

WHY SHOULD EFRON SUFFER?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 121, The Jewish Cemetery. Good Shabbos!

Because Avraham Had a Hard Day, Efron Should Suffer?

Rabbeinu Yona [Avot 5:3] discusses the 10 tests with which G-d tested Avraham. Most Rishonim learn that the tenth and final test was the Akeidas Yitzchak at the end of last week's parsha. However Rabbeinu Yona learns that the tenth and final test was the trouble Avraham had in purchasing a grave for his wife Sarah.

Avraham came back from the Akeida, only to find his wife deceased. Now Avraham must look for a grave. After having thought that he was the legitimate heir of Eretz Yisrael, rather than just burying her, he has to get into a dialogue with Efron and has to purchase a burial plot at an exorbitant price. This, says Rabbeinu Yona, was the tenth and final test referred to by the Mishneh in Avot.

This Rabbeinu Yona is very difficult to understand. Granted it was upsetting and granted it was trying to have this aggravation with the burial, but that this should be counted even greater than the test of the Akeida - the willingness to sacrifice one's own son - is difficult to understand.

Rav Dessler, in the latest volume of Michtav M'Eliyahu, explains that this was the hardest test because it demonstrates two of the greatest aspects of Avraham's personality. There were two factors that came into play here. The confluence of these two factors turned the buying of the burial plot into a super human experience.

First of all, let us picture for ourselves, under normal circumstances, dealing with this person named Efron. What type of person is Efron? How would we relate to an Efron?

Rav Dessler doesn't say this, but what I would suggest is the following: Think of a **typical** used car salesman. He epitomizes the worst type of merchant one has to negotiate with. He is willing to sell the Brooklyn Bridge. He tries to jack up the price, to steer customers to more expensive models, anything to take advantage. The customer knows that the salesman is trying to 'rip him off'.

How do we deal with people who are trying to rip us off? The immediate response is - he is trying to rip **me** off, I am going to rip **him** off. Our whole conduct with such an individual is not one of respect (menschlich). He's not being 'menschlich' with me - why should I be 'menschlich' with him?

This is a prime example of telling ourselves that we don't have to act like a prince, because we are not dealing with a prince. We are dealing with someone who is perhaps just above a thief. How does one act with such a person?

That is the type of person who Avraham is dealing with here.

Let us examine another aspect of the situation: How do we act when we are under stress? We all have different gradations of stress.

I was recently in the supermarket. There was a person who was bagging my groceries. I made what I thought was a minimal request of not overloading the bag to the extent that it could give a person a hernia. I asked this in what I thought was the nicest fashion. The fellow barked at me!

I asked him "What is my iniquity and what is my sin? [Bereishis 31:36] Why did you talk to me like that?" "I had a hard day!", he told me.

When someone has a hard day, the general feeling is that this is a carte blanche to treat the rest of the world like dogs.

Let us take something more severe than a "hard day". What about the experience of losing one's luggage. After a long drawn out airplane flight, after watching the luggage carousel go around and around until one has memorized each piece of luggage, one has had enough! He goes upstairs to the ticket agent and he has **no** patience for the agent.

Do we think to act with manners at such a time? No, because we have an excuse - we've lost our luggage!

Let us go a little further. What if someone has a relative in the hospital? Picture a person in the hospital under a lot of pressure. He is scared, he is worried. What happens when some nurse or some doctor or someone in the cafeteria gives him a hard time? The reaction is "I have no patience and I have the right to have no patience because my relative is in the hospital."

All these emotions are perfectly legitimate in our eyes.

Now let us go back to Avraham Avinu. He just came back from the Akeidah. Imagine how a person feels after he narrowly escaped the experience of slaughtering his own son. Imagine the drain of emotion. Imagine his mental state after being literally on the brink and coming back.

This is the hardest of days. Then, this person who is drained of emotion, comes back to find the wife of his youth dead. And now the emotionally drained widower, coming off the hardest of days, has to deal and buy a grave. And who does he have to deal with - Efron, worse than the used car dealer!

How does Avraham Avinu act? "And Avraham prostrates himself..." [Bereishis 23:12] He acts with Derech Eretz and with honor, treating Efron like the most honorable of people. He offers no excuse "I've had a bad day! My wife just died! I am stressed out."

Avraham remembers at all times that Efron is a mensch, he is a human being. That demands that Avraham treat him like the Image of G-d that he is. As Rav Dessler writes, "Just because I am in pain, the other person does not have to suffer."

Because one has a hard day at the office, does not mean one's children or one's spouse must suffer. This takes enormous self- control. It takes a person who is totally in control of himself and it takes a person who treats each and every human being, Jew or non- Jew, with dignity.

This incident of burying Sarah represented the ultimate test in relationships between one man and his fellow man - to act with one's fellow man appropriately, even when one has every excuse in the world to act differently.

Even under these circumstances - be a mensch. Treating people with Derech Eretz, as they deserve to be treated, while under such personal stresses, was the ultimate challenge and the ultimate test.

In this area, Rav Dessler writes, we are sorely lacking. Over the years, it has become a matter of pride that it is not necessary to act with Derech Eretz. Chutzpah has triumphed. It is 'considered a mitzvah' to talk to people without the proper manners and respect. How far we have fallen!

There is a famous story about the "Nun of Monsey". A Catholic Sister in Monsey, New York once remarked that people on the street of that largely Orthodox neighborhood did not bother greeting her. There are even some who mumble derogatory remarks under their breath but loud enough that she can hear them. She did remark, however, that there was one exception - a small man with a gray beard. He would greet her with a "Good Morning" everyday. His name was Rav Yakov Kaminetsky. [One of the greatest Torah sages of his time.]

There is no such 'heter' of "because I am suffering, I can cause suffering to my fellow man".

The confluence of these two factors: (1) being under the greatest of stress and (2) being confronted with a person who is less than a prince, - and yet showing Derech Eretz - was to Rabbenu Yonah the ultimate test that Avraham Avinu successfully completed.

Personalities & Sources:

Rabbeinu Yona ben Avraham of Gerona -- (1200-1263) author of Shaarei Teshuva (Gates of Repentance)

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler-- (1892-1954) -- Gateshead, England; Bnai Brak (Ponevezh Yeshiva); known as one of the world's great masters of Mussar

Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky -- (1891-1986) Spent his final years in Monsey after retiring as Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath Yeshiva (Brooklyn).

Glossary:

Akeida(s Yitzchak) -- Binding (of Isaac)

Derech Eretz -- The way of the land; proper manners

mensh(lich) -- (like a) human being;

heter -- permission

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Baltimore, Maryland.

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