

Peninim On The Torah

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Parashat Vayeira

And behold! Three men were standing over him. (18:2)

Rashi explains that each of these three angels disguised in the image of men had an individual mission. One came to tell Sarah Imeinu the news that she would give birth to a son; and came to heal Avraham Avinu; and one came to destroy Sodom. One angel never performs more than one mission. Let us focus on their missions. The angel that came to notify Sarah was a malach of chaim, an angel of life. The angel that came to destroy Sodom, however, was an angel representing death. What relationship is there between these two angels that necessitated their coming together to visit Avraham? Why did they have to "travel" together? Furthermore, if they had to be together, why did a malach ha'maves, an angel of death, have to accompany an angel of life? Incidentally, only two angels went on to Sodom, since the third one had no mission there.

Horav Tuvia Lisitzin, zl, derives from here that all three angels had one focus and one goal, one mission. They were all together under one aegis: to prepare the world for the birth of Yitzchak Avinu. Prior to Yitzchak's birth, Hashem changed the names of Avram and Sarai to Avraham and Sarah, respectively. This change in name also altered their mazal, zodiac star. The day that Sarah conceived Yitzchak was an auspicious one for the world. She was not the only barren woman to conceive. Throughout the world, people became blessed. Those who were barren became fertile. Those who could not see were now able to see. Those who previously had not been able to hear could now hear. Those who were mentally challenged were now able to think cogently. Many prayers were answered that day, as it became a yom simchah, day of joy and festivity, for the world community. It was a singular day in universe.

Such a halcyon day needs great preparation. The Malach Michael came to notify Sarah. The Malach Gavriel came to destroy Sodom, because prior to Yitzchak's arrival, the world had to be rid of its evil. There is no place for evil in a world inhabited by Yitzchak. The Malach Refael came to heal Avraham after he and his household had circumcised themselves. This was necessary so that Yitzchak would be born b'kedushah v'taharah, in holiness and purity.

The malach that came to destroy Sodom was on the same mission as the others. He was not an angel of death. He was an angel of mercy. Eradicating evil is not a negative act, but one of a positive nature, since it prepares the setting for good to take place. Likewise, we find that the two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening. Did it take that long to travel from Chevron to Sodom? Obviously, they were

waiting to see if Avraham Avinu would succeed in defending Sodom, if he could find something positive that would spare them. These were angels of mercy, who waited as long as possible before they had to carry out their mission. Three angels with one mission. Therefore, they all visited Avraham, from whom Yitzchak would descend.

Let some water be brought and wash your feet. (18:4)

Rashi notes that Avraham Avinu asked that a shliach, agent, be the one to prepare and bring the water for his guests. He did not bring the water himself. Thus, generations later, when his descendants were in need of water in the wilderness, Hashem "sent" the water through an intermediary, Moshe Rabbeinu. Let us step back, peruse history and develop a clearer understanding of the effect of Avraham sending an agent to bring the water. Horav Aizik Ausband, Shlita, notes that had Avraham personally brought the water, then Hashem would have "personally" given water to the Jews, rather than have Moshe speak to the rock. As a result of Moshe's hitting the rock, he was refused entry into Eretz Yisrael. Had Moshe taken Klal Yisrael into the Promised Land, there never would have been a churban Bais Hamikdash, the Temple would never have been destroyed, and we would not have had to go into exile. This would have precluded all of the persecutions and slaughter to which we have been subjected during our long and bitter galus, exile. One little action, one simple activity, would have made the difference. We now have a glimmer concerning the infinite value of one mitzvah and the incredible effect that a little alacrity and personal care adds to its fulfillment.

Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. (18:15)

We must endeavor to understand Sarah Imeinu's denial. Did she, or did she not, laugh? The Kotzker Rebbe, zl, explains that while she did laugh, it was out of joy, similar to Avraham's reaction to the wonderful news. The Torah, however, attests to her subconscious doubting of the news. The Ramban questions how Sarah, who was a Neviah, prophetess, could doubt Hashem's word. He explains that had Sarah been aware of the true essence of these three men who delivered the news, she would have certainly believed the prophecy. She was under the impression that they were human beings. Thus, she thought twice before accepting their word.

The Sefas Emes goes a bit further in explaining Sarah's statement, teaching us a powerful lesson regarding the essence of teshuvah, repentance. After all, we must take into consideration that Sarah was speaking to Hashem. One does not deny to Hashem, Who knows everything, unless one is unaware of his denial. Regarding the pasuk in Devarim 20:8, "Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his heart," Chazal comment, "What is it that provokes fear in this man?" They explain that the individual fears going to war as a soldier, because he is overwhelmed with the "sins" in his hand. This is a reference to any simple infraction, anything that might cloud his mind and impede his self-confidence. They use the aveirah, sin, of letting his mind wander while he is putting on his Tefillin. There should not be any hafsakah, interruption, or hesech ha'daas, diversion, between the Tefillin shel yad, which one places on his arm, and the Tefillin Shel Rosh, which he dons on his forehead. This is the type of sin that worries him. Why should he return from the battlefield? Certainly he has repented and performed the necessary teshuvah for this shortcoming. The mere fact that he is concerned about these aveiros she'b'yado is an

indication of his lofty spiritual nature. He fulfills the pasuk, V'chatasi negdi tamid, "My sin is before me constantly."

The Sefas Emes explains that the key to the acceptance of his teshuvah, the clear proof that Hashem has accepted his contrition and forgiven him, is when he is no longer troubled by the after effects. He does not think about his sin. His past is forgotten. If it still concerns him, it demonstrates that he has not fully achieved atonement.

Sarah repented for her laughter. She was so contrite in her repentance that she neither thought about it nor remembered that it had ever occurred. As a true G-d-fearing Jewess, she could not fathom that she had "laughed" at the angel's word. Thus, her denial was unknowing.

The goal of the baal teshuvah is to see beyond his roots. He succeeded in the process of teshuvah, so he should now feel and act like everyone else. He is a mainstream Jew. We must remember that teshuvah is a process that should elevate and embolden a person - not be a stigma of one's past.

So the men got up from there, gazed down toward Sodom... the men had turned from there and went to Sodom, while Avraham was still standing before Hashem. (18:16, 22)

Is there any difference from where they turned? The pasuk seems to emphasize that they turned from "there." We know "where" they were. They were visiting with Avraham Avinu, and it is from his hospitality that they continued on to Sodom. Sforno comments on the words Vayifnu mi'sham ha'anashim, "the men turned from 'there,'" from the house of chesed, kindness that was Avraham's. This means that they had left a home that was the epitome of kindness to go to a place that had descended to the nadir of depravity. Prior to this, the pasuk also emphasizes that the men gazed down from "there." Simply, this means that when one stands in Avraham Avinu's home, a home exemplifying loving kindness at its zenith, the stark contrast of Sodom glares at you. The evil perpetrated by the Sodomites was magnified when viewed from the vantage point of Avraham's house.

Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, takes this idea a bit further. He explains that one who was born deprived of the gift of sight, who never in his life saw light or colors, can never fully understand their meaning. An individual who was once able to see clearly, but has lost his ability to see, can understand and mentally perceive various colors. This is the condemnation against the people of Sodom: You were able to see! You once saw and understood the meaning of kindness and human decency. You have no excuse for your actions. Had you been born and raised in some remote village on a backward continent, totally secluded from human interaction, then the critique for your nefarious behavior might not be as intense. However, you lived in the vicinity of Avraham Avinu, an individual who personified loving kindness at its apex. You knew what was right and what was wrong. Yet, you chose to live a life of evil, a life of preying on those weaker than you, a life of taking advantage of the unfortunate and the needy, a life of miscreancy. Yes, the angels looked down from Avraham's house, because the view from that vantage point was much more odious. The Sodomites had no excuse. They had no one to blame but themselves.

The same idea applies to each and every one of us. Every Jew, regardless of his background or upbringing, if he is born with a mind, can reach Hashem. He was created in the image of Hashem, with

a neshamah, soul, that consists of a part of Hashem Above. What excuse does he have for not finding Hashem? At least he should search! If he searches seriously, he will find the path to Hashem. It just takes an intelligent mind - that functions!

Yet, one who has never studied Torah, who has never experienced the sweetness of a blatt, folio, of Talmud, who has never been excited over the penetrating logic of our Chazal, does have a degree of mitigation. He can plead ignorance as a way of exculpating himself. This might recuse him to a certain degree, but what about he who had studied Torah, who had imbibed of its profundities, who had experienced its lessons and savored its sweetness - what is his excuse? He knew what a Jew was. He understood the definition of a human being. He understood the meaning of spirituality. Yet, he decided to close his eyes and ignore everything that he had seen.

The angels arose from Avraham's home to look at Sodom. It was a glaring and penetrating stare. They were looking from Avraham's home, saying to the Sodomites, "You see what Avraham is and what his activities are. You are neighbors with a kind, loving example of what a human being is to be. How can you, after seeing all of this, commit your vile cruelty against people? How can you allow yourselves to sink into the quicksand of foolishness, evil and contamination? You know better; you have seen the light. So, why do you hide your head in the darkness?" Their proximity to Avraham's home magnified their sins and sealed their punishment.

Avraham responded and said... "Although I am but dust and ash." (18:27)

Our Patriarch compares himself to two lowly materials: afar and eifar, dust and ash. What is the significance of these two materials in the context of Avraham Avinu's response to Hashem? The Netziv, zl, explains that afar, dust, has an advantage in that it has the koach ha'toladah, power to give birth, to produce, to serve as the catalyst for creating something else. It does not, however, have a relationship to an av, father, a previous generation. It has been created by Hashem in its present state. It is what it is because of its own essential nature. It is not born of anything else.

Eifar, ash, on the other hand, is the end product of a coal, an ember, a piece of wood, or whatever material was burned into ash. It has a "past." It has yichus, pedigree. It, however, does not have the advantage of afar, in that it cannot be used to create something else. There is no power of toladah, creativity, in it. Afar has a future, but no past. Eifar has a past, but no future.

When Avraham entreated Hashem, he said, "Ribono Shel Olam, I am but dust and ash. I am like dust that I have no zchus avos, ancestral merit, as my father was an idolater. Likewise, I have no future in that I am childless, similar to ash which is an end product. Because of Avraham's poignant prayer, a prayer in which he presented himself as being totally unworthy, Hashem granted him two unique gifts that would serve his descendants: the afar sotah, dust used for a wayward wife, which, when used, provides the opportunity for creating shalom bayis, marital harmony and bliss, in a home; and the eifar Parah Adumah, ash of the Red Heifer, which is used to purify a person who has contracted tumaas meis, ritual contamination from coming in contact with a corpse. Avraham's unprecedented humility, his total self-abnegation, served as the precursor for his progeny to receive the two mitzvos that would elevate the kedushah, holiness, of Klal Yisrael.

The greater, more elevated an individual is, the more penetrating is his understanding of his inadequacy. Humility should be the result of a deeper understanding of Hashem and His World, thereby recognizing one's inconsequence. One who is all wrapped up in himself does not see beyond himself.

In Sefer Tehillim 17:18, David Hamelech entreats Hashem with the words, Shamreini k'ishon bas ayin, "Guard me like the pupil of an eye." The Radak comments that the root of the word ishon, pupil of the eye, is ish, man. The relationship between the two words is to be found in the fact that when one looks into the pupil of another person's eye, he sees a reflection of himself. He sees a reflection of a "man." He adds that the letters vav and nun, which are the suffixes to the word ish, creating the word ishon, are used to signify a diminutive. Thus, ishon means a small man. If one looks into someone's eye, he sees a miniature reflection of himself. He sees a small man.

Rabbi Paysach Krohn relates that, upon hearing this interpretation of the Radak, Horav Mordechai Gifter, zl, the venerable Rosh Hayeshivah of Telshe, added that a powerful lesson may be derived from here. When one looks at another person, he is inclined to view himself as superior to him, thus deserving of his honor and recognition. The Torah is alluding to a different perspective that one should have when he looks at another individual. He should "see" himself as inferior to him and, therefore, look for the other person's virtues and attributes that elevate him. As far as he himself is concerned, the diminutive image he has of himself in the pupil of the other person's eye will suffice.

In his hesped, eulogy, for Horav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, zl, Horav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Riff, zl, describes this extraordinary gadol, Torah giant, as a man of singular greatness. He not only shielded his true measure of greatness from the public realm, he managed to "hide himself" from his immediate family and friends. Who would imagine that this frail, sickly, man would arise every midnight to recite Tikkun chatzos, a prayer lamenting the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash and the ensuing exile? He was an individual who personally carried on his shoulders the financial concerns of thousands of families through the world, yet he never revealed to anyone who these families were.

Erudite in every area of Torah, his encyclopedic knowledge of Talmud Bavli, Yerushalmi and the four tracts of Shulchan Aruch was affirmed, but never publicized. He never sat at the dais at conventions or meetings, never voiced his opinion in public. Yet, behind the scenes he was the prime mover of many endeavors in support of needy Torah scholars. He was a leader who led from behind, whose presence was felt, but not seen. Humility was not just his virtue; it was his essence.

Hashem appeared to him in Elonei Mamre: And it happened after these things that G-d tested Avraham. (18:1;22:1)

There is something intriguing about the beginning of the Parsha, which commences with Hashem visiting Avraham Avinu as he recuperates from his Bris Milah, and the conclusion of the Parsha, which describes Yitzchak's preparedness to be sacrificed for Hashem. In both of these circumstances, the names of the major "player", Avraham and Yitzchak, are not mentioned. Indeed, Avraham's name is not mentioned until later, when he slaughters a calf and prepares the meat for his guests. Otherwise, we have no clue who Hashem is visiting and who saw the three angels dressed as Arabs. The story of Akeidas Yitzchak, which is one of the most seminal events in Jewish history, talks only about Avraham taking Yitzchak, preparing Yitzchak and almost slaughtering Yitzchak. But, it does not mention Yitzchak as playing a starring role in this episode of mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice. Why?

We find a similar anomaly in Parashas Tetzaveh, in which Moshe Rabbeinu's name is not mentioned. Indeed, this is the only Parsha in the Torah, from the time of Moshe's birth, in which his name is not mentioned. The Baal HaTurim explains that when Moshe interceded on behalf of Klal

Yisrael, following the sin of the Golden Calf, he said to Hashem that if He would not forgive the Jews, then "erase my name from Your Book." Because of this, Moshe's name is erased from one Parsha - interestingly, the one that corresponds with the anniversary of his death. Now, is it fair that the "reward" for his readiness to be moser nefesh for Klal Yisrael should be to have his name erased from the Torah?

Horav Eliyahu Schlesinger, Shlita, distinguishes between the acts of mesiras nefesh that individual Jews have carried out throughout the millennia, and the acts of mesiras nefesh that were performed by our Avos, Patriarchs. Yitzchak stood primed to sacrifice his life to fulfill Hashem's command. Throughout the millennia, millions of Jews have done this. Chazal record the story of Channah and her seven sons who died Al Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying Hashem's Name. When her youngest son was led to be executed, she cried out to him, "My son! Tell Avraham, your forefather, 'You bound one altar; I bound seven altars!'" While these acts of self-sacrifice certainly do not detract from Yitzchak's stellar sacrifice, they do, however, elicit us to question its primacy.

Obviously, there is a difference in the manner they withstood the nisayon, test, and the way individual Jews have triumphed. The Maharal in his Sefer Gevuros Hashem, explains that Avraham Avinu did not act throughout his trials as an individual person. He acted as the father of Klal Yisrael, as the root of a large tree, with the Jewish People, throughout the ages, as its branches. The Chasam Sofer in a homily on Rosh Hashanah adds that Hashem did not test the Patriarchs as individuals. In order to test the nation that would eventually descend from them, it was first necessary to test the Patriarchs - to have to wander from country to country, to trek the wilderness, to undergo sacrifice and hardship, so that they would serve as the shoshon, root, for their progeny.

Thus, Avraham's test concerning the Bris Milah, was Klal Yisrael's test. Yitzchak's sacrifice was Klal Yisrael's test. Moshe Rabbeinu's sacrifice was Klal Yisrael's sacrifice. When they triumphed - we triumphed. When they withstood the test - we withstood the test. Therefore, their names are not mentioned with regard to these seminal events, because it was really our tests which they passed and, subsequently, imbued us with the courage and fortitude to continue passing the tests.

And he said, "My Lord, if I find favor in Your eyes, please pass not away from Your servant." (18:3)

Avraham Avinu takes leave of the Almighty and implores Him to "pass not away from Your servant," but wait while he attends to the needs of the wayfarers. Chazal derive from here that hospitality to guests is greater than receiving the Shechinah. Avraham is visited by Hashem, yet he takes leave of Him to open his house to guests. What is the meaning of Avraham's "taking leave of Hashem?" Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, posits that although Avraham busied himself with the needs of his guests, he did not in any way completely disrupt his connection with the Shechinah. On the contrary, this is what is meant by "please pass not away from Your servant." He entreated the Shechinah not to leave him. In other words, even though for the time being, Avraham was involved in carrying out the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim, welcoming wayfarers, specifically because this is the will of Hashem, nonetheless, his mind never left Hashem's presence. Never did Avraham break his connection with Hashem. He took it with him as he went to serve the guests.

Rav Shimshon explains that the greatest deveikus b'Hashem, clinging to Hashem, that one can achieve is through Torah study. It is a well-known axiom that one does not stop studying Torah even to perform any other mitzvah that could conceivably be performed by someone else. So, when we take off

time to attend various milestone occasions, both joyous or not, we do so because we are permitted to attend to these various acts of chesed, kindness, because our presence at these occasions is necessary. This does not mean, however, that we are permitted to sever our connection with the Torah even temporarily, because we have an obligation to perform a chesed. No, we must take the bais hamedrash, the folio of Talmud, the Shechinah with us - in mind. We cannot break that tie that binds us to the Shechinah. We go where we must go - we do what we must do, but our minds must never leave.

Then G-d opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink. (21:19)

There are two significant lessons to be derived from here. First, as the Midrash notes, it does not state here that a well was created for her. It says that she "opened her eyes" and saw a well. This teaches us that the yeshuah, salvation, provided by Hashem is always there waiting for us. We have only to open our eyes and look. Second, the Midrash notes from the phrase "she went and filled the skin with water," that she filled the skin with more than enough for that day. This prompts Chazal to declare that Hagar was deficient in her belief in Hashem. Otherwise, why should she be concerned about tomorrow? She should have taken enough water to address her present needs. Where was her trust that Hashem would continue providing for her?

Chazal's inference begs explanation. We have an anxious mother with a sick son wandering in the wilderness. Is there something wrong with taking along a little bit more water, "just in case"? Does this action manifest a lack of faith? Horav Yehudah Leib Chasman, zl, explains that if one is traveling on a train as a guest of the king, he does not worry about food for tomorrow. If the king says he will provide him with his meals, he has no reason to be concerned any further. On the contrary, one who takes along extra food "just in case" is insulting the king.

This is exactly the way Heaven views the individual who worries about tomorrow. We are guests on Hashem's train. If he says that it is "all on Him" we no longer have any reason to be concerned. Hagar clearly saw that Hashem miraculously caused her to see a well before her eyes. In effect, He was saying to her, "I will take care of your needs." Why did she not trust Him? Why did she fill up water for tomorrow? Was she doubting Hashem?

The Chafetz Chaim, zl, was wont to say that the students of today's yeshivos eat from the king's table. Just as a soldier in the army is sustained by the commander-in-chief, so, too, are the soldiers in Hashem's army sustained by Hashem. Thus, the ben Torah who devotes himself to Torah study and serving Hashem, will be provided for by Hashem. He has only to open up his eyes and see.

"Please take your son, your only one... and go to the land of Moriah." (22:2)

Two mountains played a seminal role in the history of our people: Har HaMoriah, the mountain upon which the Akeidas Yitzchak took place, and Har Sinai, the mountain which was the site of the giving of the Torah. Interestingly, the Bais HaMikdash was later built on Har HaMoriah. Horav Chaim Sanzer, zl, explains that the mountain which was the site of the Jew's mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, to carry out the will of Hashem, takes precedence even over the actual giving of the Torah.

While mesiras nefesh is undoubtedly one of the primary qualities inherent in a Jew and, certainly, one without which we would not have survived spiritually, yet can we say that it takes precedence over the holy Torah? Our Torah is the lifeblood of our nation. It is more than a blueprint for our lives - it is life itself. What is the mesiras nefesh for anyway - if not for the continued observance of the Torah?

Perhaps, we might suggest an alternative reason for selecting Har HaMoriah as the site for the Bais HaMikdash. On Har HaMoriah an epic event took place that set the tone and standard for the future of Klal Yisrael: a son listened to his father. This was the site of the first mesorah, transmission of a Heavenly command from father to son. This tradition has maintained our nation's vibrancy throughout the millennia. The Bais HaMikdash was the place from where the kedushah, holiness, and Torah law would emanate throughout Klal Yisrael. It ensured the future. But, without a mesorah from father to son, this could not continue. Veritably, the Torah that was given to us on Har Sinai is our lifeblood. But without the mesorah that began at Har HaMoriah the Torah would not continue. Avraham Avinu, together with Yitzchak Avinu, taught us more than mesiras nefesh. They taught us that whatever commitment we have, we must see to it that it is transmitted to the next generation.

On the third day, Avraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place from afar. (22:4)

The Midrash draws a parallel between the three days that Avraham Avinu traveled with Yitzchak and their assistants, and the three days Esther prepared before going to Achashveirosh. Chazal say that Esther succeeded in her dialogue with King Achashveirosh in the merit of what her ancestor Avraham did on the "third day." His preparedness to sacrifice his son sent a message of strength and fortitude many generations later.

Horav Mordechai Rogov, zl, explains that Esther needed incredible strength to remain committed and observant in the palace of the king. She succeeded in rising to the challenges with which she was confronted. If we think about it, Esther was, in effect, trapped in the palace, isolated from her world of religion. How was she able to carry out her commitment? We are taught that she arranged to have seven maids, naming each one for another day of the week, in order to identify the day when Shabbos would occur. Everything Esther did to identify with and fulfill mitzvos took an enormous amount of strength and strategic planning. What motivated her? From where did she get the emotional drive and resolve to be able to rule over one hundred and twenty seven provinces and still remain uncompromising and unwavering in her religious beliefs? Chazal trace the source of her strength to her ancestor, Avraham. His heroic and courageous acts at the Akeidah infused these qualities in his future descendants. Esther survived because of Avraham. She maintained her valor and dignity, her commitment and courage, because she inherited these qualities from Avraham. She represented her heritage with pride, exercising self-control and resolve - first, over herself, thereby influencing others to emulate her. Every step that she took reflected Avraham Avinu's imbued lessons. Avraham's "three days" left an indelible impression and a solid foundation upon which Esther built her "three days."

Parents have that effect upon their children. We, the Jewish People, have been bequeathed a noble heritage of blood, sweat and tears. We have suffered, but we have triumphed. This is the legacy that we bequeath to the next generation. We must make sure that we transmit the correct values to our children. What we bequeath them will endure long after we are gone. I recently read an article by a rabbi who contrasted two funerals that he had attended in one week. One funeral was a very public one, in which a large gathering had assembled to pay tribute to a family patriarch. The deceased grandson

spoke lovingly of his grandfather's character, his love of life and sensitivity to people. True, it was a funeral, but the assemblage departed with a sort of "good" feeling about a man who lived his life well.

The other funeral was a graveside service where, regrettably, they could not even put together a minyan, quorum, of ten men. In this case, a daughter was burying her father next to her mother, who had preceded him in death some ten years earlier. As the casket was being lowered into the ground, the woman got down on her knees and screamed, "Daddy, don't hurt Mommy! Don't hurt Mommy! Leave her alone!" Unfortunately, this woman had grim memories from her youth.

I have stated this fact numerous times: Our children are watching, and what they see becomes a part of them that they will one day transmit to their children. We must see to it that their memories are always of a positive nature.

There is a deeper aspect to our heritage that should be noted. Throughout history we have been witness to an incredible phenomenon. Jews who were clearly distant from religious commitment, who had strayed far from any form of observance, suddenly, under pressure from tormentors and oppressors, have refused to renounce their faith. They have been willing to forfeit their lives for Jewish ideals. Indeed, Rav Yaakov Emden, zl, writes that during the Spanish Inquisition, many sophisticated Jews abdicated their beliefs and renounced Judaism, while the simple, unpretentious Jew went to the burning stake, undeterred, with Shema Yisrael on his lips.

Horav Yaakov Twerski, zl, the Milwaukee Rebbe, explains that this is represented by Moshe Rabbeinu's vision of the Burning Bush. The thorn bush represents the Jew who seems to be unproductive: dry, empty, providing no shade, devoid of any signs of Jewishness. Yet, when he is put to the test, he comes out alive, with a fiery passion, a burning fervor which gives a glow that extends beyond time and space. Moshe Rabbeinu asked the Almighty, "From where comes so intense a rapture in someone who otherwise shows no sign of Jewishness?"

Hashem's response was, "This is the legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. They bequeathed every Jew with a spark of their own neshamos, a nucleus of Jewishness that is the heritage of each Jew. At any moment that hidden spark can erupt into an intense and absolute devotion. Thus, no Jew may ever be written off as lost to his People."

Mitzvah performance can spur this spark to burst into flame. Rav Twerski would relate the story of an assimilated Jew in Kiev, Russia, who, due to concealing his Jewishness, had been accepted by the gentile community. Once, while on vacation at a seashore, this man chanced upon a scene where a body had washed ashore. The deceased man had no identifying papers on him, but the mere fact that he was wearing Tzitzis identified him as a Jew. As a result, he was given a Jewish burial.

Our assimilated Jew received a rude awakening: While his newly-acquired status gave him access to the higher echelons of gentile society, what good would it do him after his death? He realized that when it really mattered, he wanted to be buried as a Jew. One cannot die as a Jew if he does not live as one. So, he began to wear Tzitzis. One mitzvah led to another, and a complete metamorphosis took place. Shortly thereafter, the man assumed his rightful position in the Jewish community. One should never despair of a Jewish soul. It has a noble heritage.

While he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. (18:1)

Avraham Avinu was selected to be the spiritual father of all of mankind due to his profound

belief in the Almighty. The exemplary behavior he exhibited in caring for all people, which earned him the descriptor Amud ha'chesed, Pillar of kindness, demonstrates his incredible sense of mission to reach out in order to help others. He set the tone for his descendants. Unquestionably, Klal Yisrael have taken up the banner of chesed, a mission that encompasses all segments of Jewish belief. Indeed, one of the three character traits by which a Jew is defined is gomlei chasadim, one who carries out acts of loving-kindness. I recently came across two stories relating to the middah, character trait, of chesed which I feel shed a perspective on the profound meaning of chesed, defining our obligation towards others.

In Touched By a Story 2, Rabbi Yechiel Spero relates two episodes of chesed which teach us a number of powerful lessons. The first story is about an elderly, lonely Jew, a Holocaust survivor who had lost everything. Through various machinations, he ended up making Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey, his home. The yeshivah provided him with a bed and meals, and the venerable Rosh Hayeshivah, Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, provided him with friendship. Rav Aharon was a world leader with the pulse of world Jewry constantly on his mind; yet, he found the time to give encouragement and solace to a lonely Jew. His sympathetic ear was always listening for an opportunity to help this elderly Jew, as well as many others.

It was Yom Kippur, and the man, whose name was Leibel, approached the Rosh Hayeshivah and said that he did not feel well. Rav Aharon placed his arm around Reb Leibel and told him to lie down. Rav Aharon continued with his intense davening, and Reb Leibel went to the dormitory. The rest of the day was uneventful. The yeshivah davened with its usual fervor, Rav Aharon setting the tone for the intensity and devotion. Indeed, to gaze upon the Rosh Hayeshivah was to see a spectacle of spirituality and devotion unlike anything experienced on this earthly world. Rav Aharon's angelic presence seemed to infuse the entire assemblage.

The sun was setting, and the Minchah service was coming to an end. Everybody was mentally preparing for the concluding Tefillah of the day - Neilah. This was the prayer in which everybody raised their hearts and souls to the Almighty in a last appeal for a positive conclusion to the day. Suddenly, Rav Aharon left his seat and went over to an older student, saying, "I want you to go to the dormitory and daven Neilah in Reb Leibel's room. If he is up to it, daven with him. If not, just stay at his side and daven on your own."

"But, Rebbe," the student said, "we are about to daven Neilah. How can I miss the most important Tefillah of the year? No Minyan, no olam, group of worshippers. I will be all alone. What kind of davening could that be?"

The Rosh Hayeshivah just stared back at the young man with his piercing eyes and said, "I am referring to a chesed for an eltere Yid, elderly Jew, and you are bringing up the issue of Neilah!" The student did not need any more encouragement. He understood what the Rosh Yeshivah was demanding of him, as he quickly acceded to Rav Aharon's directive.

I think the lesson is clear: all too often, we are so wrapped up in ourselves and our own personal spiritual development that we forget that there are people out there who need us. A smile, an embrace, a good word: all these and more can make a world of difference for another Jew. It takes so little, and it can accomplish so much.

At times, our act of kindness can not only help another person, but it can earn for us lasting merit and exceptional reward, as evidenced in the following narrative. It is about a woman who was rapidly approaching middle-age and had not yet been blessed with a child. The doctors, Tefillos, prayers and berachos did not seem to help - yet. To keep herself busy, she would go to the hospital and volunteer her services. One day, as she was leaving Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, she walked by a

room and she heard an elderly woman moaning. She entered the room and attempted to initiate a conversation with the patient. The woman was despondent. Alone in the world, she was used to spending all day staring at the walls. She tried to give the impression that she was not interested in company. She did not succeed.

Slowly, over a period of a few months, the volunteer was able to scale the wall that the elderly woman had placed around herself. She penetrated her heart, as the two became friends. She would visit everyday. After awhile, she was even able to elicit a smile from the patient. It was clear that the high point of the elderly woman's day was her visit from the volunteer. Regrettably, as her happiness increased, the disease that was ravaging her body was progressing. It was clear that her days on this world were numbered. The last day of her life came quickly, but she was prepared and above all - no longer alone. She looked at the woman who had befriended her and with tear-filled eyes, she said, "I can never repay you for what you have done for me these last few months. Your daily visits have made life worth living for me. I have nothing to give you as a token of my appreciation. There is one thing, however, that I will do for you. I know how much you want to have a child. I promise you that when I come before the Heavenly Throne, I will pray for you. Believe me when I say that I will not let go until Hashem grants my request." With those last words, she closed her eyes and breathed her last breath. One year later, a little boy was born to the couple. The mitzvah of chesed, helping to make the last days on this earth for an elderly, lonely woman a little less lonely, a little less depressing, made the difference. What prayers and berachos did not achieve, a selfless act of chesed accomplished.

Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. (18:4)

The Midrash Tanchuma and the Talmud Bava Metzia 86b posit that the manner of expression used by Avraham Avinu in speaking with the angels/wayfarers was later used by Hashem as a way to generate reward for his descendants. First, the words, Yukach na, "Let some water be brought," became the vernacular for proclaiming the liberation of Klal Yisrael from Egypt. As he was rebuilding the Jewish nation, Yeshayah HaNavi spoke endearingly, using the word, na, "please." The mitzvah of Korban Pesach, also connected with the Exodus, is transmitted via the word, v'yikchu, "and they shall take." In addition, the word na is used in connection with the Korban Pesach, to indicate that it cannot be eaten na, partially roasted. Chazal go on to say that everything Avraham did for the angels, Hashem Himself did for Klal Yisrael, and whatever Avraham did via agent, Hashem also did via messenger.

We derive from here a powerful lesson concerning the concept of middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. It is not a form of remuneration for an action. Rather, it is a direct consequence of one's action. Man's actions catalyze a commensurate Heavenly response. The reaction is in direct consonance with man's action. As Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, notes, if two people were to do the exact same activity, with the exception that the far-reaching effect and influence engendered by one is greater than that of the other, the remuneration will vary in Heaven. The reaction is in direct response to the action and its overriding effect. No two actions are really identical. We, through our actions, determine and create the middah k'neged middah. Thus, if the reward we receive seems a bit indifferent, perhaps the manner in which we performed the good deed lacked enthusiasm. We cannot expect to receive more than what we expended.

Although I am but dust and ash. (18:27)

In the Talmud Chullin 58b, Chazal say that in the merit of Avraham Avinu's saying, "I am but dust and ashes," his descendants merited to receive two mitzvos that involve dust and ashes: (the ashes of the) Parah Adumah, Red Heifer; and (the dust of the) Sotah, wayward wife. We must endeavor to understand the relationship vis-?-vis the rule of middah k'neged middah, measure for measure, between these two mitzvos and Avraham's exceptional humility.

The Maggid, zl, m'Dubno gives the following analogy. A wealthy man made a wedding for his son. It was to be a lavish affair - as befits a man of his financial straits. He invited many distinguished people, among whom was a great Torah scholar. This talmid chacham not only possessed an encyclopedic knowledge of Torah, but his middos, character traits, were also impeccable. Furthermore, he was a man of remarkable humility. The wealthy man wanted to honor the scholar in a matter consistent with his outstanding scholarship, but due to the man's unpretentious nature, the host was challenged to find an avenue for honoring him. When the scholar arrived at the wedding, the host wanted to place him at the head table in front of all the guests. Here he would sit with other distinguished guests. The scholar, however, would not hear of it. He opted for a seat among the "common" members of society. What did the host do? He immediately switched the tables around, placing the individuals who were to sit at the head table in the back of the room. The entire seating arrangement was transformed, as the rear of the hall became the place for the higher echelon of society. It is not the position or the place that lends dignity to the person. On the contrary, it is the person that defines the position.

When Avraham Avinu referred to himself as lowly, as dust and ashes, Hashem sought to change this by elevating the level of dust and ashes to becoming primary components of two very significant mitzvos. As an aside, we derive another important lesson from here. One who truly deserves honor will ultimately receive it. This is what the Tanna express in Pirkei Avos!

Thus, Lot's two daughters conceived from their father...and she called his name Moav...and she called his name Ben-Ami. (19:36,37,38)

In the preface to Igros Moshe vol 8 from Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, the following story is recorded. It was the beginning of the winter of 1922. One of the members of Rav Moshe's community became ill with a strange sickness: his tongue swelled up within his mouth. When Rav Moshe came to visit him, the man asked that everyone leave the room. He had something private of great importance to discuss with the rav. What he told him was incredible.

"Rebbe, I must tell you the reason for my strange illness. This will hopefully expiate whatever sin that I have brought upon myself. A week ago, on Parashas Vayeira, I asked a question regarding the parsha. The Torah informs us that Lot's older daughter was the progenitor of the Moabite People - which means that she is the ancestress of Rus, who was the great-grandmother of Melech HaMoshiach. How could it be that this woman, who had no shame, and therefore publicized her illicit and immoral behavior by naming her son to eternalize her shameful act was granted such honor. I spared no words in denigrating her behavior.

"That night, two elderly women appeared to me in a dream. Their heads and faces were covered, and they said they were Lot's daughters. They had heard my complaint about their behavior and came from the World of Truth to convey to me a justification for their actions. Since it was well-

known that Avraham Avinu, their uncle, was an individual for whom miracles were commonplace, they feared that people might say that their sons were conceived by an immaculate conception. There were no men around, so how else could they have been conceived? In order to prevent another religion such as Christianity from being established, they decided to publicize the source of their conception. Their motives were pure and lofty. Since he had spoken ill against them and defamed their character, he was to be punished as the Meraglim, spies in the wilderness, were punished. Their tongues swelled, and they died an unusual death."

When the man concluded his story, he looked straight at the wall, closed his eyes and died. Rav Moshe recorded this incident, because he felt that there was much truth to it.

We must learn from here to judge everyone in a favorable light, not to make judgments based upon how an individual is dressed, the color of his Yarmulke or his hat - if he wears one. Appearances are just that - external manifestations. The real person is beneath the veneer of what he wears. Actions should speak louder than clothes.

He planted an "eishal" in Be'er Sheva, and there he proclaimed the Name of Hashem. (21:33)

There is a dispute among Chazal regarding the meaning of eishal. Some say that it was an orchard whose fruit was served to wayfarers. Others contend that it was an inn used for lodging. In any event, this is the source from where we derive Avraham's exceptional sense of chesed to others. His lifelong work was reaching out to others through his acts of loving-kindness, thereby sanctifying Hashem's Name in the world. The commentators distinguish between Avraham's chesed and that of Noach, who, for an entire year, saw to the welfare and sustenance of all the animals onboard the Ark. A very interesting concept is expressed by Horav Gedalya Shorr, zl. There are two forms of chesed. One type of chesed is performed when the benefactor senses a need and feels the pain of the beneficiary. He understands his hurt and reaches out to alleviate the discomfort. He does whatever he can to help. When we analyze this form of kindness, however, we observe that he is acting because he cares about the other person. There is a need within the benefactor that stimulates him to help another person in need. In essence, he is also helping himself.

There is another form of chesed, one that is more sublime and G-dly: Acting simply to help another person. There is no sense of pity or compassion to be the motivating factor, the individual just recognizes that there is a need to be filled. This is the type of chesed that Hashem performs. Surely, he does not "feel" the pain of the beneficiary. He performs chesed because he wants to act kindly. In other words, there is a chesed which originates in the mekabel, beneficiary. He is in pain; and this stimulates the benefactor's response. The other form of chesed originates from the benefactor who seeks to do good, who actually seeks the opportunity to help others.

Avraham sat in his tent and was disconcerted that he had no one for whom to perform chesed. Why should he be upset? If no one was in need, then he had no reason to perform chesed. No, not Avraham; he sought any opportunity that would allow him to help others. His chesed was like that of Hashem. Thus, Avraham was called the Amud ha'chesed, Pillar of kindness.

Horav Avraham Schorr, Shlita, supplements this exegesis by noting that Avraham's chesed to the three angels was unique in that, because of their spiritual entity, they were really not in need of any form of chesed. Nonetheless, the Torah singles out this form of chesed to teach us that chesed should be motivated by the benefactor's desire to perform kindness.

Hashem appeared to him. (18:1)

Rashi tells us that Hashem appeared to Avraham Avinu in order to visit him during his recuperation from his Bris Milah. Man is instructed to cleave to Hashem. Chazal explain that we cling to Hashem by following in His ways. As He visits the sick, so should we emulate this great act of chesed and see to it that we care for the ill and infirm. Visiting the sick means more than sending flowers and a card. While this gesture certainly has value, the essence of the mitzvah requires that one pray for the sick person. In fact, we determine when we visit the sick according to what time will inspire the greatest outpouring of tefillah, prayer.

In his inimitable manner, Horav Avraham Pam, zl, focuses on this mitzvah. What is most inspirational about his shmuess, ethical discourse, is the sensitivity, caring and love that the venerable Rosh Hayeshivah displays toward his fellowman. Rav Pam gave a shmuess about what he felt was important for his talmidim to learn. Some may feel that Bikur Cholim, visiting the sick, is relegated to the female gender; Hashem Yisborach demonstrates otherwise. Rav Pam's shmuess delves into the minutiae of this mitzvah from a practical standpoint, something he sought to infuse in his talmidim, students. Bikur Cholim means more than mere visitation. It compels us to assess the needs of the sick person and to address them. In some situations, this may involve seeking appropriate medical attention. In other circumstances, it means providing for simple necessities such as seforim, tapes and various items that can occupy the patient's time. The Perishah emphasizes the importance of making sure that the patient's room is clean and orderly, for a person's mind is clear when everything around him is neat, clean and in its proper place. Incidentally, this applies equally to the classroom. A student studies best in a clean, organized environment.

One who is a Kohen has a problem visiting the sick in a hospital which also has a morgue. Nonetheless, there are other ways to enliven the patient's spirits, as evidenced by Rav Pam himself, who was a Kohen.

There was an elderly Jew who davened with Rav Pam in the neighborhood shul. The man was hospitalized with a serious illness. Rav Pam wanted badly to visit him, but due to his status as a Kohen, he was not able to do so. What did the saintly Rosh Hayeshivah, whose sensitivity to other Jews was his hallmark, do? He wrote the man a three-line note wishing him a refuah sheleimah and expressing his hope that the man would soon return to his place in shul.

Can we imagine what such a simple note from Rav Pam could do for an elderly Jew who was alone in the hospital? To be told that he was missed in shul and to be given a brachah for a refuah sheleimah by one of the spiritual giants of the generation could raise a person's spirits from the depths. Indeed, the note did so. The man was strengthened by it. He displayed the note that the "Rabbi" sent to everyone who came to visit. It became his most treasured possession during his last months on earth. When the man passed away, the family hired a rabbi to deliver a eulogy at the funeral service. Not knowing the deceased, the rabbi based his remarks on the salutation Rav Pam wrote in the note. The salutation was Rav Pam's characterization of the man!

Rav Pam emphasized the great kindness a little gesture of sincerity can affect. This note, which meant so much to the sick Jew, became the basis for his own eulogy. He would often express his fear that this kleine tzetele, small note, would someday be held against him by the Heavenly Tribunal,

which would accuse, "If you saw how much one small note can accomplish, why did you not do this more often?" What amazes this writer is the nature of Rav Pam's thoughts. Instead of the customary pat on the back for which we all yearn, he was concerned that he either did not do enough or did not do it often enough.

In closing, Rav Pam explains that besides the halachic aspects of the mitzvah, there is a crucial emotional aspect to recognize. Many people feel that their achievements and qualities are underestimated, a fact which is regrettably true. We are into ourselves and it is basically our own accomplishments that mean something to us. This attitude misses the mark and is harmful to others. People crave recognition. While this is true on a regular basis, one who is bedridden or hospitalized, forcibly removed from his daily endeavor and contact with the outside world, is even more miserable. Loneliness, lethargy and feelings of depression quickly set in. This can even delay the recuperative process. Hence, someone who finds it difficult to visit the sick should make it a point to call or write, to convey a few words of hope and encouragement. At least the patient will not think he has been forgotten. When a sick person sees that people care about him, it increases his desire to live, to fight the illness. Indeed, Bikur Cholim can spell the difference between life and death.

And Hashem said, "Shall I conceal from Avraham what I do...And Avraham will be a great nation... For I have cherished him, because he commands his children and his household after him...Avraham came forward, and said, "Will You ever obliterate righteous with wicked?" (18:17,18,19,20)

Horav Yaakov Moshe Charlap, zl, posits that Avraham Avinu's dialogue with Hashem serves as a cogent lesson in how to educate future generations in the area of middos tovos, positive character refinement. To this end, Hashem said, "Shall I conceal from Avraham what I am about to do to Sodom?" After all, he is the educator par-excellence, whose devotion to his progeny sets the standard for others to emulate. Therefore, it is essential that he know what I am about to do to Sodom, so that he will transmit the information - to his descendants, concerning the dangers of negative character traits.

Furthermore, Avraham will derive from My actions that one must be patient with his children. Give them space and time to return, to mend their ways. At the same time, however, he must realize that there is a time when enough is enough. Sodom had reached the point of no return. The residents were beyond education. Punishment was the only recourse.

Avraham Avinu countered, "Will You even obliterate righteous with wicked?" If the purpose of the destruction of Sodom was not specifically for its pedagogic value, I would never question it. Since it is to serve as a lesson for the future, would it not be a greater lesson if the city was spared because of the righteous? This way, future generations would realize the overwhelming role the righteous play and the inspiration they infuse in a community. Regrettably, the number of righteous was inconsequential.

And Lot saw and (he) stood up to meet them. (19:1)

Rashi tells us that Lot learned from the house of Avraham the significance of seeking out guests.

In other words, Lot, by his very nature and deed, was not a person who enjoyed performing acts of loving-kindness. Opening his home to wayfarers was not only against his nature, but, in Sodom, it was also against the law and, thus, dangerous. Yet, he did so because of the chinuch, education, that he received from Avraham. This teaches us the far-reaching effect of education. Lot spent his early years in the home of Avraham and Sarah. There he imbibed the spiritual lessons from the paragons of education. Avraham Avinu was the amud ha'chesed, pillar of loving-kindness. He exemplified this attribute in his every demeanor. Lot was inculcated with this middah, and it stayed with him in his later years, when his "other" character traits were manifest.

We suggest that it was no simple education that inspired Lot. True, it was Avraham as the rebbe that should have made the difference. There was something else, however. Rashi says that Lot learned chesed in Avraham's home. This does not mean that Avraham Avinu gave classes in chesed in his house. It means that Lot saw by personal example that chesed reigned supreme. When one observes the lesson, it has greater and more enduring value than when it is simply taught in the classroom. When the rebbe's demeanor is the classroom of instruction, its effect has a greater impact on the student. Avraham's home was the natural classroom, because he lived and breathed his lessons.

Still he lingered - so the men grasped him by his hand. (19:16)

Lot is an enigma. Throughout the entire episode of his rescue from the destruction of Sodom and the ensuing relationship with his daughters, back to the previous parsha where he severed himself from Avraham and his G-d, Lot perplexes us. On the one hand, he risked his life for the safety of the angels. On the other hand, he offered his children to the wild mob outside his door. As he was being rescued, he lingered to save his money, the sole reason that he came to Sodom. In the end, in a state of inebriation, he fathered his grandsons. Previously, he had been Avraham Avinu's close disciple, absorbing not only his teachings, but even his mannerisms. Yet, when the going became intolerable between his shepherds and Avraham's, he left, as the Torah relates (13:11), "And Lot journeyed from the east." Chazal say that the word kedem, usually translated as east, can also be understood as kadmono shel olam, "the Ancient One of the world," its Creator. Lot separated himself from Avraham, saying, "I want neither Avraham, nor his G-d." So what was he, a saint or a sinner? If he was both, how did this reality unfold?

Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, explains how a person can grow up in the presence of Avraham and Sarah, be witness to the glorious endeavors on behalf of the monotheistic belief, absorb their Torah and ethics, and, yet, descend to the nadir of depravity, as evidenced in Lot's relationship with his daughters and his rejection of everything that his rebbe Avraham stood for. He explains that Lot possessed middos ra'os, negative character traits, and an overwhelming passion for materialism that had not been expunged during his tenure with Avraham and Sarah. True, he succeeded in covering it up out of shame. He did not want Avraham to discover his true essence, so he put on a show. The moment that the chains were off, however, Lot reverted to his true self. Immediately, he expressed his disdain for Avraham and his monotheistic belief. This idea applies equally to anyone who does not work on developing his character traits. Rav Chatzkel asserts that one can study for years in a yeshivah gedolah and develop into a G-d-fearing Torah scholar. Yet, when he leaves, he may suddenly transform into a stranger to Torah. What happened to his learning? What happened to his yiraas Shomayim? Nothing happened to it. It was all built upon a shaky foundation. As long as he disregarded his middos, character traits, his Torah study and fear of Heaven were foundless. He did not change. He acted

differently, but he remained the same. The following story serves as a powerful analogy to the above thesis. A distinguished rav came to a community for a visit. In an attempt to get an understanding of the nature of the community, he sought out various individuals and asked them probing questions about the character and activities of the citizenry. "Young man, tell me, what is the state of mitzvah observance in this town?" the rav asked the first person he met.

"Rebbe, our town has people that are truly righteous," the young man responded. "You will never find a thief or murderer, or, indeed, anyone whose character traits are deficient."

The rav met another person and asked him, "Tell me about the interpersonal relationships among the members of this community." "Rebbe, in this city everyone loves one another," the man said. "No one would ever testify falsely or lift a finger to his fellow. Never does it occur that someone raises a hand to his fellow man. Indeed, if every Jew was like us, Moshiach would surely come."

When the rav heard this, he was greatly impressed. He still had one more question to ask to determine the essence of the community. "Can you tell me about the community's observance of the mitzvos of Tefillah, prayer, Tefillin, Shabbos, and other such mitzvos that define man's relationship with the Almighty?"

"Rebbe," the third man answered, somewhat incredulously. "Why are you so negative? Is it not sufficient that the members of our community are fine, upstanding citizens who are active in all sorts of charitable endeavors? They get along with and care for each other. Why do you have to bog them down with all these mitzvos? Is it not enough that they do nothing wrong?" The rav was dumbfounded. These people really had it all wrong. How was he to impress upon them that sur meira, refraining from doing evil, was not enough? One also had to be *asei tov*, be proactive and perform positive mitzvos.

While the rav was thinking, a foul odor seemed to fill the air. He looked around and noticed that the carcass of a dead mule had been flung to the side of the road. Suddenly, a brilliant idea dawned on him. He knew how to convey the message to the townspeople. He turned to his shamash, assistant, and asked him to go to the tailor and purchase a large black sheet. The shamash went and bought a black sheet, which the rav, in turn, draped over the dead mule. He then instructed the shamash to go throughout the community and publicize that everyone should gather in the street for the funeral of a *meis mitzvah*, someone who had died and had no one to be involved in his funeral. This mitzvah takes precedence over all other mitzvos.

Word got out that someone had been tragically killed, and his funeral was presently taking place. Everyone should attend the service. The whole town, men and women, gathered to hear the rav eulogize the deceased.

The rav began his eulogy with a broken voice, "My brethren, the deceased was holy. His life was tragically cut short. He did not deserve to die. He never spoke *lashon hora*, slanderous speech, nor was he a talebearer. In fact, throughout his life, he never spoke - period." The people were stupefied. Who could this great person be?

The rav continued, "He was among those who accept their humiliation and do not respond negatively. He was constantly being beaten, taking each lash stoically. Material necessities meant nothing to him. He never ate meat or fish. He suffered the cold with whatever covering he had. He never slept in a bed, laying down on the ground or on some straw. He was the paragon of humility. Who can replace him?"

Everyone cried bitter tears for the exalted deceased. He apparently was no simple human being, but who was he? "My friends, we must all ask his forgiveness. Little were we aware that in our midst

lived such a great tzaddik. Oy, we were so wrong. How did we ignore such a great presence in our community?"

Suddenly, to everyone's shock the rav pulled off the black sheet. Everyone took a step back when they saw that the "great tzaddik" was none other than a foul-smelling dead mule. They, of course, began to mumble. "How could you have fooled us so?" they asked the rav.

"I did not fool you," the rav countered. "Everything that I said was absolutely true. The donkey meticulously fulfilled the concept of sur meira. He never wavered from his lack of doing evil. Yet, he remained a donkey all of his life, because it is not enough merely to distance oneself from evil. One must act positively and perform mitzvos. Without mitzvah observance, one remains a donkey."

Yes, Lot distanced himself from evil. On the other hand, he did nothing positive to refine his character. He was a donkey in many ways. When he left Avraham, his true character was manifest. An observant Jew is one who distances himself from anything negative, while simultaneously acting in a positive manner to perform mitzvos and refine his character.

*For I give him special attention because he commands his children and his household after him.
(18:19)*

Hashem expresses His affection for Avraham Avinu because of his adherence to imparting the derech Hashem, way of Hashem, to the next generation. It is Avraham's ability and dedication to educating his progeny which distinguishes him from everyone else. Chinuch habanim, educating one's children, is what differentiates a parent from a caretaker. A parent cares about his child and, consequently, oversees his educational development. A caretaker cares primarily about himself, placing his child's education in a far second-place behind everything else. What is the most effective method for educating one's children? Since Avraham is the "father" of education, it would be appropriate to take note of his methods and apply them in raising our children. Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, notes that when Avraham conveyed Hashem's command regarding the Akeidah to Yitzchak, he spoke only eight words: "Hineni beni...Elokim yireh lo haseh l'olah beni, "Here I am, my son...Hashem will show the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." This is all that is recorded by the Torah of their dialogue preceding the Akeidah.

We derive from here, posits Rav Zilberstein, that a multitude of words -- long, tedious conversations -- are not what is necessary in order to appropriately convey the Torah way to one's children. There is another way, a better way, Avraham Avinu's way -- to be a proper role model: Be straight; be ethical; be moral; be truly observant. Do not communicate mixed messages. Do not say one thing and practice the opposite. In short, earn your child's respect and set the proper standard for him to emulate. A child can observe no greater chinuch, lesson in education, than watching his father following the path of Torah without compromise.

"Because I said (only) there is no fear of Hashem in this place and they will kill me on account of (to take) my wife." (20:11)

Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, had occasion to be in Germany a number of years prior to the Nazi implementation of their Master Plan. At the time, Germany was considered among the most

progressive and intellectual nations. Its culture and nobility presented a paradigm for others to emulate. As we know, however, it was all superficial. Something was missing from this cold, dispassionate culture. The Jews were an "accepted" part of society. This, of course, led to assimilation. Little did they know the tragic events, the cataclysmic horrors, that were lurking right around the corner. Rav Elchanan delivered a lecture to the Kollel, post-graduate fellows, of the Seminar L'Rabbanim in Berlin.

He began his address by first citing Avraham's response to Avimelech, explaining why he claimed Sarah was his sister, rather than state the truth that she was his wife. Avraham feared for his life, since he was in a country in which the people did not fear G-d. In making his statement, Avraham says rok, "only," there is no fear in this place. Why does he add the word rok, only? This word appears to be superfluous. Rav Elchanan explained that Avraham Avinu was conveying an important principle/message to Avimelech. He told him, "You have an impressive community, cultured, intellectual; everything for which one can ask, rok, only, there is one thing that is clearly missing - yiraas Shomayim - fear of Heaven. This is why I had decided that my wife and I are in mortal danger. If the base passions of any of your countrymen becomes ignited for my wife, I am as good as dead." In such a situation, culture, intellect and breeding have no value. Only one thing can prevent a tragedy: yiraas Shomayim. With these words, Rav Elchonon was alluding to the danger lurking under the surface of the progressive and enlightened German culture. No one believed that such a refined nation could descend to the nadir of depravity, to rewrite the meaning of cruelty. The Germans were missing one thing - one thing that distinguishes between a human being and an animal: yiraas Shomayim.

We derive from here an important lesson. Fear of Heaven is the key to humanness. It is the only way that one can control his base nature. Man needs discipline. This discipline can only come from a source whom man respects and fears. If there is no fear, there is no man. In his "Chaim Shel Torah," Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita, analogizes this idea with an example from the world of vegetation. Trees are good for the environment. They provide shade; they enhance the beauty of their surroundings. One can even have fun climbing them. Fruit-bearing trees have an added benefit: they provide fruit, and, thereby, sustenance for us. It goes without saying that the fruit-bearing quality of these trees is not simply just another benefit; it constitutes their essence. Without this quality, they are just plain trees! Likewise, man is comprised of various attributes. The virtue of yiraas Shomayim supercedes every other virtue, because, without it, he is not a human being.

Rav Elchanan supplements his thesis, citing the Zohar HaKadosh which suggests that Hashem wanted man to be comprised of all of the creatures in the world. He should be a veritable microcosm of the creations preceding him. This is why when Hashem was about to create man, He called together all creatures and said, Naase Adam, "Let us make man." He should have a bit of every creature in him. Thus, all the creatures "shared" in the creation of man.

With this in mind, we understand that man is a formidable creature. He is part lion, part leopard, part snake, part vulture, and part insect. He is a conglomerate of every animal, wild beast, fowl, insect, and fish. How do we keep this creation known as "man" in check? What chain do we tie on him to keep him from destroying everything around, if he so pleases? Only one thing: yiraas Shomayim, the chain of fear, the chain of discipline, the chain of respect. What is yiraas Shomayim? Rav Beifus explains that it is the acute awareness that Hashem observes everything that we do. He witnesses every nuance, every movement. He knows every thought. This awareness inspires fear and awe, which in turn, evokes a sense of humility and shame if He sees us doing anything inappropriate. How does one acquire yiraas Shomayim? Simple - constant awareness and reiteration that Hashem is above us watching at all times. Awareness, however, is not sufficient. One must acquire this awareness and integrate it into his psyche.

A well-known incident occurred concerning the Chafetz Chaim, zl, that supports this idea. The Chafetz Chaim was once traveling by wagon. While on the road, the wagon driver noticed a melon in someone's field by the side of the road. He quickly pulled over the wagon and jumped out. He was about to pick it up, when the Chafetz Chaim shouted, "They are watching!" When the driver heard this, he quickly returned to the wagon. Upon noticing again that no one seemed to be around, he made another attempt to retrieve the melon from the person's field. Once again, the Chafetz Chaim shouted, "They are watching!"

This happened a few times, until the wagon driver gave up trying to "appropriate" the melon for himself. As they continued their trip, the driver turned to the Chafetz Chaim and asked, "To what do you attribute the fact that each time I went to take the melon you saw someone watching while I saw no one?"

The Chafetz Chaim's response is something which should catalyze within us a heightened sense of awareness in regard to our daily endeavor. He said, "I also did not see any man. I meant that they are watching in Heaven!"

Shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid, "I place Hashem before me constantly," should be the catchword by which we live. Our function is to remain resolute, so that when the yetzer hora, evil inclination, begins with its blandishments, we respond, "They are watching!" This defines yiraas Shomayim. Thus, it is the essence of man.

Avraham prayed to Hashem, and Hashem healed Avimelech, his wife, and his female slaves and they gave birth. (20:17)

Hashem punished Avimelech and his families for taking Sarah from Avraham. It is interesting to note Avraham's reaction when Avimelech realized that he had erred. Avraham prayed that Avimelech be cured from his punishment. Avraham Avinu, the amud ha'chesed, pillar of kindness, conveys to us the appropriate response to hearing about someone else's misfortune - pray for him! Avraham's sympathy set the standard for his descendants. How often do we hear about another Jew who has fallen ill or succumbed to another misfortune. While it is true that we feel for him, how many of us feel the pain as if it were our own? Avraham prayed for Avimelech, simply because it was the right thing to do.

Furthermore, Avraham prayed for Avimelech to be able to have children once again, a blessing that had eluded Avraham. He prayed for someone else, even though he himself would have been overjoyed to have children. According to human nature, if one hears about another person who has sustained the same illness from which he himself is suffering, he will not pray for his fellow. He might even feel that misery loves company. Avraham Avinu had every reason to disregard Avimelech's "situation." After all, it was not as if Avraham had himself been blessed with children, that he should now concern himself with Avimelech.

This was not Avraham's manner and this is not the way a Jew should respond. As descendants of Avraham Avinu, when we hear of another Jew's pain our immediate reaction should be to daven for them. Is that not what we do for ourselves? Horav Moshe Leib Sasover, zl, was wont to say, "To know the needs of men and to bear the burdens of their sorrows - that is the true love of man." Avraham Avinu was rewarded for praying for Avimelech. Chazal tell us, "Anyone who prays for his friend, when he himself is in need of that mercy, he is answered first." Whether this is a reward, or Hashem's response to an act of total self-effacement, it is a wonderful eitzah, piece of advice, for those in need.

As mentioned before, it goes against the grain of human nature to rejoice in another person's joy when he personally is in need of that same blessing. If one can break away from his natural proclivity and elevate himself to pray for another person in the same need, Hashem will certainly look favorably on his prayer -- and He will bless that individual first.

Visiting the sick is not easy. To walk in, smile, convey best wishes and leave, does not constitute bikur cholim. To fulfill the mitzvah of visiting the sick, one must empathize with him; one must pray for him. To visit the sick means to pray for him. To care for the sick means to pray for them. One who feels for another Jew knows that there is only one "address" for assistance - Hashem - and he turns to Him.

Let me close with a notable Midrash regarding Avraham's prayer on behalf of Avimelech: Chazal portray the Heavenly angels crying out to Hashem, "Ribono Shel Olam! Sarah has been barren for so many years. Avraham prays for Avimelech's wife, and she becomes fertile along with his other midwives. These women You remember, and You listen. Yet, Sarah remains infertile. Is this justice?" Immediately, Hashem remembered Sarah. This Midrash tells it all; we have only to listen.

And they stood up and went together. (22:19)

The Torah uses this phrase three times in regard to the Akeidah. The first time, when Avraham left his home together with Yitzchak on the way to the Akeidah, the Torah writes that "they walked together." Rashi explains that "together" means that Avraham, who was acutely aware of his mission to slaughter his only son, went with the same good will and joy as Yitzchak, who knew nothing of Hashem's command. The second time the Torah writes this phrase it is after Avraham had hinted to Yitzchak that he would be the sacrifice. Yet, Yitzchak accepted Hashem's command in such a manner that he continued "walking together" with Avraham, as one person with one sentiment. The third time seems problematic, since it refers to Avraham and Yitzchak returning from the Akeidah together with his two lads, Yishmael and Eliezer. How are we to understand this "togetherness"?

Horav Aharon Kotler, zl, explains that Eliezer and Yishmael were unaware of the heightened spiritual experience which they had missed, having no clue to what had transpired. Likewise, Avraham and Yitzchak, who played the leading roles in this drama, left the Akeidah without any feeling of haughtiness after having experienced this seminal event. Probably the best word that comes to mind is: equanimity. They acted as they were supposed to act. In no way did they feel that they deserved any special round of applause or unusual commendation. They did not bask in assumed glory. It was not a deed performed beyond the call of duty. It is for this very purpose that they were created. They were Jews, and a Jew follows Hashem's command - unequivocally, with equanimity, because that is what a Jew is supposed to do. To put it in simple terms: a musician makes music; a physician heals; a teacher instructs; a Jew follows Hashem's command.

She called his name Moav (19:37)

At first glance, one views the naming of her son as a reflection of her immorality. To publicize that the child's father was none other than his grandfather takes a certain amount of either chutzpah,

shamelessness, or plain foolishness. In light of the following incredible story our attitude towards Lot's daughter might change.

Once, Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, was called up to the Torah. Immediately following him was a student of the yeshivah who had an excellent reputation. Rav Moshe took one look at a small skin wound on the student's hand and asked him, "Do you know you have tzaraas?" (A form of leprosy visited upon a person for speaking lashon hora, disparaging, slanderous speech.) The bachur was shocked to hear this. Rav Moshe inquired, "Did you recently speak lashon hora?" "No," the bachur responded. "I am very careful in matters of speech." "Perhaps you spoke against the dead," Rav Moshe queried. "No, I really cannot remember an instance when I spoke against anyone... - except, I did recently say that Lot's daughter acted inappropriately when she named her son Moav." "That is the reason for your tzaraas. You slandered Lot's daughter," Rav Moshe declared. "Do you realize that she named him Moav to emphasize the fact that he was conceived from her father and not from G-d - as the Christians have claimed about their god? Moav was not the product of an immaculate conception. Indeed, she should be lauded for her forthright and truthful manner." Needless to say, the student accepted upon himself to do teshuvah, repent, and we are the beneficiaries of a new insight into the parsha.

And G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

The Chida, zl, cites the Maharam Almusenino, zl, in his sefer Yedei Moshe, who asks a penetrating question. The Torah lauds Avraham Avinu for his adherence to Hashem's command, for his willingness to sacrifice his only son, his beloved Yitzchak. What about the scores of Jewish fathers, mothers and children who have given up their lives Al Kiddush Hashem, to sanctify Hashem's Name? What about the Asarah Harugei Malchus, Ten Martyrs, or those who were murdered during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the numerous pogroms that decimated European Jewry? Are we to ignore the Holocaust of not so long ago? Is there any question that if Hashem had appeared to them as He did to Avraham, that they would have done what He asked of them? What aspect of Avraham's act of faith resonates with such distinctiveness?

The Maharam explains that Avraham's uniqueness was evinced in his unparalleled joy in being able to serve the Almighty. He substantiates this idea with the words of Chazal in the Talmud Pesachim 117a, who say that nevuah, prophecy, Divine Inspiration, does not rest on a person unless he is in total joy. If there is any taint of depression, regardless of its insignificance, there will be no prophecy.

Avraham had every reason to develop a feeling of sadness as he held the knife in his hand, poised to slaughter Yitzchak. True, he was following Hashem's command, but it was a command that required him to take the life of his son. How could he execute this act joyfully? He did so because he was Avraham Avinu, our forefather, who set the standard for mesiras nefesh and avodas Hashem. He must have been filled with joy at having the opportunity to serve Hashem. Otherwise, the angel who told him not to slaughter Yitzchak would not have appeared to him.

The martyrs throughout the ages clearly died with faith and conviction. They believed that as a Jew one is asked to sacrifice at times, even his own life. They were prepared to do just that. We would be hard-pressed, however, to assert that it was with joy. They must have been depressed about leaving their families and their communities, about their inability to continue serving Hashem and performing His mitzvos. Whatever the motivation, they had every reason to be sad. This is the difference between

our Patriarch and his thousands of descendants who followed his path of self-sacrifice: joy.

In an alternative approach, the Chida explains that Avraham's act of mesiras nefesh was unique in that he acted willingly. Throughout history, Jews have been sacrificed because of their belief, because of their commitment, or simply because they were Jews. Unquestionably, their portion in Gan Eden is of a level that is unimaginable. Yet, they were forced to die - they were not asked to. They did not have a choice. Avraham Avinu's test was unusual in that Hashem requested of him - "kach na" - "please take (your son)." Hashem asked him to give up everything for which he had previously worked. He had a choice.

Avraham could have said no. The Akeidah was counter to everything he had believed. It went against his personality. He was the Patriarch who symbolized chesed, kindness; surely the act of sacrificing his son was not an extension of this middah, attribute. When Hashem asked Avraham, however, he accepted unequivocally. This does not in any way diminish the mesiras nefesh of our martyrs throughout the generations. Rather it raises the degree of Avraham's level of commitment.

And G-d tested Avraham... and He said, "Please take your son, your only one, whom you love - Yitzchak - and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering (22:1,2)."

Hashem did not immediately reveal the clear identity of the sacrifice to Avraham Avinu. Chazal record the dialogue between Hashem and Avraham. Hashem said, "Take your son." Avraham replied, "But I have two sons. Which one should I take?" "Your only one." "But each of them is the only one of his mother." "Whom you love," Hashem answered. "But I love them both." "I mean Yitzchak," Hashem responded. The Midrash asks, "Why did Hashem not immediately reveal the identity of the offering to Avraham?" Chazal explain that the gradual revealing of the identity of the sacrifice was designed to make the commandment more precious to Avraham by arousing his curiosity and rewarding him for complying with every word of the command. We must endeavor to understand the meaning of Chazal's statement. How does the extra wording engender greater reward for Avraham? Furthermore, another Midrash states that Hashem sought to increase Avraham's love for Yitzchak by slowly building his prominence as being the only child that he loves. Why did Hashem do this prior to the sacrifice? Did he doubt Avraham's feelings towards his son?

Horav Yitzchak Aizik Sher, zl, explains that for a korban of sheep or cattle there are certain criteria that must be met to render that korban valid (unblemished; one year old; male). Similarly, Hashem presented conditions to Avraham that set the standard of acceptability for this sacrifice: bincha, your son; yechidcha, your only one; asher ohavta, whom you love. In other words, it was intrinsic to the korban's admissibility that these conditions be met. Why is this? He explains that during the heightened spiritual experience of the Akeidas Yitzchak, a clear possibility existed that Avraham would become so enveloped in the mitzvah and ensuing kedushah, holiness, that he might even forget that he was sacrificing his only beloved son! This could not be. It was essential for this korban that the sensitivity and love which a father manifests for a son should not in any way wane, even for a moment. Avraham has to remember that this was his son - his only son - whom he loved unequivocally. It was Yitzchak, his future, the legacy that was to be the foundation of Klal Yisrael - gone! When Avraham accepted these conditions, when they stood before him as he prepared to sacrifice his son, the mitzvah became more significant. Thus, the reward increased by extension.

The Sefas Emes reiterates this idea when he says, "It is 'easy' for a father to relinquish his

fatherly love for his son out of his deep love for Hashem. Hashem Yisborach did not desire this. He wanted Avraham to include this love, to take the son that he loved and sacrifice him to Hashem." We must note the Sefas Emes' words "It is 'easy' to relinquish his love for his son because of Hashem." Only someone of the caliber of the Sefas Emes would make such a statement. This concept was ingrained in his descendants, as demonstrated by the following episode. It was Shabbos night, Parasah Vayeirah, 1935, in the Gerer Bais Hamedrash in Poland. The Rebbe was Rav Avraham Mordechai, the famous "Imrei Emes." He was conducting his Friday night "Tish," festive table, which was a chassidic tradition. He was surrounded by his chassidim, who were still in a state of traumatic shock, reeling from the terrible tragedy that had befallen their beloved Rebbe, just a few hours earlier. His son, Rav Yitzchak, a tzaddik, pious and virtuous in all aspects of his relationships - between man and G-d and man and his fellow man - had just that day been taken from them. They had just a few hours previously returned from laying his mortal remains to rest. Yet, the Imrei Emes were conducting his festive tish as if it was any other Shabbos. He stated, "One does not mourn on Shabbos. It is Hashem's day." Everyone present was in shock and stunned silence - everyone but the Rebbe whose face shone with a Divine countenance as he began his Torah lecture on the Akeidas Yitzchak.

How appropriate were his words, as "Avraham" had just laid his "Yitzchak" to rest. Indeed, he went further than the Patriarch: he had returned bereft of his beloved son. The Rebbe began by saying that Avraham's test was, as the Sefas Emes writes, to integrate his love for his son as he prepared to sacrifice him to Hashem. While it may be "easy" to ignore one's filial love for a child for a greater love to Hashem, it was necessary that the love for the child be an inherent component of the sacrifice. The mitzvah was not to transcend his fatherly love, but to incorporate it in the Akeidah. These words, emanating from an individual who had just experienced tragedy as no Jewish soul should ever experience, penetrated the inner recesses of the chassidim's hearts. These words echoed, inspiring them to go their ultimate sacrifice Al Kiddush Hashem some years later, when Hitler's hordes slaughtered the Jews of Poland.

We close with the Gerer Rebbe's promise, "The reward of the Akeidah is that, regardless of Klal Yisrael's iniquity, Hashem's love for them will never wane." This is the love that we allude to in Tefillas Shemoneh Esrai, "U'maivi goel livnei b'neiheim l'maan Shemo b'ahavah." "and (He) brings a Redeemer to the children's children for His Name's sake, with love." The exemplary love exhibited by Avraham Avinu is reflected by Hashem's love for his descendants.

And Avraham took the wood for the offering and placed it on Yitzchak, his son.... And then the two of them went together... Then Yitzchak spoke to Avraham, his father... but where is the lamb for the offering?... and Avraham said, G-d will seek out for Himself the lamb for the offering, my son. And the two of them went together... Avraham returned to his young men, and they stood up and went together to Beer Sheva. (22:6,7,8,19)

The word "yachdav," together, is used three times. The Midrash focuses on the significance of the first two. When Yitzchak questioned his father, Avraham, regarding the whereabouts of the korban, sacrifice, they were intending to offer, Avraham responded, "Hashem will select for him a sheep, and if there is no sheep then you - Yitzchak - will be the sacrifice!" The Torah records that even after this exchange, during which Avraham knew that Yitzchak was the designated korban, and Yitzchak was still unaware of the role he would play in Akeidah, both were together, manifesting the same joy. Father and son - one about to slaughter, and the other about to be slaughtered - both walking in unison, about to

serve their Creator.

Afterwards, Avraham and Yitzchak returned to their lads whom they had left waiting. They all left together - yachdav. We must endeavor to understand the relationship of this last yachdav to its two predecessors. The Kotzker Rebbe, zl, explains that the last yachdav defined the spiritual plateau of Avraham and Yitzchak after they returned from the seminal event of the Akeidah. Their actions and self-sacrifice set the tone and standard for mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, and devotion to the Almighty for Klal Yisrael until the advent of Moshiach. It would, therefore, be appropriate to posit that they had reached the zenith of spiritual devotion. Yet, the word yachdav relays a different message. This yachdav includes Avraham's ne'arim, two lads, who were not on an appropriate spiritual level to continue on to the Akeidah. They were asked to stay back. It was not for them. They were like the donkey with whom they spent the time. As the donkey did not have a clue what was transpiring, so, too, did they have no idea of the significance of the Akeidah. They had no idea why they went to the mountain, nor did they understand what had occurred prior to their return. Like the donkey.

Now we have a clear picture of the scenario. Avraham and Yitzchak return from the Akeidah and left together with the two lads who had not experienced this incredible event. Are they in any way the same? Is there any relationship between these two pairs of people? Obviously, the answer will emphatically be - no. Yet, the Torah writes that they all returned yachdav, together. What happened? This is the Torah's message: Avraham and Yitzchak felt no different than the two lads. What did they do that was so special? They served Hashem; they carried out His will. Is that not what we are here for? They were just doing what was expected of them as Jews. Total equanimity, complete composure. They had only done what was expected of them. They demonstrated no arrogance. They were servants of the Almighty. A servant does what he is told. This gives us but a glimpse of the profundity intrinsic to the Akeidas Yitzchak.

Hashem appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre. He was sitting at the entrance to the tent during the hottest part of the day. (18:1)

Rashi states that Hashem visited Avraham on the third day after his Bris Milah, which is the most painful time. What is the significance of this? Avraham enjoyed fulfilling the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim, welcoming wayfarers, all of the time. He treated everyone with ultimate respect.

Why does the Torah emphasize the fact that it was the third day? Kehillas Yitzchak derives from here an important and timely lesson. The Torah is stressing the love Avraham manifested for performing chesed. He could have easily deferred himself from this mitzvah, as this was the third day after his circumcision. He could have relied upon the principle of "osek b'mitzvah patur min ha'mitzvah," one who is involved in performing one mitzvah is exempt from simultaneously doing a second mitzvah. Frequently, people who are involved in "great" acts of chesed have limited "time" to address routine acts of kindness.

Avraham Avinu modeled for us the way to do chesed. He was involved in a pivotal mitzvah, the only one that Hashem commanded directly to him. He had waited for Hashem to instruct him to perform this mitzvah. He was in the third day after his circumcision, a day of intense pain. He had just cause to exempt himself from taking care of the everyday greeting of wayfarers. Not Avraham. He went to the door of the tent during the heat of the day, looking for people for whom to do chesed. This was the Patriarch who is the paradigm of chesed.

What an important lesson for us. We are involved in so many mitzvos. We are helping communities, saving the world, raising the banner of Yiddishkeit. Do we, however, sacrifice the everyday chesed of the fellow around the corner, the widow down the block, the young boy or girl who has no one to whom to turn, on the altar of communal mitzvos? When we are out saving the world, do we still have time for the "little guy," or is that outside our scope of chesed? Avraham Avinu found time for everyone. Every individual was a priority to him. Should we be any different?

Avraham had a disciple in the middah, character trait, of chesed; Lot, his nephew. We find identical pesukim addressing the manner in which Avraham greeted his guests and the way in which Lot greeted them. Avraham arose and ran towards his visitors. Lot arose and bowed down to greet them. Avraham served them a large dinner; Lot made a great feast for his visitors. Lot was even willing to risk his life to protect his guests. Yet, Chazal do not view Lot's behavior or his actions in the most positive light. Why? What did he do that was different?

Horav Levi Yitzchak zl, m'Berditchev explains that the distinction lies in attitude. Avraham Avinu looked outside and saw three men; Lot saw angels. Avraham was willing to help anyone, regardless of his background or stature; Lot reached out to angels. Lot was particular about whom he helped. They had to meet his "standards." He did not reach out to the ordinary person. He only ministered to the distinguished; he performed the "exotic" forms of chesed. That is not true chesed. Lot was helping himself, assuaging his own ego, making himself feel important. That is the type of chesed typical of Sodom.

When the water from the skin was consumed, she cast off the boy beneath one of the trees...for she said lest I see in the death of the child. (21:15)

Hagar was in great pain. She could not stand to see what was happening to her son, who was dying of thirst. What did she do? She turned away. She cared more for herself than for her child. This is not the Jewish way. We do not run away from a tzarah, distress. If someone is ill, we do not forsake them. We remain with them, giving them hope, encouragement, strength and succor. We believe that we experience tzarah for a reason. We address the tzarah while we identify and "correct" the cause. Nachlas Tzvi cites an insightful analogy that clarifies the Jewish attitude towards tzaros. He asks: Why is it that when we strike a horse, it runs quicker? Indeed, the more we hit it, the faster it runs. The reason is that the horse "thinks" that it can run away from the lashes of the whip. The animal foolishly sees only the whip, not the individual who is striking it. The more it runs, the faster it attempts to escape, taking along its rider. The horse's myopic vision does not permit it to see beyond the whip.

A similar idea applies to man. When people see that tzaros are beating down on them, when distress afflicts them, they attempt to run, thinking they can escape the pain. If only they would realize that the source of their pain is Hashem, Who is with them for the duration of their journey on this world. The only possibility for ending the tzarah is to turn to Hashem in repentance and supplication in the hope that He will listen to our pleas.

A Jew once came to the Kotzker Rebbe, zl, weeping brokenheartedly, "Rebbe, I have so many tzaros; I do not know how to escape from my overwhelming misfortunes." The Rebbe responded, citing the Talmud Pesachim 115b where Chazal say, One who swallows matzoh (without chewing it) fullfills the mitzvah; one who swallows marror, does not fullfill the mitzvah. "The reason for this", said the Rebbe, "is that one must taste and experience the bitterness of the bitter herbs, so that it will bring him

to realize the depth of pain and affliction to which we were subjected. This will evoke feelings of teshuvah within him. We do not run from Hashem's therapy.”

He ran toward them from the entrance of the tent... (18:2)

*Avraham came forward and said, "Will You also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked?
(18:23)*

And G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

In our Parsha we see Avraham from three different perspectives: We see him as the paradigm of gemillas chesed, kindness, reaching out to all wayfarers. We see him using everything in his power to save the evil inhabitants of Sodom. Last, we see him going to the Akeidah with conviction, ready and willing to offer the ultimate sacrifice - his son. On the one hand, he is reaching out to a world of pagans, bringing them into his home, sustaining them both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, he is prepared to slaughter his son. Where is his "rachamei av," fatherly compassion, especially in light of his overwhelming prayers for the wicked citizens of Sodom? How do these three aspects of Avraham's behavior coincide with each other?

In his sefer "Eilah Ha'davarim," Horav Eliyahu Schlessinger, Shlita cites Horav Meir Shapiro, zl, who posits that three ideas/behaviors are essential prerequisites for every Jew. He homiletically interprets this into the Mishnah in Meseches Shabbos 2:7 which says, "Three things one should say on Erev Shabbos as it gets dark: 'Asartem?' 'Did you tithe, take Maaser from the foods?' 'Eiravtem?' 'Did you make an Eiruv, allowing people to carry on Shabbos?' 'Hadliku es ha'neir?' 'Did you light the candle so that people can walk freely and safely?'" He asserts that "Asartem?" "Did you tithe?" implies that one should have the knowledge to distinguish between holy and mundane, between sacred and profane. He should know how to remove the sacred from the mundane, the spiritual from the material. Accordingly, the concept of division, between what is mine and what is not mine is addressed with the term, "Eiravtem?" "Did you make an eiruv?": symbolizing togetherness, bringing people together. The word "eiruv" also signifies arvus, collective responsibility for one's fellowman, realizing that one's actions, good or bad, have an effect on others. "Hadliku es ha'neir?" "Did you light the candle?": one must light up the way, illuminate a path so that he does not stumble upon hidden obstacles.

These three foundations were inherent in Avraham Avinu's actions and personality. His "hachnosas orchim," welcoming wayfarers, symbolized his exemplary acts of loving kindness to all people that were deserving. He was able to delineate between those that were sincere and those that were deceptive, between those who were l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven, and those who were not. Hence, he fulfilled the "Asartem," knowing when and how to separate the good from the bad, the holy from the mundane. Seeking zechusim, merits, for the people of Sodom was Avraham's way of demonstrating concern and responsibility for his fellowman. His sense of achrayos, responsibility, urged him to ask for and seek that "one tzaddik, righteous person in the city of evil". Thus, he fulfilled his obligation of eiravtem, sense of communal accountability. Last, his conviction and willingness to sacrifice his son at Hashem's command "lit the candle," illuminating the path for all Jews throughout the ages. Jewish life is replete with mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, an attribute that was demonstrated for

us by Avraham Avinu.

Please take your son...and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains... (22:2)

The mountain on which the Akeidah took place, Har Ha'Moriah, was the future site of the Bais Hamikdash. The Divrei Chaim notes that two mountains played a pivotal role in Klal Yisrael's history: Har Sinai, upon which the Torah was given; and Har Ha'Moriah, the site of the Bais Hamikdash. He wonders why the Bais Hamikdash was built on Har Ha'Moriah, rather than on Har Sinai. Would it not have been appropriate that the mountain which had been sanctified by the giving of the Torah should be the setting for the building of the Bais Hamikdash? He explains that a place where a Jew had stretched out his neck in submission to the Almighty, prepared and willing to give up his life to become a sacrifice to Hashem, is truly the place most suited for the Bais Hamikdash. A Jew offering his life in devotion to Hashem sanctifies a place even more than the Giving of the Torah.

This is a powerful statement. It does, however, raise a question: Why did not Hashem give the Torah on Har HaMoriah? If Akeidas Yitzchak consecrated this mountain, then it certainly should be an appropriate setting for the Revelation and the Giving of the Torah. We suggest that perhaps the Divrei Chaim's answer has a deeper meaning. The Torah's permanence in Klal Yisrael is inextricably related to its capacity to be transmitted from one generation to another. While we will find fathers who are devoted to Torah study to the point of personal self-sacrifice, how many are prepared to demand the same level of commitment from their children? How many parents impose hardship upon their precious children, so that they will study Torah? How many understand that mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, is an inherent component of Torah study? How many understand that to succeed in Torah one must give up an element of materialism and be willing to undergo hardship - and to demand this of their children?

Avraham Avinu taught us what it means to take an only child and prepare him for shechitah, slaughter, because Hashem had asked for this. True, the Torah was given on Har Sinai - but it is Har HaMoriah that made sure it is still with us. On Har Sinai, we received the Torah. On Har HaMoriah, we learned that the only way we will keep this Torah is if fathers are willing to impose upon their children and make demands of them. Many years ago, some of us thought that by placing their children in a yeshivah/day school they would be depriving them, making too many demands of them. Regrettably, those children have become estranged from our people. The disservice their parents did to them haunts them today.

And an angel of Hashem called to him from Heaven, and said, "Avraham, Avraham!" and he said, "Here I am!" (22:11)

During the beginning of the chassidic movement, a serious conflict ensued between the misnagdim, those that were anti-Chassidus, and those that followed and revered the great chassidic leaders of their time. The misnagdim, who sincerely felt that the chassidic movement was manipulating the minds of its followers, went to extremes to prevent their influence from spreading. They would often resort to imposing a cherem, excommunication, against the "factions" of chassidim. The story is told that they once sent a ksav cherem, letter of excommunication, to Horav Refael M'Hamburg, zl, a

distinguished scholar and leader, requesting that he affix his signature to this letter. In the note that accompanied this ksav cherem they wrote that even the great "rav who is compared to an angel of G-d," the Gaon M'Vilna, had agreed to sign his name to their letter.

Rav Refael responded to their request by citing Hashem's "dialogue" with Avraham prior to the Akeidah. He said, "When Hashem commanded Avraham to sacrifice his son, He did not send an angel; He spoke personally to Avraham. When someone's life is in the balance, when a father is asked to sacrifice his only child, a malach, angel, is not sent. Conversely, when Hashem told Avraham to refrain from slaughtering Yitzchak, He sent an angel. To save a life, a malach suffices. While the Gaon, the gadol ha'dor, greatest Torah scholar of our generation, may truly be compared to a malach, when someone's life is in question, it is not enough for me."

This story and the "vort" have received much acclaim over the years. The question that remains to be asked is: Do we think about what Rav Refael said when we disparage someone whose beliefs do not necessarily coincide with ours? Do we think twice before we resort to character assassination? If Rav Refael refused to sign a letter that the gadol ha'dor had signed because he was concerned about the effect it would have on another Jew, we should at least not be so hasty as to call another Jew names that should be reserved for the lowest of the low. All too often, we enjoy the "vort" and refuse to acknowledge the lesson it implies.

Hashem said, "Because the outcry of Sodom and Amorah has become great, and because their sin has been very grave. (18:20)

Even sin has limits. In order for Hashem to destroy an entire population, the evil must have stretched to its nadir. Indeed, we find only two places in the Torah which manifests destruction of such magnitude: the Mabul, flood; and the cities of Sodom and Amorah. True, other individuals sinned, but in these two incidents iniquity reached a milestone. What was there about these sins that was so baneful that the consequences for the sinners was total annihilation? As long as teshuvah, repentance, is an option, Hashem refrains from striking the final blow. Hashem's disciplinary measures are not punitive. They are therapeutic, a guide for us to mend our ways and return to the Almighty. In other words, the characteristics of the sin of the generation of the flood and the inhabitants of Sodom seem to have precluded teshuvah. Chazal teach us that while the generation of the flood was morally corrupt, Hashem sealed their doom only because of theft. Their theft was of a unique form. They stole only a pachos m'shaveh perutah, less than the value of a perutah, which is the smallest coin. Halachically speaking, this is not even considered to be stealing. A Bais Din does not punish a thief for such an act of stealing. Hence, the thief can even strut around, head held high, in total contempt of the law. Ostensibly, such a person will not repent. After all, what did he do wrong?

A similar behavior pattern was manifest in Sodom, where the people simply changed the rules to suit their needs. If an evil they sought to commit did not fit into their code of law, they conveniently altered the law. Thus, in their eyes, they did no wrong! If so, what would motivate them to repent? The people of these two generations had one thing in common: they did no wrong; they had no reason to repent. Consequently, there was no expectation that they would mend their ways. They would continue living an iniquitous lifestyle without any hope for change. This is why Hashem destroyed them. When one either does not care, or deceives himself into believing that he is doing the right thing; when there is no hope that a person will one day say, "I have sinned," then there is no hope for reprieve.

What if there should be fifty righteous people in the midst of the city? (18:24)

If there had been tzaddikim, would they have made a difference? In reality, there were not even ten righteous people. If there would have been ten tzaddikim, however, the city would have been saved. Why? Will a few tzaddikim accomplish so much that their presence would save the city from disaster? The answer is yes, if these few righteous Jews do not isolate themselves from the community. The key phrase is, "b'soch ha'ir," in the midst of the city. The fact that tzaddikim live in a community is not necessarily a guarantee that it will be spared. Hashem does not overlook sins, simply forgive iniquity, just because the city is host to a number of righteous, G-d fearing Jews. They must be involved in the community, living "in the midst of the city," giving shiurim, lectures, publicly displaying their conviction in the Almighty in order for their presence to have an effect. When the wicked see the righteous observing mitzvos, performing acts of chesed, reaching out to the unaffiliated, acting in a manner becoming a Torah Jew - they change. They can only put us down if we allow them to. The light of Torah can banish the darkest darkness. We have only to focus on the light.

Avraham Avinu 's advocacy on behalf of the evil Sodomites is remarkable and, indeed, sets the standard for the patience we must exert in order to give the sinner an opportunity to repent. Horav Moshe Schwab, zl, cites Sforno who interprets Hashem's statement regarding the fifty tzaddikim who would catalyze Sodom's rescue, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous men who will protest against the wicked ones." We infer from here that as long as someone protests, as long as there is one who will rebuke and attempt to set the wicked on the correct path, there is hope. If someone protests, the rasha has the possibility of hearing mussar. All is not yet lost.

Thus, on the one hand, we must vigorously challenge those who would defame the Torah and its way of life. On the other hand, however, if someone has a Yiddishe neshamah, such that when he is up against the wall he cries out, "Shma Yisrael," we are not permitted to "write him off" the spiritual ledger. If Hashem does not, how can we?

And Hashem remembered Avraham; so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval. (19:29)

The Ran infers from this pasuk that Lot was spared only because of Avraham. Chazal question what did Lot do that granted him such merit that he was saved from the destruction that befell Sodom. They respond that when Avraham referred to Sarah as his "sister" in order to protect himself from the Egyptians, Lot did not utter a word in dispute. Since he was compassionate with Avraham, Hashem took pity and spared him. The various commentators ask if this was the only merit that Lot possessed. Surely, he must have performed acts of chesed and good deeds that would distinguish him from the wicked people of Sodom. In his sefer "L'maan Achai V'reiai" Horav Elchanan Sorotzkin, zl derives from here a remarkable lesson as to how much Hashem recognizes every good action and every good thought that one has. Hashem does not overlook even a momentary triumph over the subconscious yetzer hora, evil inclination, to harm someone. Indeed, Lot certainly had other merits, more profound and more significant, but the lesson of this merit is that nothing good is wasted. Lot was rewarded for his meritorious deed regardless of its simplicity. We must remember that everything counts; we never know when that seemingly insignificant good deed will benefit us.

The Ramban claims that it was truly because of Avraham that Lot was saved. He left his quiet, relaxed lifestyle in Charan in order to accompany Avraham. He ended up moving to Sodom indirectly because of Avraham. Had Avraham not moved initially, Lot would still be living in Charan, content and relaxed. "It does not make sense," says the Ramban, "that something should happen to Lot, since Lot had done Avraham a favor by accompanying him." This was actually the reason that Avraham fought with the kings who had taken Lot captive.

Horav Sorotzkin emphasizes the profundity of the Ramban's statement and its pertinence to us. Lot left Avraham on his own; he decided to go to Sodom in response to its material benefits and because the city's laws and philosophy coincided with his own perspective. In other words, Lot chose his "lot" in life. Thus, he deserved whatever happened to him. Yet, Avraham still felt pangs of responsibility for Lot. Perhaps, if not for Avraham, Lot "might" still be in Charan. We also do things "willingly" that are not necessarily appropriate, but result from years of exposure to a society that is not conducive to Torah. If we would not be here, if we were still in Eretz Yisrael with a Bais Hamikdash, we would be different. This should be a limud zechus, serve as a source of merit, for Klal Yisrael. After all, it worked in this manner for Lot.

The child grew and was weaned. Avraham made a great feast on the day Yitzchak was weaned. (21:8)

Rashi says that feast was "great" because the great men of that generation, Shem, Eiver and Avimelech attended it. In the Talmud Shabbos 130A, Tosfos contends that this feast took place on the day Yitzchak was circumcised, the eighth day after his birth. Rabbeinu Bachya feels that this unique feast took place on the day that Yitzchak began to study Torah. It is no wonder that Avraham "bypassed" the first "milestone" of Bris Milah. After all, he himself was three years old when he "realized" that there was a Creator Who ruled the world. Consequently, he felt that the most appropriate time for expressing his heartfelt joy was the moment that Yitzchak began to study Torah. Is there a greater expression of simchas haTorah than this? His son was weaned and went immediately to study Torah. He left his home prepared for greater spiritual heights.

Horav Chaim Elazary, zl, emphasizes the beauty and poignancy of this moment, which expresses a crucial message to all parents. Avraham and Sarah waited their entire life for a child. Finally, they were blessed with a miracle child, a son who is destined to be an Olah Temimah, perfect sacrifice. When he was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, they still do not make a great feast. They expressed their joy and thanksgiving when he was about to study Torah, when he was ready to be sanctified to the Almighty. A simchah, feast, that does not include or manifest one's preparedness to serve Hashem is an incomplete simchah.

Hashem remembered Sarah as He had said...And she (Sarah) conceived. (21:1,2)

Rashi quotes Chazal, who explain the juxtaposition of Sarah's conception upon Avraham's prayer on behalf of Avimelech and his family. As punishment for Avimelech's abduction of Sarah, he and his household were subjected to a complete cessation of their reproductive functions. Avraham prayed for them and, in turn, was himself blessed. The inference is that, if one prays for another, if he himself is in need of that same cure/help, his prayers will soon be answered.

The Tiferes Shmuel interprets this statement with a slightly different twist, providing an important lesson. He reads the dictum in the following manner: If one prays for another as intensely as he would pray for his own personal needs, he will soon be answered. When a person shows that the concern he has for a fellow Jew is equal with that which he has for himself, then he merits a quick response from the Almighty.

"V'ahavta l'reicha kamocho," "Love your fellow as you do yourself." The Golden Rule is meaningful, but how many of us can say that we achieve this plateau? Can we say that when we pray for someone who is sick, that we expend as much kavanah, concentration and feeling, as if it were for ourselves? Avraham Avinu set the standard. He prayed for Avimelech, a gentile who had abducted his wife - as if he were praying for himself. This is the paradigm of chesed. Do not ignore your family - as a Jew, your family has just been extended. The concern you demonstrate for others is what you may come to expect from Hashem.

And He (Hashem) said, "Please take your son...and go to the land of Moriah." (22:2)

The Torah dedicates two parshios to Avraham Avinu. The first one begins with Hashem's command to Avraham, "Lech Lecha," (12:1) Go forth, leave the land and reach out to the world. The second ends with another Lech Lecha. Here he is instructed to take his son, Yitzchak, and go to the land of Moriah. He begins his mission focusing on himself, his responsibilities. He ends his mission by taking his son to Har Hashem, exposing him to the Divine, ensuring that he will carry on his father's legacy. Indeed, is that not what Yiddishkeit is all about? The father goes through life with its trials and tribulations. He stands steadfast in his belief in the Almighty, trusting in Him, "sharing" Him with others, seeing to it that others are brought closer to Hashem. Then, as life goes on, he must guarantee that his mission will continue, that it will not dissipate with him. The second "Lech Lecha" begins, "Kach na es bincha," "Take your son," make sure that he will continue your work.

"Continuity" is the key word in Hashem's message to Avraham. While the individual must strive to fulfill his own responsibility as a Jew, assuring that Hashem's Name is proclaimed throughout the world, it is not the final goal. He must see to it that his work is continued, that a world realizes that Judaism is a vibrant religion. Its observances and practices are as much a part of Jewish life today as they were thousands of years ago. This can only be accomplished if one sees to it that faith and conviction, Torah living and observance, are transmitted to the next generation.

Chazal ask which "Lech Lecha" is more significant: the first one, when Hashem instructed Avraham to leave his land and go forth in the land, or the second, the "Lech Lecha" of the Akeidas Yitzchak. They respond that the second Lech Lecha carries greater impact. We can understand this with the above idea in mind. Judaism with no future has little significant present. Parents who observe, but do not transmit their lifestyle to their children, either by example or through education, will regrettably reap what they sow.

Avraham came forward and said, "Will You also stamp out the righteous along with the wicked?" (18:23)

Avraham's love for all people is exemplified in its noblest form as he intercedes on behalf of the

people of Sodom. Even the wicked inhabitants of Sodom were worthy of his sympathy. He prayed to Hashem to spare them from impending doom. Avraham Avinu's most significant strength was his total devotion to Hashem. Representing the greatest aspect of his personality, this trait caused Hashem to say that during the ten generations from Noach until Avraham, He spoke to no one other than Avraham. Avraham's commitment, to the point of self-sacrifice, was definitely the zenith of his life's achievement. Chazal, however, imply that the apex of Avraham's endeavor, the attribute for which Hashem rewarded him with nevuah, prophecy, was his caring for people, his tendency to view people through the prism of tzedek, to judge them in the most positive light.

Avraham emulated Hashem; as He is compassionate, so was Avraham. This is evidenced in his prayers on behalf of the wicked Sodomites. Avraham loved chesed, to perform acts of loving-kindness. Yet, he prayed for the people of Sodom who hated to act kindly to others. Their laws were the antithesis of social justice and, certainly, were counter to everything in which Avraham believed and for which he sacrificed himself.

Conversely, we find that for a comparatively minor infraction, Avraham severed his relationship with his cousin, Lot. The shepherds of Lot "allowed" their sheep to graze in property which was not theirs. These actions brought Avraham to tell Lot, "Separate from me. If you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will go to the left." Chazal infer from Avraham's words that he was totally severing his relationship with Lot. They could not assimilate with one another. Where is the consistency in Avraham's actions? Does he care about all people, or is he particular about whom he cares for? Why does he pray for Sodom, but divorce himself from Lot?

Horav Elchanan Sorotzkin, zl, derives from here a compelling lesson regarding a Jew's relationship with the rest of the world. Avraham cares deeply. He is devoted to helping humanity. He prays for them, he opens his home to them when they are in need; he seeks justice for all mankind. He draws the boundary, however, concerning living and interacting with them. Klal Yisrael must maintain a distance which does not permit assimilation to germinate and grow. The nation that sublimates itself to Hashem, that decries idol worship, does not mix with other nations. Avraham prayed for Lot. He even risked his life to fight for him, but he would never have become a single nation with him.

And Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law and he said, "Get up and leave this place, for Hashem is about to destroy the city. But he seemed like a jester in the eyes of his sons-in-law."

In the Midrash, Chazal recount the dialogue between Lot and his sons-in-law. When Lot implored them to leave because of the impending doom, they countered derisively, "The city is singing and dancing, music is playing, and you say the city is about to be destroyed? Nonsense!" Horav A. Henach Leibovitz, Shlita, observes that Lot's sons-in-law would have heeded the warning to leave the city had they not seen the people in a state of joy and frivolity. They believed that Hashem could destroy the city; they did not believe that He would. Intellectually, they knew it might happen, but the present circumstances, albeit deceiving, did not lend themselves to such foreboding.

Why would the people's lack of awareness counter what was rationally evident? Horav Leibovitz explains that one cannot perceive doom and destruction amidst joy and dancing. It just does not penetrate. If things remain as before, if business continues as usual, human nature does not permit an individual to believe that the status quo is going to change.

Regrettably, the same inconsistency affects us. We see people suffering; we see sickness, bad luck, people who have fallen on hard times. We do not, however, believe it can happen to us. It is always the other one who will be hurt, never us. This is because things seem to be progressing well. We do not take into account that maybe, beneath the surface, they are not as smooth. We also tend to forget

that circumstances can change instantaneously.

Chazal say that the fear of death should have a compelling effect upon us. It should imbue an individual with fear and inspire him to perform teshuvah. One never knows when his time is up. At least if he repents today, and tomorrow he is called back to the Olam Ha'emes, he will leave as a righteous person. Why then do so many people defy this reality? Frequently, people are, unfortunately, faced with an impending meeting with the Angel of Death. Yet, many ignore this fact and continue to do as they please. Where is their fear? How long can they deny the truth? The answer must be that people may have an intellectual awareness of their end, but as long as everyone around them is having a grand time, it becomes difficult to accept. Only after the message reaches home, do some wake up. Regrettably, others still continue to ignore the truth.

And Hashem tested Avraham and said to him, "Avraham," and he replied, "Here I am." (22:1)

Avraham Avinu's loyalty to Hashem was ratified through ten trials, which he passed with exemplary devotion. Every trial had its own unique degree of challenge. The tenth, and most significant trial, was the Akeidah -- when Hashem instructed Avraham to bind Yitzchak and sacrifice him. Avraham responded, "Hineni," I am prepared and ready to serve You in any way that You ask. In response to a test of this caliber, the Satan was working overtime, challenging Avraham every step of the way. The Satan appeared to Avraham in the guise of an old man. He questioned Avraham regarding his destination. At first, Avraham was evasive, but when he saw that the Satan was not giving up, he told him emphatically, "I will not listen to you. Leave me alone!" Avraham refused to have any dialogue with the Satan. He knew that any relationship with the Satan would be devastating. Noach also had an interchange with the Satan, but, unlike Avraham, he seemed to have no problem learning an ethical lesson from him. When Noach was about to plant the vine, the Satan appeared and asked Noach if he would like him to join, to become his partner in nurturing the vine. Noach readily agreed. Satan left, returning with a little lamb which he slaughtered over the vine. He left again, only to return with a lion, which he slaughtered and whose blood he poured over the vine. He left yet again, returning with a monkey which he slaughtered, pouring its blood over the vine. Finally, he brought a pig which he slaughtered, and its blood stained the earth under the vine.

The lesson was: excessive drinking can have repulsive results. One cup of wine can make a man docile as a lamb. If he drinks two cups, he behaves like a lion--arrogant, boasting about his physical prowess. After three cups, he dances foolishly, like a monkey. Four cups will bring him to the point of inebriation, when he will vomit and roll in the mud like a pig. "Be careful," the Satan told Noach, "if you imbibe excessively, it can have such results that you enter into my domain. You will no longer have self-control; you will act like a swine, wallowing in the filth. You will be mine!"

Two great people--Noach and Avraham. One chooses to accept mussar from the Satan, while the other banishes him from his presence. Avraham refused to talk with the Satan. What are we to learn from these disparate approaches? Horav Moshe Schwab, zl, observes that herein lies the distinction between Noach and Avraham. Noach and his followers/students have no compunction to derive from the Torah only those lessons that the Satan disputes. Those things with which the Satan agrees, on the contrary, learn from the Satan! When it comes to social laws, manners, character refinements, etiquette, they want to be students of Satan.

Avraham Avinu and his students view Torah as a code which encompasses every aspect of life.

Torah does not focus on Olam Habah; it should be our guide and directive as to how we should relate and act in Olam Hazei. Noach and his milieu believe in Torah study, tefillah--indeed, everything spiritual. They also believe that this world is for enjoyment--not necessarily the enjoyment as seen through the perspective of the Torah. Their perspective is secular. In those areas which they know are not antagonistic to Torah -- or simply should not be in the Torah's domain -- they have no problem inviting the Satan to teach them ethics. Avraham understands that only when an endeavor is totally guided by the Torah can it become part of one's psyche and, thus, be bequeathed to the next generation. The answer for every question concerning life, from birth until the end of life, can be found in the Torah. One only has to be willing to look.

And Hashem tested Avraham. (22:1)

With the Akeidas Yitzchak, Avraham Avinu reached the summit of spiritual commitment to the Almighty. He was prepared to sacrifice everything--even his only son, his future--to serve Hashem. Avraham Avinu demonstrated obedience by listening to the command of Hashem. He showed unparalleled yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven, when he listened to Hashem without question. The Netziv, zl, emphasizes Avraham's readiness to accept Hashem's command without questioning, as one might listen to a close friend. Avraham was in awe of Hashem, a state of being which precludes the question, "Why"? Fear is equated with unequivocal acquiescence; no questions are asked, one just readily performs the will of Hashem.

Avraham listened to Hashem's command to sacrifice Yitzchak. He also listened to Hashem's angel when he was told to halt the sacrifice. Avraham did not suddenly "come to his senses," as some alienated Bible scholars would have us think. Avraham acted with complete obedience. In fact, he set the criteria for halting the sacrifice; the ram that was to replace Yitzchak must carry the same degree of holiness as if Yitzchak had been sacrificed. Regrettably, these people refuse to acknowledge the truth that one can reach the spiritual zenith of serving the Almighty and still remain in complete control of his faculties.

Avraham set the standard for avodas Hashem, serving the Almighty through mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice. The pasuk attributes the test to Avraham. Is this title misplaced? After all, Yitzchak was the one who was to be the korban, sacrifice, not Avraham. In the Drashos Ha'ran the point is made that a test is a test the first time it is initiated. After the first person undergoes the trial, it becomes easier for the person who follows. With this in mind, Sefer Aperiion comments that Yitzchak's test, his willingness to give up his life for Hashem, was not novel. He inherited his devotion from his father, who was thrown into a fiery furnace and who risked his life in battle to save his cousin, Lot. Avraham, on the other hand, was undergoing a trial that had not been previously experienced. Never had an individual been asked to slaughter his son for the sake of the Almighty. This was the supreme test. Avraham had no one from whom to learn.

Horav Elchanan Wassermann, zl, observes that mesiras nefesh, sacrificing one's life in order to sanctify Hashem's Name, is not really a significant test. One is exchanging a temporal world for an eternal world. An individual who is bound up in the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem acts with remarkable courage and enthusiasm, excited in the knowledge that he is relinquishing Olam Ha'zeh for Olam Ha'bah. He will now be inducted in the Yeshivah Shel Ma'alah, the Heavenly Yeshivah, where he will accompany the great tzaddikim of old. If this act of Kiddush Hashem causes him to lose his portion in the World-to-Come, if by performing this act of mesiras nefesh he is left with nothing, will he still go

forward for the sake of the Almighty?

That is the definition of true mesiras nefesh, claims Reb Elchanan. A nisayon is a test of one's dedication to the Almighty. Throughout history, Jews have demonstrated their commitment and have given up their lives as they have sacrificed themselves for the Almighty. They were oriented towards Olam Habah. They always had something to look forward to. The opportunity to die as a Jew, to achieve the ultimate closeness with Hashem, to have a "ticket" to Gan Eden, is the reward of he who is moser nefesh. Avraham Avinu did not undergo that type of mesiras nefesh. If he had carried out Hashem's will, if he had sacrificed Yitzchak and passed the test, he would have lost everything. What did Avraham want most of all? His greatest desire, his ultimate goal, was to spread Hashem's Name throughout the world. His mission in life was to unite the world in monotheistic belief in Hashem. He told Hashem, "What can You give me, if I go childless? What benefit is Olam Habah if I have no son to carry on my work? What good is Olam Habah for me if all the work I have accomplished in this world is to be wasted because I have no heir to continue what I have initiated?" This was Avraham's test. His mesiras nefesh comprised his willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak, to give everything up, to relinquish his Olam Habah for Kiddush Hashem. Yitzchak's death would bring an end to Avraham's dreams. He would not have Olam Hazeh or Olam Habah. No, we cannot compare Avraham's zenith of mesiras nefesh to that of the ensuing generations.