

And it happened after these things/words that G-d tested Avraham. (22:1)

The *nisayon*, trial, of *Akeidas Yitzchak*, the Binding of Yitzchak, was the greatest of the ten trials which our Patriarch, Avraham Avinu, underwent. His triumph over the various challenges to his faith and his emotions, both as a father and as the first Jew, serves as a paradigm for – and major intercessor on behalf of – his descendants. The *Akeidah* epitomizes the Jew's determination to serve Hashem, despite his difficult circumstances. *Pesikta Rabbasi* teaches that the *Akeidah* took place on *Rosh Hashanah*. For this reason, it serves as the Torah reading for the second day of *Rosh Hashanah*. That, together with the various *tefillos*, prayers, which refer to the *Akeidah*, all serve as interveners, recalling Avraham's superhuman act of devotion. In his merit, we beseech Hashem to pardon and continue to sustain us.

I have always been bothered that on the day we ask for life, we recall an act of devotion that was about to end life. Is this not a bit ironic, almost self-defeating? Furthermore, the *Akeidah* is considered the ultimate test of the "ten." Why? What about Avraham's being flung into a fiery furnace? That surely was not a trial to ignore. Yet, it lags far behind the *Akeidah*. According to *Rashi*, it is number two on a scale of ten. Should not Avraham's willingness to risk his life for Hashem not receive greater acclaim? It is almost as if Avraham had simply been doing what was expected of him.

I recently came across a powerful analysis by *Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl*, concerning the episode in the *Talmud Menachos 29b* which relates Moshe *Rabbeinu's* dialogue with Hashem concerning the proper *s'char*, reward, to be accorded to the *Tanna* Rabbi Akiva. *Chazal* relate that Moshe was overwhelmed by Rabbi Akiva's knowledge and his ability to derive *chiddushim*, original Torah explanations, from the crowns affixed to the letters of the Torah. He asked Hashem, "Show me his reward." Whereby Hashem showed Moshe how Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by having his flesh torn off his body with metal combs. His corpse was then cut up and sold in the marketplace. When Moshe saw this, he was appalled. *Zu Torah, v'zu s'charah?* – "This is Torah, and this is its reward?" Hashem's response was, *Shsok kach alah b'machashavti*, "Be silent! This is what has been My line of thinking." Basically, Hashem told Moshe that the reason behind what appeared to be this gruesome and humiliating form of punishment was beyond Moshe's ken.

It is notable that when Moshe saw Rabbi Akiva's torture, he did not ask any questions. It was only after he saw his flesh being weighed in the marketplace that he became disconcerted. Was Rabbi Akiva's death not sufficiently disturbing that it would engender questioning? *Rav Shach* explains that Moshe understood that there is no greater reward than meriting to leave this world *Al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying Hashem's Name. This is the ultimate service to Hashem. Indeed, Rabbi Akiva himself declared to his students, "All my days I was troubled about when I would have the opportunity to fulfill the mandate of 'loving Hashem with all my heart and soul.'" He had reached the pinnacle of a life devoted to Hashem.

When his flesh was sold in the marketplace, however, it was too much. It was a *chillul Hashem*, desecration of Hashem's Name. The denigration of such an illustrious Torah leader was too much to bear. Moshe cried out, "Is this Torah? Is this its reward?"

What a powerful lesson the *Rosh Yeshivah* is teaching us concerning the manner in which a Jew should live. Avraham *Avinu* walking into the fiery furnace was the ultimate Jewish experience. It was the zenith of service to Hashem. He was doing that which was **expected** of him. This is the meaning of **living** as a Jew. Only a Jew who is prepared to **die** as a Jew really **lives** as a Jew!

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we recall the *Akeidas Yitzchak*, which is Yitzchak's *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice. We are telling Hashem, "Yes – we are prepared to die as Jews." Thus, we are deserving of living as Jews. In the merit of our Patriarchs, who understood the depth of love that one should manifest for the Almighty, we ask that He grant us a year blessed with life, so that we may be able to sanctify our lives for (and, to) Him. To live for Hashem is to be prepared to die for Him.