elements involved: realizing what the emes is, and being able to leave everything behind to follow the emes and live by it, no matter the cost. Avrohom took on Nimrod and his entire empire and walked through the kivshon ho'aish without a scratch.

There is Horon – he wanted to be with the winner. If Nimrod wins, he'll follow him, and if Avrohom wins, he'll follow him. So Avrohom wins and they ask Horon if he is willing to be thrown in to the fire as well. He says yes because he saw that Avrohom was the winner. But, Hashem isn't going to do a miracle for someone who doesn't take any risks for the truth. He dies in the fire, and Terach is deeply shaken by all this. He decides to travel to Eretz Canaan to join the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. This is a daunting journey because he has to travel up from southern Iraq through Turkey, and then come down to Canaan. He takes Avrohom, Soroh and Lot with him, and Nachor and his family stay behind. But even though he is inspired to make this radical change in his life, he fizzles out along the way and stops in Choron. Many people get inspired and then lose that inspiration. It is a challenge to hold on to one's inspiration. Inspiration quickly fades.

Avrohom stays in Choron with Terach, his father, but Hashem tells him: "Lech Lechah". At the age of 75, Avrohom has to cut all his family ties, start all over again and found a brand-new nation. You have to leave your father and not be pulled down by him. Lot still has some inspiration and goes along with Avrohom. They arrive in Canaan, and immediately, there is a famine and they have to leave to Egypt! Why? Because Hashem is now orchestrating events that affect the entire region just for Avrohom. Hashem causes a famine in order to get Avrohom to Egypt. When he returns to Canaan from Egypt, the famine is over. Hashem accomplished what He wanted with it.

There are two reasons why Avrohom Ovinu has to go to Egypt. One is to test him, to see if he will accept the contradiction of Hashem asking him to come all the way from Ur Kasdim only to be forced to leave soon after he arrives. The second reason is to see if Avrohom can detect Hashem's hashgocho in putting him in a position where he needs to go to Egypt to become wealthy and fulfill Hashem's promise. He asks Soroh to participate and pretend she is his sister and be taken by Pharaoh in order to go along with Hashem's plans of making them wealthy.

Avrohom comes back from Egypt a very wealthy man. Lot is a hanger-on to Avrohom and sees everything that is happening, and also gets wealthy. He realizes how desperately poor Avrohom was on his way down and how rich he is on his way back. He focuses on that – he is following the money. When they come back, Lot needs to maximize his wealth even if it means compromising his ethical standards and stealing grazing land from other people. Avrohom sees his wealth very differently – not as an end to itself that needs to be increased at all costs, but as a means to an end. So he is very concerned with stealing and he cannot tolerate someone like Lot in his proximity. They need to part ways. Lot moves his operation to S'dom.

The Torah testifies that the people of S'dom were extremely evil. The gemara says that Lot knew about it and didn't care. He wanted to be part of them in all ways. He was prepared to join these resho'im if it meant he was going to expand his wealth. All the inspiration and special hashgocho he saw while he was with Avrohom just went out the window. Lot is a very standard type of individual who loses his inspiration very quickly when other factors start to impact his life, especially when it comes to getting even richer.

Hashem decides to destroy S'dom because the evil is not sustainable. But Lot isn't totally identifiable with these people. He spent many years in his uncle and sister's household and he absorbed much of their values. So Lot is torn and conflicted between two identities. He is the one honest person in S'dom, and this is why he is appointed as their judge. He sees the malochim on the street and invites them to his house. Rashi explains that he absorbed the

value of hachnosas orchim from Avrohom. He insists they come to his home – even risking his own safety. Eventually, the people of S'dom confront Lot and demand he hand over the guests to them, and Lot is willing to sacrifice his own daughters to protect them! As they are about to break down the door, the malochim pull Lot back into the house and strike the people outside with blindness so they can't find the door. Now Lot realizes these aren't ordinary people!

The malochim inform Lot what is about to happen to S'dom – complete devastation. They need to get all their family members to pack up and leave immediately. Lot's sons-in-law brush it off as a joke. But Lot's household just saw what the malochim are capable of – they blinded people with open miracles – and now the malochim are being laughed at by Lot's sons-in-law? We see here that human nature is stubborn – we don't want to give up the way we have been living just because someone is telling us about the dire consequences. It's just too painful, too inconvenient to be taken seriously. It means turning my whole life upside down – and many people are not able to do it.

So the malochim tell Lot to forget his greater family and just focus on getting his wife and his two daughters out alive. But Lot hesitates! Why? Here we see how far Lot has sunk in his pursuit of wealth. He is being told to leave it all behind. You can't save anything that will remind you of S'dom, because that will keep you connected to the place being destroyed. But for Lot, his life was his money and his money was his life! He hesitated because he wasn't sure if he would prefer to survive without his money!

A similar thing happened in the financial meltdown of the Great Depression in 1929. People jumped off their office buildings because they lost all their money when the stock market crashed. They couldn't see a reason to keep living if they didn't have their fortune anymore. The malochim had to take them by the hand and drag them out of S'dom. They warned him not to look back during the destruction. If you want to be saved, you have to cut yourself off from the place and the society of S'dom. If you look back and think about your friends and your money, then you are identifying with that society and then you will share their fate. The decree of destruction is on the tzibbur of S'dom. If you are still connected emotionally to that tzibbur, you will join them in the din they are receiving.

The malochim plead with Lot to go and rejoin Avrohom's household. You will be safe and successful again. But Lot refuses. He is confronted with a very tragic situation. He left Avrohom Ovinu because of the money – money which he got only because of being with Avrohom Ovinu! But he let the pursuit of money take over his life and now he can't let it go. By going back to Avrohom, he knows he will be required to go back to the level he was on before money took over his life. Now that money took over his life, he feels he can't go back to the level he used to be on. He would rather escape to a place where he can exist on a lower level.

Lot's sons-in-law couldn't escape S'dom altogether because they couldn't move out of their previous mindset at all. They had the emes displayed right in front of them when the malochim revealed who they were, and they couldn't accept it – because the emes demands you change your life. They couldn't change their life and they were destroyed along with S'dom. Lot recognized the emes and knew he had to change, but he hesitated. He had to be dragged out of S'dom. He was only saved because of the merit of Avrohom. But that's as far as he can change. He can't go all the way back to Avrohom Ovinu. Lot's wife couldn't even manage being taken out of S'dom. She looked back and maintained that strong connection to S'dom, so she shared the din of S'dom and was turned into salt. Lot and his daughters find refuge in a cave somewhere. His daughters think it's the end of the world, and Lot winds up in disgrace.

There are times Hashem gives people opportunities to grow in ruchniyus, and if they take advantage of that opportunity, there is no limit to how far they can grow. Avrohom was given opportunities, and he took advantage of each one of them to bring himself to a higher level. Lot was given chance after chance, and he got side-tracked by the money. Hashem showed Lot that he can become wealthy just by associating with Avrohom and not doing anything. He showed Lot that he can lose everything instantly, because he

went to S'dom to pursue more wealth. But none of these messages made an impact. He can't go back to Avrohom and he ends up in total disgrace.

Then we come to the story of the Akeidah. There are many messages that we can learn from the Akeidah. But one thing is this:

Avrohom is traveling with Yitzchok, Yishmoel and Eliezer. Hashem doesn't tell him where to go. It's one of the mountains that I will show you. So Avrohom is wandering around for three days, even though going from Chevron to Har Habayis is less than a day's journey. Avrohom doesn't know where he is supposed to go and he is waiting for some indication of where to go. On the third day, Avrohom sees the mountain from a distance. How does he know that this is the right one? He saw a cloud hovering over the mountain. Avrohom turns to Yitzchok and asks him what he sees, and Yitzchok says he sees a cloud over the mountain, like Avrohom. He asks Yishmoel and Eliezer what they see, and they respond that they only see a bunch of hills. So Avrohom says only Yitzchok is coming, and you two can stay here with the donkey. The donkey doesn't see the cloud and you don't see the cloud.

Chazal are trying to tell us something. When you live a life of kedushoh, you are sensitive to the presence or absence of kedushoh around you. Since Avrohom was immersed in kedushoh and taharoh, he had a sense for kedushoh. He can see the cloud of the Shechinoh resting on that particular mountain. But if you are basically a materialistic person – chomri, like a chamor – you won't see anything special on that mountain.

Now we have an unbelievable nisayon. Yitzchok is a grown man – 37 years old! And he is willing to be put on a mizbeach and be slaughtered because his father told him that this is what Hashem wants him to do. After everything that happens, the posuk says Avrohom returned to Yishmoel and Eliezer and they made their way to Be'er Sheva. Chazal ask: where did Yitzchok go? They answer that Yitzchok went to Yeshivas Shem and Ever. But what is wrong with learning in Avrohom's yeshiva? After all, he was already learning there for the first 37 years of his life. The difference is that Avrohom Ovinu's yeshiva was open to the whole world. All sorts of people were bustling around, coming in and out, and it was a busy place. But Yeshivas Shem and Ever was a select few individuals secluded in a quiet, private corner somewhere with no distractions – this is where you could really focus on personal growth and avodas Hashem.

Yitzchok Ovinu realized that after he overcame this incredible nisayon and rose to tremendous levels, he needs to make this a permanent part of him and not go back to life as usual. He doesn't want to be like Terach, where the inspiration of the kivshon ho'aish fizzled out half way to Canaan. How do you hold on to inspiration? By secluding yourself in an intense environment without distractions and focusing on limud Torah and avodas Hashem. That is how he is going to hold on to his inspiration.

These parshiyos are giving us the contrasts between all these personalities. Yitzchok is committed to not letting his inspiration fizzle out like Terach. Lot gets wealthy just like Avrohom did, but Lot lets this wealth take over his whole life. To the point where Lot loses everything and ends in disgrace, while Avrohom Ovinu knew where the wealth came from and doesn't let it go to his head. He is super careful about stealing.

Avrohom is given nisayon after nisayon. We are all given tests in life from which we are meant to grow. They are challenges that are designed to maximize our potential. The Ramban says Hashem doesn't give a person a nisayon that is impossible to overcome. The whole purpose of a nisayon is to bring out the hidden strengths that a person has not yet developed and made a real part of him. To make it real, a person has to express those strengths in action, and then it becomes a part of who you are.

Lot was given chance after chance to grow from his association with Avrohom Ovinu. But he let the wealth go to his head and he lost everything. He left Avrohom and joined the immoral society of S'dom. He is given one last chance to go back to Avrohom and he refuses. So, he is lost.

The parsha has another lesson, from the confrontation with Avimelech and the subsequent birth of Yitzchok. It seems a little murky. When Yishmoel was born, it was clear to everyone that Avrohom and Hogor were his biological parents. But Soroh was with Avrohom for decades and they didn't have children. Suddenly, after she was taken by Avimelech and returned, she has a child? So the leitzonei hador start rumors that Yitzchok is either an abandoned baby they picked up from the street and are trying to pass him off as their own, or he isn't Avrohom's child but Avimelech's. They don't want to acknowledge that Soroh was pregnant for nine months prior to Yitzchok's birth. So Hashem gives Soroh the ability to nurse everyone else's infant as well her own, to prove this is her child. Then they came up with another rumor that it's her child with Avimelech. So Hashem made Yitzchok's features look identical to Avrohom's to dispel that rumor as well.

When people are confronted with the truth, it is uncomfortable and they

want to explain it away with all kinds of delusions and fantasies. About two years ago, all the archeologists in Israel were doing excavations around the Dead Sea where S'dom used to be. They came to the conclusion that the whole area surrounding the Dead Sea at one point had the richest and most fertile soil of all of Eretz Yisroel. Just as the pesukim describe. Then, they say, a meteor filled with a tremendous amount of sulfur came down and exploded and destroyed the whole area – made it completely desolate. This is exactly what the Chumash describes as the destruction of S'dom! You would expect all these people to jump up and acknowledge the truth of the Torah. But this is too uncomfortable for them to do. They need to find some kind of theory that can explain how it could happen without Hashem doing it.

The truth is that Hashem allows them to do this. He shows people the truth and then gives them a way to deny it if they really want to. This is why Hashem brought Avrohom and Soroh to G'ror before Yitzchok's birth – to allow the leitzonei hador to explain away the miracle of Yitzchok's birth without it changing the way they live.

There is one time Hashem didn't let this happen. For the first nine makkos in Egypt, Moshe predicts that the makkoh is coming, the makkoh comes, and then predicts when the makkoh leaves, and it leaves. All exactly as Moshe predicted. You would think that the Egyptians would start to realize that Hashem means business when He says He wants Klal Yisroel to leave! But a week later, they go back to their old routine and continue life as usual and don't let Klal Yisroel leave. Then Moshe predicts makkas bechoros, and you would think the Egyptians are going to take him seriously! But when the makkoh happens at midnight, the pesukim say Pharaoh woke up in the middle of the night to find Moshe and Aharon. That means after Moshe made the prediction, Pharaoh goes to sleep in his bed! He isn't phased one bit!

There is an interesting Rashi which observes that when Hashem told Moshe when the makkoh will occur, He says it will happen exactly at midnight. But when Moshe conveys the warning to Pharaoh's court, he changes the wording and says "around midnight". Why? Rashi explains that Moshe wanted to avoid leaving any room for the Egyptians to find an excuse to say the makkoh didn't happen as predicted and ignore it. If Moshe said it would happen exactly at midnight, it is possible that the Egyptian timekeeping methods would be a little off, and to them, the makkoh would seem to miss precise midnight, and they would have an excuse to ignore the makkoh!

Just stop and imagine what he is afraid they will do. The makkoh will be striking every house at the exact same time, and kill only the first-born children – and only the first-born Egyptian children – and they all die on the spot. Despite all that, it will still be possible to dismiss it all because it was a few seconds before or after what they thought was midnight! So Hashem wanted to make sure they didn't have this excuse and Moshe told them "around midnight".

The truth can be very threatening to people because it signals to them that they have to change their direction in life. Hashem sends a lot of signals and they are very clear if you keep your eyes open. This parsha describes different types of people. Avrohom is successful because he recognizes the emes. He recognizes that Hashem is responsible for everything he has, which is difficult for one's ego that wants to feel they accomplished something on their own. Avrohom is scrupulous about theft because he knows the money is not his own. Hashem gave it to him in order to use it according to His rules. Lot gets wealthy and it takes over his life. He is given chance after chance to turn around and he says he can't change. Ultimately, we live the life we choose to live.

We sometimes get inspired but it quickly fizzles out unless we find a way to make it a part of us through limud Torah and focusing on avodas Hashem. The Chumash tells us stories about the real events of real people, and we have to learn from them and allow the lessons they convey to guide our own lives in a very real way.

Hashem is sending tremendous messages these days. Someone told me they were upset about what I said about the October 7th attack by Hamas last year. I mentioned the fact that of the 14 yishuvim, the ones that were shomer Shabbos, and the yeshivos, were untouched. We later found out that Hamas intended to conduct a massacre at one of the yeshivos but they got distracted and side-tracked by the music festival. These are messages that people don't want to hear. The truth is very uncomfortable to many people and they don't want the truth to force them to change their whole outlook on life.

The Chumash tells us the story of Lot and Avrohom. Lot is given the opportunity to make the right decision and rejoin Avrohom and be successful. He rejects it and ends up in disgrace. Avrohom is given opportunities to grow with nisayon after nisayon. He takes up the challenge to express his potential and his life becomes a massive success. This is the choice we are all given today regarding how to make decisions and live our lives.