

# SARAH'S LAST MOMENTS - A DEADLY TRICK

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

*Our forefather Avraham was tested with ten trials - and he withstood them all. (Avos 5:4)*

Mefarshim (commentators) disagree as to exactly which ten events comprise the "ten trials" (asara nisayonos). Almost all commentators are in agreement that the final and greatest test was the Akeidas Yitzchak, Hashem's command to offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. Rabbeinu Yona, however, explains (ibid.) that Avraham's final test was the difficulties Avraham underwent in securing a burial plot for his wife Sarah, an episode described in detail at the beginning of this week's sidrah.

One might ask: After undergoing what was ostensibly the most demanding experience imaginable - the Akeidah - what more could be left to test?

Rashi points out the proximity of Sarah's death to the Akeidah. Quoting a Midrash, he explains that Sarah's death was a result of the Akeidah. According to this Midrash, the Satan (Angel of Death) was exceedingly perturbed that Avraham was willing to go through with the sacrifice of his son, an act which stands as a merit for his decedents to this day. After repeated attempts at discouraging Avraham failed, the Satan took a different tack. If he couldn't deter Avraham, at least he could scare Sarah - as they say - to death; literally. He appeared to Sarah and showed her how in the distance, her beloved and only son Yitzchak lay bound upon the Altar. The hand of her husband Avraham, clenching a sharp knife, stretched towards his neck to perform the ritual slaughter. In the moment just before the sacrifice (Avraham was halted at the very last moment), Sarah was overwhelmed by the vision of her son's slaughter, and in a state of intense shock her soul departed.

It seems like the ultimate irony. Avraham returns home having navigated the most profound test of his life, to find his life-long partner has passed away; he has been left alone. Not only that, but her death was a direct result of his having obeyed Hashem's command to sacrifice Yitzchak.

One of the other nine tests is that after leaving his homeland and arriving in Cana'an at Hashem's behest, Avraham encounters a famine, and is forced to abandon Cana'an for Egypt, where food was more plentiful (the famine was restricted to Cana'an). The test was not to question Hashem - that even after having done what he had been told, things didn't work out the way he might have wished or expected.

Compared to what transpires here, that test seems like child's play. In Cana'an, the famine was "coincidental" to Avraham's coming; here Sarah's death is a direct result of the Akeidah. There,

Avraham suffers the temporary inconvenience of prolonged exile; here he loses his spouse forever. Putting oneself in Avraham shoes, were it possible, it is almost unimaginable to not feel even the slightest touch of doubt or misgivings. "How could it be? Where have I sinned, in doing what You told me, that I should lose Sarah as a result?" If there were any test that could top the Akeidah, this was it.

What was the truth? Sarah's time had come. In a Divine irony, Hashem arranged things so that the (aborted) Akeidah take place at the precise moment that Sarah was meant to pass away. Satan knew this, and grabbed a hold of the opportunity. In a ruse second to none, he played things just-so in order that it should seem to the observer that Sarah's death was an outcome of the Akeidah, when in truth things were occurring according to the Heavenly plan. Each person is given a certain number of years upon the Earth; Sarah's were up. No force, not even the Angel of Death, could take from her even the smallest moment of life. Rashi says that the reason the verse repeats, "... these were the years of Sarah," at the beginning of the sidrah is because her years were perfect and complete - there was nothing missing.

The only thing that could nullify and revoke the merit of the Akeidah, even after it had been performed, would be if Avraham would, G-d forbid, regret have done it. This is what the Angel of Death, in bringing about Avraham's final test, and his own last hurrah, hoped to accomplish.

Avraham, inimitably, took the incident completely in stride. His calmness as he patiently deals with Efron and the B'nei Cheis over Sarah's burial plot is obvious. "And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah, and to cry over her (23:2)." The letter kaf in "ve-livkosa - and to cry over her," is diminutive, to note that although he cried, he did not obsess over her death as one might under such circumstances, inconsolably sobbing over the irony of the loss and his possible role in it. He cried as one must, and he went on in complete faith that such was the Heavenly decree. He pointed no fingers and voiced no concerns. He saw the Satan's ruse for what it was; a distortion of the truth accomplished by "sight-of-hand" and advanced knowledge of what the future holds. (see Nesivos Shalom and others)

A young girl once wrote into an "advice" column: "Dear..., You know how you always tell us to be honest and say the truth... Well, yesterday at school three friends and I played a nasty trick on our teacher. She was really upset. She confronted the whole class and told the guilty girls to come forward and admit what they had done. That if they didn't, she'd find out anyway, and then they'd be in even more trouble. Well, I went over to her quietly and told her that I was one of the girls. I was the only one. Later, she did find out who the other girls were, and they were suspended from school for a week. But because I told the truth, I only received a minor punishment. So you're right - it always pays to tell the truth!"

The response, which contains a fair bit of wisdom, went something like: "Dear..., It sure does always pay to tell the truth. But I don't want you to think that if you're going to be honest, things will always go your way. You could just as easily have told the truth, and been the only one punished. We can't

control how things turn out. Sometimes we do what we know is right, and we still suffer because of it. I'm glad you weren't punished severely, but remember, even if you had been, it still would have payed to tell the truth."

To be able to deal with a spouse's death with equanimity under such circumstances is exceptional and unique. But the lesson learned - to do what we know in our hearts is right and not be swayed by seemingly negative repercussions - is one that we need to internalize every day of our lives.

Have a good Shabbos.

*This week's publication was sponsored by Mr. Zalman Deutsch, in memory of his sister, Sarah bas R' Yaakov Tzvi HaCohen.*

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