

Parshas Chayei Sarah 5762

You know, my oldest daughter is in high school now. And the bane of her life is tests. It seems that every other day she has another test, to prepare for which all her free time is required.

But she doesn't hate her teachers for it. Because she knows that all these tests have a purpose; they're not an end in their own right. She's not just taking test for the sake of test taking. Not at all; she needs to take all these tests, she knows, for a higher goal; so that ultimately she will be well prepared for - Regents.

I mention this because the subject of tests comes up naturally when we talk about Avraham Avinu. Avraham Avinu also had to take a lot of tests. עשרה נסיונות, the Mishnah says, were given to Avraham - the last of these, according to Rabbeinu Yonah, being the difficulties he encountered in this week's פרשה burying שרה. And he passed all of them.

It's interesting that we don't find the same focus on tests in regard to the other אבות. Certainly none of the אבות had easy lives; Yaakov's life, especially, was filled with tragedy. But it is only in Avraham's life - as understood by חז"ל - that the idea of נסיון looms so large. Even the עקידה, in which יצחק took such a central part, is described as a נסיון of Avraham's, rather than of יצחק. Indeed, the Torah itself indicates that it was Avraham's נסיון; because after the עקידה Hashem appears to Avraham - and not to Yitzchak - and says: עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה:

Somehow, it seems, it was particularly אברהם who required testing. Why should that be?

I once heard from a great man, that הקב"ה doesn't give someone a נסיון unless he knows he can pass it. And that seems difficult to understand,. If הקב"ה knows that he can pass the test then what is the purpose of the test in the first place?

Actually, our translation of נסיון as *test* is not really accurate. The word נסיון, the מפרשים explain, is related to נס, a pole, which is used to elevate something - as in עשה לך נחש ושים אותו על נס. And so a נס is an event, a trial, whose purpose is to elevate the person undergoing it.

You see, a person may be born with the great potential. But that doesn't mean that he was born great. No one is born great; at most, he may be born with great potential. That potential has to be realized, and it can be realized only by the force and the press of circumstance.

The greatest world leader of the twentieth century, perhaps the largest person - at least in the non-Jewish world - of the twentieth century, was, perhaps, Winston Churchill. Churchill was undoubtedly born with tremendous gifts, both intellectual and moral. But had he not been called upon to lead England in its hour of trial,

that greatness would never have been fully tapped; not only would it have remained hidden; it would not have existed, except in unrealized potential.

A נסיון is not a test, but a trial; a critical event which causes that untapped potential to be transformed into reality.

And so the purpose of the עקידה, for example, was not to discover whether or not אברהם was a ירא שמים, even to the degree that the עקידה demanded. הקב"ה didn't need a test to discover that, anyway; He could have simply looked into Avraham's heart. The purpose of the עקידה, rather, was to raise אברהם to the level of the עקידה; to take the potential with him, and bring it to fulfillment and realization.

Perhaps that is why it is particularly in regard to אברהם, more than to any of the other אבות, that the concept of נסיון is so central.

Avraham Avinu was born into a pagan family. His life's story is a story of transformation; perhaps the most incredible transformation the world has ever seen - from pagan child to the father of monotheism, the unique figure who transfigured all of history.

The other אבות, who followed אברהם, each staked out their own path in עבודת השם. But, nonetheless, they were born on the mountain. They weren't required to transform themselves in that radical sense that Avraham had to.

And so, more than any of the other אבות, Avraham had to be elevated - transformed - into greatness. And that required נסיונות. Through the force of the נסיונות the greatness within him was brought to the surface, and realized.

And it's significant that חז"ל speak of ten נסיונות. Because ten represents, in the thought of חז"ל, a complete שיעור קומה, a complete set. (Thus, for example, the world was created with ten מאמרות, utterances; and the לוחות, of course, contained ten דברות.) So that what חז"ל are indicating is that אברהם's entire spiritual stature was built up through these ten successive נסיונות.

today, especially in ארץ ישראל but around the world, as well, are experiencing a נסיון. We don't seek נסיונות. We say in davening each day: אל תביאני... לידי נסיון. But when נסיונות come it is valuable to realize that their purpose is not to test us. G-d doesn't need to test us. The purpose of a נסיון is to change us; to elevate us; to bring to fulfillment the capacity for אמונה and בטחון, for calm and unquestioning trust in the רבשי"ע, that we have inherited from אברהם אבינו, in whose footsteps we follow. And ultimately the purpose of this נסיון, as of all נסיונות, is to transform us; each of us, individually, all of us as a people, and ultimately - through us - to transform the world, into a place where הקב"ה's presence and kingship will be felt and acknowledged by all, והיה ה' למלך על כל הארץ ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד.