

# DONT LOOK BACK

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Vayera

## Don't Look Back

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #831, Hagomel for Elective Surgery. Good Shabbos!

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In this week's Parsha, we learn of the destruction of the cities of Sodom, Amorah, Admah, and Tzavayim. The angels came and miraculously saved Lot and his daughters from the destruction of Sodom. They gave Lot only one instruction as they were saving him: Don't look back! He was told to head for the hills and run for his life and he would be saved, provided that he did not turn around to look at the destruction that was befalling his former neighbors.

Rashi explains the reason for this command was that Lot himself was not much better than the people of Sodom. Really, he should have been punished with the rest of the Sodomites and should have been part of the destruction. He was Only being saved in the merit of Uncle Avraham was he being saved; therefore he did not deserve to look back and watch the fate that was befalling those who were not much worse spiritually speaking than he was.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski offers another reason into why Lot was warned not to look back. As is his wont (k'darko b'kodesh), Rabbi Twerski offers a psychological insight into how to deal with one's evil inclination: Many times the greatest impediment to doing Teshuva [repentance] and to changing one's behavior is the fact that a person feels burdened by his past.

When a person looks back at his past and sees how he has sullied himself and the baggage which he carries from what he has committed in the past, he is overcome with feelings of despair and will likely say: How can I ever approach the Master of the World? How can I ever consider myself to be a righteous person? My past is just too sordid to ever become close to the Ribono shel Olam or make any kind of spiritual advance.

Because a person has these feelings of despair, he does not even try to do Teshuva or become closer because "How could the Holy One Blessed Be He ever want a person like me?" Such a person

is making one of the fundamental errors when it comes to Teshuva.

There is a famous Medrash on the pasuk in Devorim [10:12] "And now (v'Ata) Israel what does the L-rd your G-d ask from you..." which states that the word "v'Ata" (spelled with an Ayin) always connotes repentance. What does v'Ata have to do with Teshuva? The answer is that in order to do Teshuva one must focus on the present. One has to have the attitude "Listen, my past is my past. True I may have wallowed in the mud, but NOW I am going to change." There is no point, in fact, it is counter-productive to keep on thinking how muddy one was in the past. The way to move forward is not to focus on what was, but on what is now.

This could be the message of the pasuk in Vayera [Bereishis 19:17] where G-d tells Lot to escape: "And it was when he brought them outside, he said 'Save your souls; do not look behind you...'" The way to save one's soul (via doing Teshuva) is to not look back and dwell on one's past mistakes. Lot, if you want to break away from your association with the people of Sodom and move forward with your life, don't dwell mentally on the fact that you were part and parcel of that evil society, lest you despair of being able to turn over a new leaf in your life.

In the evening prayers we say the expression "And remove Satan from before us and from behind us." This is because many times this is the approach of the Satan and the evil inclination: It is hopeless, you are beyond hope! This is the meaning of "Remove Satan from behind us" -- Don't let the Evil Inclination convince us that because of our past (what is behind us) we cannot move forward. So too, that is what the angel meant when he told Lot: "Do not look behind you".

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## **Rav Shraga Feivel Did Not Let Torah VoDaas Become His Bridge Over the River Kwai**

I would like to share a profound observation from Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his Chumash Commentary -- Meshech Chochmah on Perek 22 pasukim 16-18: "By Myself have I sworn, said the L-rd, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son your only son, that in blessing I will bless you and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you listened to My voice."

It is well known that many of the things the Patriarchs did implanted within us the ability to do the same thing for ourselves. Rav Chaim of Volozhin once asked: What is the big deal that Avraham Avinu jumped into the fiery furnace (in Ur Kasdim, according to the well known Medrash) -- after all, there were many Jews throughout our history who willingly gave their lives, jumping into the fire -- be it literally or figuratively -- in order to sanctify the Divine Name. Why then is what Avraham did so

unique and praiseworthy? Rav Chaim of Volozhin answers that it was Avraham's willingness to give up his life and his actualizing that attribute by jumping into the fiery furnace that imbued in each of his descendants the spiritual strength to replicate this heroism of their ancestor.

Avraham Avinu changed our spiritual DNA as Jews by implanting something into our spiritual genetic makeup that allows us to rise to the occasion and give ourselves over to martyrdom if the situation demands it. Mesiras Nefesh (the ability to give over one's life for G-d's sake) comes from Avraham Avinu.

The Chasam Sofer writes in his responsa that there is a concept of "Emunas Chachomim" - the quality of listening to and believing in the great men of the generation (Gedolei haDor) even when we do not fully understand or fully agree with the positions they have taken. We are nevertheless required to listen to them and we do that. Where does this ability come from? The Chasam Sofer says it comes from Yitzchak Avinu. When his father told him, based on the command of G-d, that he was going to sacrifice him this went against everything that Yitzchak knew and understood about the ways of the Almighty.

"Human sacrifices? This is against Torah. My father must have gotten this all wrong. The Almighty could not have told him this!" This is what Yitzchak must have been thinking. But he put all that aside and did not question his father's direction. He respected the words of the "elders of Israel" and he did what was right, even though he did not understand it. This implanted in us the ability to listen to the Chachomim (wise men of Israel) even though we might not understand what they are saying.

Rav Meir Simcha states that the Binding of Yitzchak also shaped our spiritual DNA and implanted in us an attribute and characteristic that every single Jew may need at some time in his life. That is the ability to be cruel. For Avraham Avinu to take his dearly beloved son and be ready to slit his throat -- to sacrifice him to G-d -- was a tremendous test. It went against every inclination in his spiritual psyche. It required a tremendous amount of cruelty (achzarius), but he did it anyway.

This is a quality, Rav Meir Simcha says, that the Jewish people would need in subsequent generations. There are a few mitzvos that are difficult because on the surface, they seem to require a measure of cruelty. Jews are by nature the most compassionate people on earth. It must have been exceedingly difficult to carry out such mitzvos.

We inherited this ability from our patriarch Avraham. What is amazing, says Rav Meir Simcha, is that even though acts of violence and cruelty usually reshape a person, warp him and pervert him, since Avraham did this act "L'shem Shamayim" [for the sake of Heaven], it did not have the corrosive, pernicious, effect that cruelty normally has on a human being.

This is how Rav Meir Simcha interprets the expression "And his children will inherit the gates of his enemies" [Bereishis 22:17] in the above quoted passage from the Akeida narrative. The interpretation is just that -- now that you have done this, your descendants will also be able to manifest cruelty on occasion, when necessary, to thereby defeat their enemies. And it will not affect them because you

did this for the sake of Heaven. Your children will remain a source of blessing for the entire world.

What is more amazing is that this Avraham Avinu is the paragon of Kindness (Chessed), open-heartedness, generosity, and giving. Yet, when the time came and situation called for cruelty, he was willing to put his Chessed aside and to act like a cruel person. This is truly remarkable.

Sometimes we become obsessed and overcome by what is normally an admirable trait. Anything -- even good and noble ideas -- can become an Avodah Zarah [idolatry] at times in and of itself. Chessed can become an Avodah Zarah. One can become so caught up and obsessed with the kindness he performs, that he can't realize that there may be times where offering such kindnesses is inappropriate, damaging, and simply wrong. He can't put it away when it is time to put it away. This was the greatness of Avraham. He could put his attribute of Chessed away when the situation demanded it; he was not obsessed with it.

I will give an example of what I mean by becoming inappropriately preoccupied with one's life work:

There was a book written about an incident that happened during World War II. It is the story of "The Bridge Over the River Kwai". The Japanese had a prisoner camp located on the River Kwai in what today is Burma. The Japanese, as part of their war effort, wanted to build a bridge between Burma and another place which would have given them strategic military advantage. This prison camp contained an entire battalion of captured British soldiers. The Japanese wanted these prisoners to build a railroad bridge over the River Kwai. The British soldiers, particular their Lieutenant Colonel who was the head of the brigade, refused. "We are not going to build a bridge to help the Japanese in their war effort."

To make a long story short, after a while the British soldiers and their commanding officer agreed to build this bridge. Not only did they agree to build the bridge, it became this man's life preoccupation to build the bridge right! "The Japanese don't know how to build a bridge. They picked the wrong spot on the river to build the bridge. We are going to show them! We British know how to do things right!"

So they went about this amazing feat of engineering to build a bridge over the River Kwai, to the extent that this Lieutenant Colonel became obsessed with building this magnificent bridge over the River Kwai. Someone escaped from the prison, went to the British command and told them what was happening with their imprisoned soldiers. The British military headquarters set up a commando team to mine the bridge and blow it up.

They mined the bridge and waited for "opening day" when the first train was supposed to cross the bridge filled with Japanese dignitaries. The Lieutenant Colonel was waiting expectantly for the first train to come when everyone would be able to see his masterpiece. However, the level of the river sank, and he noticed that the bridge was wired. He understood what was going to happen and he made frantic efforts to cut the wires so that the British commanders would not be able to blow up the bridge that the Japanese needed for their war effort!

What happened to this fellow? He was part of the allies. The British plan to blow up the bridge might hasten the end of the war. It might save lives of allied soldiers. What was he thinking? Was he crazy? Why would he prefer saving his bridge over saving the lives of his fellow British soldiers?

He became so obsessed with his bridge that he lost sight of what was really going on. In the end, the British shot their own Lieutenant Colonel and blew up the bridge. What happened to this fellow? He became preoccupied with the bridge to the extent that nothing else really mattered.

This can happen to each and every one of us. We can become obsessed with our "bridge". Avraham Avinu, the man of Chessed, could have been so obsessed and preoccupied with Chessed that he would have ignored the Almighty's command to kill his son. But Avraham had the capacity to look beyond his signature attribute of Chessed. He had the capacity to recognize what is right and what is important and what is the ultimate Will of G-d.

In life, many times people become obsessed with their life's work. It may be the most noble of works. They can build a school, they can build a Yeshiva, they can build a community, they can build a shul and they become so obsessed with their project, their life's goal that nothing else in the world matters. That is wrong. One must keep their eye on the bigger picture.

An example of an individual who did not let his life's work "overtake him" was Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitch. He was the person who put Yeshiva Torah VoDaas on the map. But when it came time to build other Yeshivos, he was the first person in line to help start competing institutions. When Chaim Berlin wanted to start a new Yeshiva Ketana and the parents in Brooklyn hesitated to send their children to this new "upstart Yeshiva" but rather to the more established Torah VoDaas, Rav Shraga Feivel drew a line on the map and refused to take children from parents who lived beyond his red line. "Anyone who lives beyond this line must send their children to Chaim Berlin!" The reason why The Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Weinberg, zt"l, went to Chaim Berlin rather than Torah VoDaas was because he lived on the other side of the line!

Torah VoDaas did not become the "bridge" of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitch. He was not obsessed with its growth, but rather asked himself "what business am I in?" He concluded that he was in the business of "harbotzas haTorah" [spreading Torah]. If a second (competing) Yeshiva can accomplish more spreading of Torah then that is my business! He had the capacity to not let something become his bridge over the River Kwai.

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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 this Parsha are provided below:

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