

# CHALLENGES: THE RIVER, THE MEDDLE, AND THE WORD

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

The Midrash (Tanchuma 22) describes the challenges Avraham and Yitzchok faced as they journeyed towards Har Ha-moriah, upon which Avraham had been instructed to slaughter Yitzchok: Satan encountered Avraham as he was going, appearing as an old man. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To pray," he told him.

"To pray? Does one going to pray need fire and a knife in his hands, and firewood on his shoulders?"

"Perhaps we will stay there for a day or two. Thus, we will be able to slaughter an animal, roast its meat, and eat it."

"Old man," Satan said, "do you not think I was there when He told you to take your only son and slaughter him? Now, should an old man like you, who was finally blessed with a son at the age of one-hundred, kill him? It's like someone who throws away what he has, and then goes asking others to help him! Do you think you will have yet another son? You heard some spirit tell you something, and you're ready to slaughter your child?"

"It was not some spirit," Avraham responded. "It was the Holy One, Blessed is He. I have no interest in your words."

Satan next showed up appearing as a young lad, and began walking next to Yitzchok. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"To study Torah," Yitzchok said.

"Alive... or dead?"

"Have you ever heard of a person studying after he's dead?" Yitzchok said.

"Shameful one, son of the shameful—do you know how many days your mother fasted that she should have a child? And now that old man has lost his mind, and wants to slaughter you?"

"Don't listen to him," Avraham told Yitzchok, "he's just trying to distract us and tire us out."

Satan then appeared as a huge river. Avraham entered the waters. First they reached his knees. Then they were up to his neck. Avraham picked his eyes up to the heavens, saying, "Master of the Universe, You chose me and You revealed Yourself to me... You told me to bring Yitzchok as a

sacrifice, and I did not argue. Right now, I am on my way, but the waters will drown me. If I drown, who will do Your command?"

Said the Almighty, "I promise you will do my command, and make My name known among people." Hashem roared at the river, and it dried out...

Clearly the three guises of the Satan are meant to represent three difficulties Avraham had to undergo in order to fulfill the word of G-d. Avraham's experience as he makes his way to what he thought was the slaughtering of his son serve as an example of absolute obedience and unwavering faith in God despite the enormous difficulties and challenges involved. The details of his journey are meant to shed light on the "nisayon" (test) experience and provide us with guidance for confronting our own "nisyonos."

First he appears as an old man trying to dissuade Avraham from following through. This encounter symbolizes the direct approach nisayon—the most obvious attempt at preventing a mitzvah from happening. The arguments, while somewhat logical, are easily recognized and easily refuted. "You never heard it from Hashem... It's not really a mitzvah..." To be sure, it's much easier for us to pick out the fallacy in his overtures than it was for Avraham in the heat of an emotional, confusing and traumatic experience. Satan's head-on approach is not always obvious, often difficult to spot, and can be subtle and carry countless nuances. But ultimately, if we are willing to approach the nisayon with clarity and conviction, we should (with Hashem's help) be able to identify the voice of dissention that does it's best to turn mitzvos into sins, and sins into mitzvos.

Failing to stop Avraham, Satan turns to Yitzchok. Remember, this is Avraham's nisayon, not Yitzchok's. Whatever attempts are being made to dissuade Yitzchok are in truth indirect plays on Avraham. The second, more subtle nisayon, is when the voice of dissention speaks not to us, but to (and subsequently from) those dear to us. Their dissuasion is more difficult to counteract. They mean well, and we don't want to hurt them. To put up a fight against an apparent enemy is one thing, but now we're being forced to defend against friendly fire. We fret over their approval, worry about hurting them, and are easily dissuaded from following through with what we started because of some simple (or complex) interaction with others whose opinion means much to us.

Sometimes life graces us with the good fortune of seeing their seemingly forceful objections disappear even more suddenly than they came, in a flash of nonchalance, as if they never really meant to object in the first place, and we feel foolish for having considered changing course to satisfy what was ultimately no more than a weakly conceived and quickly abandoned opposition. Other times it's only in hindsight that we realize that "doing our own thing" when we felt it was right wasn't hurting anyone; they might have even respected us more.

The final guise is the river. When all else fails, bog them down with details. We've overcome our own doubts and shortcomings. We've thrown social caution to the winds by ignoring what we felt were real issues that others had. But there's still the fine print; what some have called, "the objective

difficulties that block a person's path." At times, life throws up what seem to be insurmountable logistical obstacles—a raging river. The way across seems anything but apparent. We're ready to throw up our arms in defeat and say, "Oh well, you can't say I didn't try!" It's the most difficult nisayon of all, because of its subtlety. After all, there's only so much we can do, and we really did try, and it obviously just wasn't meant to be. It's not for nothing they say "the devil's in the details."

Avraham, we can surmise, was tempted to say likewise; it was undoable, not meant to be. He had no idea how he would traverse the raging waters. But he knew that if he meant to reach Har Hamoriyah, he had better find a way. He jumped in, went as far as he humanly could, and then cried out to Hashem; only then did the river dry up.

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