

PARSHAS VAYEIRA

תשפ"ו

We talked about the various nisyonos of Avrohom Ovinu. We need to understand the basic idea behind a nisayon.

Life is not supposed to be straightforward and simple. Life is supposed to be a life of growth.

Avrohom Ovinu was given the nisayon of making a bris miloh. But this nisayon only came after he reached a certain level after overcoming many previous nisyonos. At that point, Hashem understood that he was capable of fathering a Yitzchok Ovinu and starting a Jewish nation.

Bris miloh is a very interesting mitzvah. There are a number of conversations recorded between Rabbi Akiva and Turnus Rufus ha'rosho, who was the Roman governor of Eretz Yisroel, and they all revolve around the same idea.

Turnus Rufus challenged Rabbi Akiva – If Hashem loves poor people, why doesn't Hashem make them rich? If Hashem despises the orlosh, why did He create man with it? And more generally, he challenged: whose actions are more superior? G-d's actions or Man's?

To this last question, Rabbi Akiva gave a surprising answer: Man's actions are superior! How could that be? Isn't Hashem perfect? Rabbi Akiva said – let's try it and see for ourselves. Come tomorrow and bring kernels of wheat with you. Rabbi Akiva went home and instructed his wife to make a cake, which he brought to the meeting.

At the meeting, Rabbi Akiva told Turnus Rufus to eat the cake and then eat the kernels to see which one was superior. Of course, the cake was delicious and the kernels were inedible! So Rabbi Akiva demonstrated that Man's actions were indeed superior.

Chazal say this idea is expressed in the word לעשות at the end of the six days of creation. There is still what to do after Hashem finished! Hashem intentionally did not create a complete, perfect world. Bread doesn't grow on trees. Most things we eat require extensive processing before they become edible. Raw materials have to be purified and shaped before they can be useful.

This pattern extends to the human being himself as well. No-one is born a tzaddik or a rosho. We require effort and training of our human nature to develop it properly and bring it to its final, perfect state. That is what a nisayon is about, and that is what Rabbi Akiva said bris miloh is about. The human being is born imperfect and he has to do things in his life to perfect himself.

A nisayon means there is potential there, and a person needs to go through and succeed in the nisayon to bring that potential out to make it a real, permanent part of himself.

A baby has a lot of potential. But if it is constantly pampered and never left to struggle to do anything on its own, it will never develop properly into an independent, fully functioning human being.

The gemara at the end of Shabbos talks about the significant effects of mazalos on human characteristics. The gemara seems to conclude אין מזל לישראל. But there is an interesting Teshuvos HaGeonim which has an important perspective on this gemara. The teshuvah asks: How can mazalos only affect non-Jews and not Jews? Aren't we all human beings subject to the forces of nature equally? The answer is that while each human being is influenced by his mazal to have certain tendencies and characteristics in his personality, no-one is born a tzaddik or a rosho. And even identical twins with the exact same DNA, parents, and life circumstances, still have different neshamos and

different personalities.

There are positive and negative traits in each of us. We have a Torah that tells us to take the negative aspects and either channel them or suppress them. Living a life of Torah is a disciplined life. Not only are we told what are positive elements and negative elements, but we also are trained through a life of mitzvos how to discipline ourselves. We don't give up and say this is how I was born and this is who I am. Popular psychology has this concept of "self-discovery". To discover "who you are" to them, means you can never change. We say no. We have bechiroh chofshis and we can control even our extreme middos that come so naturally.

A nisayon comes to a person to challenge him to channel his middos in the right direction.

Avrohom had developed the middoh of emes to an incredible degree. This middoh was so strong that it was able to overcome the first nisayon of being threatened with being burned to death. He was willing to die horribly rather than bow down to an idol he knew was sheker. Emes was the backbone of his life and motivated him to search and search until he found Hashem.

Then he was told by Hashem to pick up and uproot himself from everything he had known and go into a completely unfamiliar environment. A second nisayon. It wasn't so simple to just cut off everything that connected him to his past. This was the first time Hashem spoke to him. He is taking Avrohom by the hand and lifting him to the next level. But in order to do that, Avrohom has to make a clean break from his wider family and his previous environment. It was a tremendous nisayon.

He finally comes to Eretz Yisroel, and suddenly, he hits a famine and he has to leave! He has a nisayon to trust that Hashem is planning everything and using this famine to fulfil His promises. Right now, Avrohom is broke and is wandering from place to place! But he passes the test and doesn't question Hashem's bewildering actions.

Then we have the bris bein habesorim. Avrohom is being challenged to believe in Hashem's promise to have a son, even if it is physically impossible to have children with Soroh. Hashem tells Avrohom to realize that he can function above the limits of nature if he connects totally to Hashem without reservations or doubts. Hashem isn't limited by anything. Avrohom believes, and he passes this nisayon as well.

Then Avrohom gets the nisayon of bris miloh – a painful and dangerous operation in order to be able to father the Jewish people.

After he makes the bris, and he is recuperating from the pain, Avrohom is still driven by chessed to go and sit outside in the blazing heat to look for guests to serve! Hashem is revealing Himself to him to do bikur cholim, but when he sees the guests, and Avrohom says to Hashem "please wait while I cater to three dirty Arabs and provide hospitality." The gemara says that from this action of Avrohom we learn that hachnosas orchim and chessed is more important than having an audience with the Shechinoh! Absolutely mind-blowing!

The guests talk to Avrohom and he realizes these are really malochei Elokim in human form. All of the sudden, Soroh Imeinu starts to have a regular cycle again! How do we know that? Because we read earlier that the bread was promised to the malochim, and Soroh was told to make it, but notice that it was never served to the guests. What happened to it? The answer is that when Soroh suddenly became a niddah, she was

in the middle of preparing the bread. The bread became tomei and was no longer fit to be served according to Avrohom's high standards.

But Soroh smiled in disbelief at the prediction of one of the guests that she will have a son this time next year. Even after her cycle resumed, it still didn't make sense to her.

The guests got up to face S'dom and Avrohom accompanies them to escort them on their way. At that point, Hashem says such a person who will teach his children to follow the ways of the Derech Hashem deserves to understand why I am about to unleash the middas hadin on S'dom. Why is Avrohom worthy? Because Avrohom epitomizes the middos of chessed and emes, and he will do everything in his power to instill these middos in his children. He is worthy of fathering the Jewish people, so he deserves to gain insights into the way Hashem runs this world.

Avrohom reached the highest levels of chessed, and by contrast, the people of S'dom are the most cruel and inhumane people you could imagine. They are rich and want to keep all their riches to themselves – to the point they will torture others who dare share their wealth with the poor. Such a society simply cannot continue to exist in the place that Avrohom's children will eventually inherit.

Avrohom's argument with Hashem is: perhaps there are tzaddikim who can turn the city around. Hashem finally gave up hope on the generation of the mabbul because after 120 years, Noach wasn't successful in making one baal teshuvah. Noach didn't believe in his cause, so it became a self-fulfilling prophecy and no-one besides Noach's family was saved from the mabbul.

But Avrohom isn't willing to give up so easily. Maybe there are tzaddikim who can influence the people to do teshuvah? Hashem says there aren't enough tzaddikim like that in S'dom. So Avrohom goes back to looking for more guests.

The story of Avrohom Ovinu is the story of constant nisyonos and constant growth.

The story of Lot is just the opposite. Lot just attaches himself to Avrohom and rides along his success. He chooses to leave Avrohom and live in S'dom because that is where the money is. S'dom is marked for destruction and Hashem sends malochim to save Lot and his family. Not because Lot deserves it, but because of the zechus of Avrohom.

The malochim tell Lot to make sure to sever all ties with S'dom – mentally, psychologically, socially – and then you will escape their fate. You have to realize you are starting a brand-new life without any of the influence of S'dom in your thoughts and feelings. If you maintain any kind of connection, you will be caught up in their gezeirah. Lot's wife can't manage to do this and she looks back – so she is destroyed in the exact same way the city was destroyed.

Now Lot has a choice in front of him. He sees now that his pursuit of wealth was the cause of so much misfortune in his life. His family was spared from destruction only because of Avrohom Ovinu. Maybe he should go back to living with Avrohom Ovinu and absorb his values and outlook on life instead of his path of pursuing money? This the nisyaron of Lot's entire life. To realize the failure of his path in life and

make a complete correction.

But Lot can't manage it. He says he wants to flee to the mountain – but later he says he can't remain on that madreigoh. The malochim try to encourage Lot to fight back to his former madreigoh, but Lot declines. He wants to start somewhere else. He blows the opportunity. Lot ends up getting drunk, fathering two children with his two daughters, and ending up in disgrace. He fades into the background with no real accomplishments and is forgotten.

Let's make this very practical.

Every person eventually needs to make important life decisions. They need to figure out which direction they want their life to take. If you don't aim very high at the beginning, you won't even get off the ground. If you shoot for mediocrity at the very beginning, you are doomed to fail in life.

When a person makes life decisions, he has to remember that life is all about growing as a person. I was reminiscing with an old talmid from 54 years ago. We remembered about a great real estate deal he was about to make and he was so excited to live there. Luckily, he asked me about it first and I challenged him: was it a place where somebody can raise a high quality frum family? The answer was clearly not. And luckily his enthusiasm for the great deal didn't cloud his judgment and he decided to prioritize his family's spiritual environment. Life is about growth – not about making great deals.

You have to ask yourself constantly: where are you going to grow the most at this stage of your life? Each stage comes with its own type of nisyaron and a new direction of growth.

Avrohom didn't stop growing – even when he was getting old and weary. He had the biggest nisyaron of his life – the Akeidah – when he was at the age of 137. He had been growing since the age of three, says the Rambam. Yaakov wanted to take a break from nisyonos but Hashem didn't let him relax until the last 17 years of his life.

Life decisions need to surround one basic question: where you are going to grow the most. Where to live – the most important factor has to be the quality of ruchniyus for yourself and your family. Life is all about dilemmas – to choose between prioritizing ruchniyus or gashmiyus.

Avrohom chose correctly time after time because he had his priorities and his values worked out properly. Lot is such a failure that it is shocking. He wasn't willing to push himself to an uncomfortable space where he would be forced to grow by Avrohom's presence in his life. He wanted stay away from Avrohom and be comfortable in his mediocrity. Similarly, there are people who instinctively recoil from any kind of pressure. But a car doesn't move without applying some pressure to the gas pedal. Without some kind of pressure – in the right measure and at the right times, people don't grow and develop in any area.

We can all grow together when we make the cheshbon hanefesh regarding which environment creates the best kind of pressure to grow in Torah and middos and yiras shomayim.