

MAINTAINING THE VISION

by Rabbi Elly Broch

A maxim of Torah scholarship is that we do not only learn much from what our Sages do say, but also from what they do not say. How much more is this standard applicable to the words of the Creator as stated in the Torah: every word is essential and counted for and every omission noteworthy. Certain episodes in the Torah are thoroughly described, whereas others are hinted to or left out. Numerous lessons concerning the Creator and His will are gleaned when investigating these differences.

Pirkei Avos (The Ethics of Our Fathers 5:4) states that our forefather Avraham was given ten challenges to prove his loyalty to Hashem. For the tenth trial, the Akaidas Yitzchak (The Binding of Isaac), the Torah offers a detailed account of Avraham's command to bring his only son, Yitzchak, as an offering. The Torah describes the journey to the location where the sacrifice will take place and the dialogue between Avraham and his beloved son as they approach the mountain. Although Avraham is certainly prepared to carry out the command, G-d prevents him from doing so. Declaring "Now I know that you are a G-d fearing man", G-d gives numerous blessings to Avraham for his magnificent display of dedication to and faith in his Creator. Of all of the trials Avraham faced and overcame, the Torah's commentaries note this one was the greatest.

Lev Eliyahu (Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian; 1876-1976; Mashgiach/spiritual mentor of the Etz Chaim Yeshiva in London and Yeshiva Keneset Chizkiyahu in Kfar Chasidim, Israel; emphasized the importance of developing and improving character and never ceased trying to improve his own midos (character traits) and sensitivity to others) questions why the Torah devotes a great deal of attention and importance to this test whereas the first demonstration of Avraham's greatness is not explicitly discussed? Medrash Tanchuma (aggadic Midrash on the Pentateuch, of the school of the Sage Rabbi Tanchuma bar Abba of fourth century Israel) explains that Avraham rebelled against his idolatrous upbringing and that his dismissal of his homeland's religion had come to the attention of the authorities. Nimrod, self-deifying king of the land, gave Avraham the option of accepting the idols and deities of the city or being thrown into a pit of fire. Avraham, due to his ingenious deductions and steadfast conviction of one Creator, chose to be cast into the fire. Avraham was miraculously saved, although he was labeled an outcast and remained ostracized. This episode would appear to deserve at least as much narrative as that of the last trial. Moreover, Avraham had not yet been spoken to or had a vision from G-d to corroborate his belief in the Creator, thus compounding the difficulty of this earlier test. In contrast, Hashem had already performed numerous wonders before commanding him to take the life of his son. Why is the last test judged to have been

the greatest?

Rabbi Lopian concedes that on face value the first trial was more impressive. However, when considering the internal battle and the tensions, the last trial was far more difficult. Avraham had spent years proving the existence of a Creator through his inspection of the world and its demonstration of plan and purpose. He contemplated the reality of creation until it was crystal clear to him that the Creator continually intervenes and sustains the world with kindness, which Avraham emulated with his kindness and hospitality to others. When confronted with the choice to deny G-d or perish, Avraham had no battles or hesitations because G-d's existence was so clear to him. In contrast, the final test potentially went against everything Avraham stood for. Avraham had spent his entire life doing kindness and attempting to stop atrocities such as human sacrifice, which was a societal norm. The command to take another life as a sacrifice was completely antithetical to all that he had believed and taught. Furthermore, what would his family say when he returned? What would become of the promise that his child would become a great nation? All of these were barriers that Avraham overcame to fulfill the Divine command. He did not do any calculations or deliberations, he subordinated his own logic and feelings to the will of G-d.

Avraham's great challenge appears similar to many that we face: for much of his life operated within a certain paradigm; apparently, his success was that when the paradigm shifted, he was able to change. Not so! His paradigm did not shift, because his paradigm was not HIS worldview; his paradigm was G-d's worldview. He did not perform his acts of kindness because he wanted to bring good to the world. He did acts of kindness because G-d constantly showers the world with kindness, and emulating G-d's kindness brings good to the world. Our forefather Avraham's success was suppressing his own human compassion as he maintained his unswerving commitment to fulfilling G-d's vision. Our challenge is to learn from him and see the world through his eyes.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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