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It's Your Choice

This week's Torah portion culminates the ten tests of Abraham with the Binding of Isaac. God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and Abraham stood ready to complete the task. This was the fulfillment of Abraham's highest, holiest potential and thus his last and final test. We read about the binding of Isaac every day in our prayers and it also plays a central role in the prayers of Rosh Hashanah and as we blow the shofar.

The Torah portion also includes events marked with baseness and debauchery. After Lot and his

daughters flee from the city of Sodom, his daughters believe that the world has been destroyed and thus devise a plan to repopulate the world through their father. What does the spiritual low of Lot have to do with the spiritual high of Abraham?

Lesson:

God, out of His abundant kindness allows us to be co-creators in our own reality. He gives us the ability to choose -- to either fulfill our spiritual potential, or to move in the opposite direction towards evil and destruction.

When the shepherds of Lot and Abraham were arguing over muzzling their animals in other people's property, Abraham told Lot that it's not good for family to quarrel. As such, Lot should choose where he wanted to go, and Abraham would go the other way. At this point, Lot had a choice: he could have said that Abraham is correct and told his shepherds to muzzle their animals; he could have told Abraham that he does not want to leave his tutelage, that Abraham is the key to greatness. He could have also settled in a place where the people were moral and protect his family from negative influences. However, Lot chose 'greener pastures' over greatness. He chose to settle in the land of Sodom that was known for its extreme wickedness and immorality because it had luscious land for his pastures. It was the very choice of being in Sodom that led to the debase situation with his daughters.

Abraham also had choices to make; his spiritual compass lead him to very different decisions. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his son

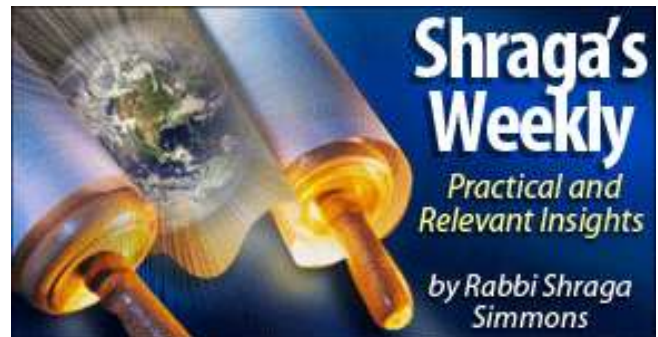
Isaac, it went against every fiber of who he was. Abraham was the epitome of kindness, the last thing he wanted to do was to sacrifice his son whom he had waited a hundred years for! Additionally, God told Abraham that He would fulfill His promise of making a great nation through Isaac. It would seem impossible to fulfill this promise if Abraham sacrificed him. Moreover, Abraham was telling the entire world about God – about one God and His love and compassion for every creation – that God did not require or even want human sacrifices, which was the idolatry of that time.

Asking Abraham to sacrifice his own child went against everything Abraham knew and taught and believed to be true about God. Yet Abraham didn't question God. He completely subjugated his will to God's will and made decisions based on that knowledge. This is what led to Abraham's greatness – through aligning his will to God's will and making decisions in his life based on that awareness. This is what brought out Abraham's potential and created Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish nation.

Often times throughout the day, we are faced with choices. Do we make decisions like Lot – caving into our lower selves and moving away from what we know is right, or do we choose that which we know God really wants from us at that moment, no matter how hard it is?

When we keep the awareness of 'what does God want from me in this moment' and make decisions based on that, then we emulate Abraham, pass our tests, and activate our highest spiritual potential.

Exercise: When faced with a choice throughout the day, think of what God would want from you and choose based on that. Know that you've fulfilled more of your potential.



Be a Giver

Abraham is on a mission to teach the world about God. Yet if God is an infinite force who encompasses everything and lacks nothing (He doesn't get tired, thirsty, restless or cold), how can He possibly be described?

The answer is found in what motivated God to create the world in the first place. He wasn't lonely. He wasn't bored. And it wasn't a science experiment. Yet God did lack one thing, so to speak. He lacked someone outside of Himself to nurture and bestow kindness upon. Thus the attribute of "giving" is the most essential thing we can say about God.

Abraham's Spiritual Greatness

Abraham emulated God by performing endless acts of kindness. His tent, pitched in the middle of an intercity highway, was open on all four sides so that any traveler was welcome to stop in and enjoy a royal feast.

At the end of the meal, invariably the grateful guests would want to thank Abraham. "It is not I who you should thank," Abraham would reply. "I am only emulating the Almighty Who gives us life, provides our food, and sustains us moment by moment. To Him we should give thanks!"

To those who balked at the idea of thanking God, Abraham offered an alternative: Pay for the meal. Considering the astronomical price tag for a fabulous meal in the middle of a barren desert, Abraham succeeded in inspiring even the skeptics to "give God a try."

Talking To God?

Our parsha begins with Abraham having just circumcised himself at age 99. We'd expect anyone in this condition to be recuperating in bed. Instead, Abraham is sitting at the entrance of his tent in search of guests.

Yet on this day, no guests are in sight. God made a heat wave to ensure that no travelers were on the road – in order to give Abraham some much-needed rest. The ploy didn't work, however, because for Abraham, the pain of circumcision paled in comparison to the anguish of not doing kindness for others. So God had to send guests in order to spare Abraham pain!

"God appeared to Abraham as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men passing by. Abraham ran to greet them and said, 'Please come in! I'll bring some water, and you can wash up and rest..' Abraham hurried to Sarah's tent and said, 'Quickly make three cakes.' Abraham ran to his cattle, selected a choice one, and

gave it to his son who rushed to prepare it..." (Genesis 18:1-8)

There's a lot to talk about here: How Abraham treats the guests royally and serves the finest foods, how he involves his family in the mitzvah, and his incredible zeal in making it all happen.

But something about this sequence should be bothering us: At the beginning of the story, God appears to Abraham, and next thing you know, Abraham leaves to attend to three strangers. Imagine you're in the middle of speaking to the President of the United States. Would you ever say, "Hold on, there's some strangers walking by. I'll get back to you later!" So what made Abraham think leaving God was the right thing to do?

The answer is that there is an experience even greater than talking to God. To be like God. Human beings are created in the image of God. God is a giver. Thus, giving is our greatest form of spiritual expression.

The Need To Give

Abraham was a wealthy man who had many servants. If so, why didn't he simply order his staff to serve the meal?

We mistakenly think that "giving" is a drain on our time and resources. On the contrary, giving energizes and enlivens us. At the beginning of our parsha, Abraham is in such pain from the circumcision that he is only able to sit outside his tent. But when the guests pass by, he runs to greet them! And his energy is infectious: His wife and children also hurry to perform the mitzvah.

Imagine being born into great wealth and given a monthly allowance of \$100,000. You never have to work a day in your life. You can play golf, go shopping, travel, lie on the beach. Everything easy, everything handed to you. The good life!

Actually, it's not. Because after awhile, you'd get tired of "taking" all the time. A nagging voice persists: What is my contribution to this world?

The Talmud says there are four individuals who are "considered dead even while they're alive." The common denominator of these people is that (due to circumstantial limitations) they are unable to give.

Of course, the reason to treat others kindly is because we care about them. But just as crucial is what giving does for me. The act of "giving" makes me more sensitive, caring, compassionate and... God-like.

The Basis of it All

Giving is the foundation of any relationship. When two people focus on giving to one another, the relationship flows in two directions – connecting, linking and forging the bond. But when the focus is on taking, the dynamic pulls in opposite directions – creating strain and tension.

This is illustrated later in our parsha with the story of Sodom. What was the terrible sin that caused the city to be destroyed? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109) says that in Sodom it was illegal to welcome strangers. One Sodomite woman who gave bread to a poor person was punished by publicly being covered with honey and devoured by bees.

Geographically, Sodom is located next to the Dead Sea. In Israel, there are two seas connected by the Jordan River: the Sea of Galilee in the north, and the Dead Sea in the south. Since the Dead Sea is the lowest point on planet Earth (396 meters below sea level), water flows in, but doesn't flow out. This inability to "give" is why it's called the Dead Sea. Likewise, any society that eschews giving is on a path to self-destruction.

Making It Real

Practically speaking, how does one become a "giver?" The simple answer: Start giving. Some people say, "I can only give to someone I love." This is incorrect. The Hebrew word for "give" – *hav*, is the same root as *ahava*, which means "love." Giving is what leads to love. When I give, I invest a part of myself, making you more precious to me. This is why parents love their children most of all; it is their greatest investment.

A few suggestions: Visit some patients at the local hospital. Invite your friends to a Shabbat dinner. Volunteer to serve meals at a homeless shelter. Do the dishes at home even when it's not your turn. Emulate God and be a giver. Do it with zeal. Do it as if your life depends on it.



Jewish Character Traits

"And God appeared unto him"[1] are the opening words of *Parashas Vayeira*. Interestingly enough, although in context it is clear that God appeared to Abraham, the Torah does not explicitly name him. The last verse in *Parashas Lech Lecha* indicates that Abraham had just circumcised himself and the members of his household, so we know that Hashem came to visit him during his recuperation.

Some commentators wonder why the text omits the Patriarch's name. Why does he remain anonymous? Surely, his many merits rendered him worthy of the Divine visitation. There is a profound teaching behind this omission. The true greatness of Abraham (whose name means "father of all nations") could be found not only in his incredible *chesed* - loving-kindness, his all-encompassing faith in God, his ability to sacrifice ... - but also in his genuine humility. "Behold, I am but dust and ashes,"[2] he proclaimed. He totally negated himself, divested himself of his ego, and became a complete spiritual being. It was this humility that enabled him to connect with God.

All of us who would strive to have a relationship with the Almighty should attempt to emulate Abraham's example. For our generation, this should not be too difficult, for if anyone should realize how fragile life is - how, in an instant, all our possessions can be wiped out and our very lives forfeit - it is we. On a universal as well as on a personal level, we live with uncertainty. It seems that no place is secure. Terrorism, economic instability, and fear of illness loom over us like sinister shadows. Certainly we can all echo the words of the Patriarch: "I am but dust and ashes" Our only hope is to return to God and proclaim with the psalmist, "I raise my eyes upon the mountains, whence will come my help? My help is from Hashem"[3]

CHARACTER TRAITS THAT DISTINGUISH A JEW

Chesed - Loving-kindness

Our Sages teach that certain traits distinguish us and indicate that we are descendants of the Patriarch Abraham. One of those traits is *chesed*. In addition to *chesed*, yet another trait is associated with loving-kindness: *rachamim* (compassion). But there is no redundancy in Hebrew; thus, each of these terms has its own distinct component of loving-kindness, which we will discover in this *parashah*.

The *parashah* opens with Abraham, at the age of 99, recovering from his circumcision. For any adult to undergo such a procedure is no simple matter, but for a man of 99 it is a painful ordeal. This narrative takes place on the third day following the *bris*, which we know is the most difficult. Yet Abraham sat in the doorway of his

tent, looking for guests so that he could perform the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* (hospitality). Therefore, Hashem compassionately caused the sun to shine in its full intensity to deter travelers so that Abraham should not be disturbed by wayfarers.

But Abraham's heart was bursting with *chesed*. He had a need to give, and he suffered more at the thought of not being able to welcome guests than from the physical pain of his circumcision. He anxiously sat at the threshold of his tent, searching for passersby to invite into his home. When the Almighty saw Abraham's yearning to reach out, to be of service to others, He sent him three angels in the guise of nomads. Although ailing, Abraham was so overjoyed to see them that he actually *ran* to greet them, offered them hospitality, and prepared a lavish meal for them.

Herein is to be found the difference between the traits of *chesed* and *rachamim*. The word *rachamim* is derived from the word *rechem*, which means "womb." Even as a mother has compassion on the child growing within her, so, too, the individual with *rachmanus* has his/her compassion aroused by a certain need. But *chesed* operates *independent of need*. It throbs in the heart and demands expression. The *baal chesed* - he who personifies *chesed* - desires to give because that is his *raison d'etre*. Doing so lends meaning to his life; that is the spiritual gene that our forefather Abraham transmitted to us: the desire to *give, to make the world a better place* by extending a helping hand.

From whom did our forefather Abraham learn this? From the Almighty Himself. It was on

pillars of *chesed* that God built this world.[4] Prior to the Creation, there was no life in need of God's compassion, but it is God's "desire," so to speak, to do *chesed*. Therefore He created the world in order to dispense His loving-kindness. We have a mandate to emulate the Almighty God: to live our lives in such a way that we become *gomlei chasadim*, men and women who impart loving-kindness to others.

Our bobbe, Rebbetzin Miriam Jungreis, *a"h*, was a true embodiment of this trait of *chesed*. Her life was one of constant giving, and even in her last days, as illness racked her frail body, she continued to organize *chesed* programs for needy Russian immigrants, explaining that if she could not offer help to others, her life had no meaning.

Bikur Cholim - Visiting the Sick

Our Sages impart yet another reason why Abraham's name is omitted as God makes His compassionate visit in the opening verse of this *parashah*. Had the Torah identified the Patriarch by name, we might have concluded that God visits only the righteous. To the Almighty, however, every human being is holy and the *Shechinah* hovers over every sickbed. Therefore, the lesson that we should glean from this is that we, too, must visit the sick and express concern, not only for friends, family, and prominent individuals, but to all those in need.

Acting upon this teaching, *Bikur Cholim* organizations (for visiting the sick) have been important to Jewish life throughout the centuries. Timeless lessons are to be found in the very words "*Bikur Cholim*," as well. The Hebrew word *bikur* (to visit) is related to *bikores*

(investigation), to teach that when we visit someone who is ill, we should investigate and determine how we may best help the patient and family members. The word *bikur* is also related to *boker* (morning), reminding us to bring cheer and sunshine with our very presence and not to depart from the sickroom without pronouncing a prayer for good health. The importance of visiting the sick is just one of the concepts of *chesed* that we can learn from this *parashah*.

Welcoming Guests - Lessons For Life

Although the Torah had not as yet been given, Abraham felt God's word in every fiber of his being. The Torah describes in great detail the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim* - welcoming guests.

When we open our home to guests, we transform it from a residence into a spiritual abode in which we share God's blessings. Our home is not simply a residence in which we eat, drink, sleep, and relax, it is also a place in which we welcome guests, impart joy to others, and help all those in need.

We can learn many lessons for life from *Parashas Vayeira* and can readily apply them to our own situations. Among these lessons are:

(1) **The Chuppah - Abraham's Model for the Jewish Home:** Abraham's tent was open on all sides so that it might be accessible from every direction. To this very day, in remembrance of the Tent of Abraham, the *chuppah* (marriage canopy) is open on all sides, in the hope that the home of the young couple will replicate Abraham's tent, in which guests were lovingly provided with hospitality. This teaching applies to *all* guests, for

even though Abraham thought that his guests were simple desert nomads, he welcomed them with great honor.

(2) **Enthusiasm:** Abraham *ran* to greet his guests and he ran to serve them, teaching us that when we perform a mitzvah, it should be done with alacrity and joyous enthusiasm. It is not only *our performance* of mitzvos that is critical, but *the manner* in which we do so: grudgingly or happily, angrily or kindly, warmly or coldly.

(3) **Attend to the needs of guests:** Abraham had many servants, but he and his wife Sarah *personally* attended to the needs of their guests. Thus we learn that it is proper to honor visitors by serving them.

(4) **Say little, but do much:** Abraham invited his guests to partake of "a little water" and "a morsel of bread,"[5] but then proceeded to prepare a lavish banquet, teaching us that a host should say little - so as not to make his guests feel beholden - but deliver much.

(5) **Thank God:** Abraham did not allow his guests to express thanks to him, but instructed them to thank God. He impressed upon them that all that he possessed and shared was from Hashem. From this we learn that when we entertain guests, we must also consider their spiritual needs and make them aware of God's presence and bounty.

(6) **Escort guests:** It is written that when the angels took their leave from the tent of Abraham, he "walked with them to escort them"[6] - reminding us that not only is it a mitzvah to invite guests to our homes, but when they depart, we

should accompany them (for example, if we live in an apartment building, we should escort them to the elevator; if we have a private home, we should walk them to the door). To this very day, we can recall our grandparents, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Abraham Jungreis, of blessed memory, walking us to our car and waving until we turned the corner. This same tradition was continued by our beloved father, Rabbi Meshulem Jungreis, *z"tl*, and lives on today in our mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis *a"h*.

(7) **According to the effort is the reward:** The reward is commensurate with the pain: Although Abraham was suffering intensely due to his circumcision, he transcended that pain so that he might perform the mitzvah of *hachnasas orchim*, and experienced great joy in doing so. We learn that the greater the effort and *mesiras nefesh* (self-sacrifice) that the mitzvah entails, the greater the satisfaction in doing it. Today, we go to synagogue despite distance and inclement weather; we study Torah despite our fatigue; we give *tzedakah*, despite the fact that we are on a tight budget, and we grow spiritually as we perform each mitzvah.

(8) **Hospitality:** *Hachnasas orchim* may be proffered on many different levels. People are lonely. They yearn for warmth and family. People are perplexed; they need guidance. They are spiritually deprived and are yearning for something to hold on to, something to believe in. The hospitality that Abraham extended encompassed all this. By following in his footsteps, we can bring people closer to God. A most auspicious time to extend such hospitality is Shabbos, for the spiritual power of the day is all

encompassing and will leave a life-transforming impression on our guests.

(9) **Responsibilities of guests:** "They [the angels] asked Abraham, 'Where is Sarah, your wife?'" [7] Rashi explains that the angels knew where Sarah was. Nevertheless, they inquired about her whereabouts to praise her to Abraham. Their question called his attention to her fine character traits and modesty, thus making her even more beloved to her husband.

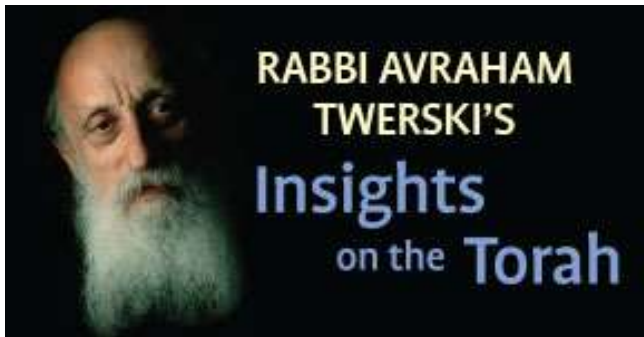
The Torah teaches that we should always try to enhance the *shalom bayis* (peace and harmony) of those whom we visit by praising one spouse to the other. Similarly, the most meaningful gift that we can give parents and grandparents is to notice something praiseworthy about their children. Such expressions of kindness are the most meaningful gift that visitors can impart.

(10) **Praying for others:** "He who prays on behalf of another when he himself needs that very same thing is answered first." God granted Sarah a son after Abraham prayed for Abimelech to be blessed with children.[8]

Find someone who has the same problems as you and pray for that person, and God will hearken to your prayers. Admittedly, this is not an easy challenge, for we tend to be consumed by our own needs. We see only our own requirements, but if we can transcend ourselves, if we identify with the pain of our neighbors and sincerely beseech God on their behalf, that is our best reason to hope that God will answer us.

1. Genesis 18:1.
2. *Ibid.* 18:27.
3. Psalms 121:1-2.
4. Psalms 89:3.

5. Genesis 18:4-5.
6. *Ibid.* 18:16.
7. *Ibid.* 18:9.
8. *Ibid.* 20:17, Rashi to *ibid.* 21:1.



The Most Powerful Parenting Technique

He (Lot) said, “Behold now, my lords; turn about please, to your servant’s house; spend the night and wash your feet, then wake up early and go your way...” He made a feast for them and baked matzos, and they ate (19:2-3).

Many books have been written about parenting. There is universal agreement that the single greatest influence on children is their parents’ behavior. All other techniques parents may employ are not nearly as effective as what they themselves do. Parental behavior is deeply engrained in children.

The Torah teaches us this in the character of Lot. Lot was a rogue who rejected Abraham, saying, “I want neither Abram nor his God” (Rashi, Genesis 13:11). Lot chose to live in the corrupt city of Sodom, fully aware of their decadence (*ibid* 13:13). He married a woman of Sodom, who turned into a pillar of salt as punishment because

when Lot asked her to give his guests salt, she said, “Are you trying to bring this wicked trait of hospitality to us?” (Midrash). According to the Midrash, giving food and shelter to wayfarers was punishable by death in Sodom.

Yet this depraved scoundrel, Lot, risked his life to take in guests, and indeed aroused the entire populace against him. He put himself in even greater danger when he defied the populace and sought to protect his guests. This seems to be incongruous with his degenerate character.

R’ Meir Rubman (Zichron Meir) says that having been exposed to his Uncle Abraham in his youth and having witnessed the overwhelming dedication which Abraham had to *hachnasas orchim*, welcoming guests, made an indelible impression on Lot. There is every reason to believe that Lot assimilated to his environment, and indeed, he was spared from the destruction of Sodom solely because he was Abraham’s nephew (Rashi, Genesis 19:17). In spite of his depravity, he could not extirpate this particular trait, to the point of risking his life to be hospitable to guests.

This is a convincing example of the power of early imprinting. It is commonplace that children who were victims of parental abuse may swear that they will never be harsh to their children, yet they often repeat the very abuse they despised. This may seem to defy logic. However, the early imprinting of a behavior may overwhelm logic. There is only one effective method to teach children proper behavior, and that is for parents to practice it themselves.