

THE FINAL TEST

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 #568 Feeding our Animals. Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha [reading] contains the story of the purchase of the Cave of Machpela and the burial of the Matriarch Sarah. The Mishneh in Avos says that Avraham experienced 10 tests, which are listed or alluded to in the previous two parshios. According to most commentaries, the commandment to sacrifice his son Yitzchak was the tenth and final test. According to most opinions, Avraham reached the apex of his spirituality when he passed that test.

The Rabbeinu Yona, in his commentary to Pirkei Avos, disagrees. Rabbeinu Yona lists the incident in this week's parsha related to Sarah's burial as the tenth and final test. The fact that Avraham has to buy a burial plot for his wife from Ephron, in the land promised to him by G-d, constitutes the tenth and final test. Avraham successfully passed this test when he had no complaints against the Almighty concerning this incident.

The Rabbeinu Yona's opinion is based on a Gemara [Bava Basra 15b] which puts the following words into the mouth of the Satan: "Master of the Universe, I have traversed the whole world and found none so faithful as thy servant Avraham. For You told him 'Arise, walk through the land to the length and the breadth of it, for to thee I will give it' and even so, when he was unable to find any place in which to bury Sarah until he bought one for four hundred shekels of silver, he did not complain against thy ways."

It is difficult to explain this Rabbeinu Yona. In past years, we have pointed out the "anti-climactic" nature of such a test. It certainly does not seem to fall into the same league as being prepared to sacrifice one's son to the Almighty.

One of the approaches we have used to explain this difficulty is to give a "baseball analogy". There is a difference between a regular game and the final game of the World Series. When a person knows that "this is it -- crunch time!" he may be able to conjure up within himself great reservoirs of strength. When a person knows that he is on the spot, he can sometimes act for a short time, on a supreme level that far surpasses his normal capacities. When Avraham was given the command to take his son and go with him to Mt. Moriah, he sensed that this was a big test. With that sense of the drama of the moment, he gathered in his entire spiritual might and power of concentration. The

adrenalin flowed and he rose to the occasion.

The incident with Sarah's burial plot was just another day of the week. He was faced with this distressing situation in a moment when he was not expecting a test. The adrenalin was not pumping. There was no voice in his head telling him "It is 'nisayon' [test] time - this is it!"

When a person rises to the occasion even under such circumstances, it proves his true nature -- to some extent -- even beyond what might be demonstrated in a test such as 'Akeidas Yitzchak.'

This is what we have explained in past years. This year, we would like to take a different approach.

The word nisayon comes from the word 'nes', which means to demonstrate something, like a flag. The tests that Avraham passed are supposed to be lessons to us in terms of how we should act for all eternity. The only value then for us is when it is evident how Avraham acted under the circumstances of his tests.

What behavior of Avraham's does the test of Sarah's burial model? The behavior is the fact that Avraham did not have complaints or questions for the Almighty, when he experienced the frustration of having to pay a high price for a small plot of land in a country that G-d promised would belong entirely to him. He did not protest: "G-d, what are you doing to me?"

But how do we know that Avraham did not have complaints or questions? How can this story teach a lesson in how to act if we do not see anywhere that "Avraham did not question His Attributes"? Maybe he WAS thinking the whole time "This is not fair! This is not right! You promised me the whole land. Why do I have to deal with an Ephron here?" Maybe that was what Avraham WAS thinking.

True, it is a teaching of Chazal. But how do we know Avraham's reaction? Where is the 'nes' - the flag flying to demonstrate all this? If we do not see it, then the whole point of the test -- that it should be a lesson for all future generations -- is lost.

The answer is based on an interesting terse comment in the Medrash (Bereshis Rabbah 58) on the pasuk "And Avraham prostrated himself before the members of the council" [Bereshis 23:12]. The Medrash states: "From here we see that thanks are offered on good news". Why is the Medrash using this incident to teach about gratitude?

This is the second time Avraham is bowing down. Earlier, when he first appeared before the sons of Ches, he also bowed down [Pasuk 7]. The Medrash is pointing out that the second bowing down is not a civil greeting to the sons of Ches. That was accomplished earlier. The second bowing down is bowing to the Almighty! It was an expression of thanksgiving at having received the "good news" that he finally has a gravesite for his wife.

If Avraham's attitude was "I had it coming", he would not have felt gratitude. Clearly, if he was moved to bow down to express his gratitude to the Almighty, that is a clear sign that he had no complaints and that he did not feel any resentment at the trouble he had to experience in order to acquire the

grave. So this is where we see the 'nes' - the demonstration of the appropriate behavior that we should try to emulate. Despite the fact that perhaps he could have felt "it was coming to him", he had no complaints. On the contrary he hastened to fully prostrate himself in gratitude to the Almighty.

Ephron Lost It When He Heard The Jingle of the Shekels

The Medrash describes Ephron as a person who was "nivhal l'hon" - a person who became confused when he saw the money Avraham was prepared to give for the burial site.

However, something does not seem right. Avraham approached the sons of Ches. He told them that he needed a burial plot. Ephron got up in front of everyone and magnanimously told Avraham that he would GIVE him a burial plot, no charge what so ever. He offered it as an outright present, stating basically that it was a privilege to be able to give Avraham the land.

But Avraham insisted that he did not want the field as a gift. He wanted to pay for it. Ephron responded, "What is a mere 400 pieces of silver between friends. You don't have to pay me."

Suddenly, Ephron mentioned a price! What happened? Where is the transition? Why does Ephron suddenly switch from being the gracious generous giving person to 'What is 400 bucks between friends?'

Rav Simcha Zissel records an incident in the life of the Rambam. A group of wise men approached him and told him that they could change the nature of a cat, training it to be as gracious and polite and as giving as a human being, making the cat into a servile butler. The Rambam argued that it was impossible to change the nature of a cat.

The group of 'wise men' set about for weeks and weeks to train a cat. They trained it to walk on its hind legs. They dressed the cat up in a little suit. It was trained that when people came into the room the cat would escort them to their seats. In fact, the cat acted just like a butler. They further trained the cat to hold a little cup and to serve the people when they got to their seats. They invited the Rambam to show him their accomplishment and to prove to him that it is possible to train an animal to be just like a human being.

The cat greeted the Rambam and guided him to his seat. When the Rambam got to his seat he removed a box from his pocket. In the box was a little mouse. He dropped the mouse on the floor. The cat suddenly forgot that it was a butler and scampered after the mouse. The Rambam turned to the wise men and said, "A cat is a cat and will always be a cat."

Rav Simcha Zissel concluded that unless a human being learns to train himself, he can also be like a cat. There are times when he may act kind and gracious and cultured. But when his button gets pressed and he is no longer in control, he can lose it all to his own equivalent of the mouse.

Avraham's words to Ephron: "I am prepared to give money for the field. Take it from me" pushed Ephron's button. Reaching into his pocket and taking out the shekels of silver was equivalent to the

Rambam's dropping the mouse in front of the cat. Ephron lost it right there. The jingle and the smell of the money was all he needed to throw off his magnanimous show of generosity and become a greedy money-lusting real estate agent.

Every human being potentially has his own 'mouse', whether it is a real mouse or money or food, or whether it is other physical lusts. We all have that thing that can reduce us from being a human being to just a two-legged animal.

A cat cannot become a 'mensch'. But a 'mensch' CAN become a 'mensch'. A person can learn to control himself. That, in fact, is man's spiritual task in this world. The challenge of man is to not 'lose it' when confronted by all the potential lusts of this world. We don't want to become like the cat that scampers after the mouse.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Chaye Sarah are provided below:

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