

Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Yitzchak. (22:2)

Akeidas Yitzchak, binding of Yitzchak, is considered Avraham Avinu's tenth and most challenging trial. This test was to catapult our Patriarch to the apex of *avodas ha'Borei*, service to the Creator. We wonder if the tenth trial was that difficult, after he had already passed nine earlier trials, with each success refining and enhancing Avraham's level of *mesiras nefesh*. For instance, if a person must scale a large mountain, with the last one hundred feet fraught with danger, can we say that it is the same as the fellow who stands at the foot of the mountain prepared to climb? True, the climber nearing the pinnacle is about to undertake the most difficult portion of the climb, but he has climbed thousands of feet already. The other climber is just starting out. Our Patriarch had successfully passed nine trials. While they did not hold a candle to the *Akeidah*, they did make him a stronger, more deeply committed, servant of Hashem.

The *Chasam Sofer* quotes his *Rebbe*, the *Haflaah* (cited by *Horav Yechiel Tzucker*), who explains why the *nisayon*, challenge, of the *Akeidah*, was by far the most intense and most difficult for Avraham to pass. He says that, when Avraham was tested with the *Akeidah*, Hashem had cleared the slate and erased any of Avraham's prior achievements. It was as if he was undertaking his first *nisayon*. He was not at the top of the mountain; he was at the very bottom, about to attempt his very first climb. Every spiritual merit and plateau that he had was off the books. Avraham was going into the *Akeidah* like a novice. Indeed, as a result, what Avraham achieved at the *Akeidah* was far beyond expectations. This was not his tenth *nisayon*, but his first. When a person is tested, the key to triumph is the awareness and belief that *ein od Milvado*; there is none other, but Him/Hashem. No one and nothing can help us, other than the Almighty. Thus, the less prior support one has had, the greater the *nisayon*, but, concomitantly, the reward is also greater.

We all experience *nisyanos* in life. Some triumph and, as a result, grow spiritually. Unfortunately, others are unable to muster the necessary spiritual fortitude to succeed in overcoming the challenge. He may feel helpless or overwhelmed or that he is a victim of circumstance. The first step or hurdle he must climb is to acknowledge that it is only a challenge, designed by Hashem for his benefit. It is there either to promote growth or to serve as a springboard for greater opportunity. It is not a punishment; it is a challenge or, as I would like to call it, a speedbump, to slow him down, allowing him to pause and think. He is definitely not at a dead end, but rather, at a spiritual junction, intended to lift him higher than he could have climbed on his own.

The following needs no name because it could be anyone. Who has not experienced a dramatic change, Heavenly-choreographed for his benefit? A young father made a decent living working in marketing. One day, out of the blue, he was laid off. With no income and limited savings, he had every reason to fall into despair. He was sitting in his car in front of his three-year-old's playgroup, mulling over the circumstances in which he found himself. The *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, was going into overdrive in making its "pitch" to him. Nothing like a little depression to turn one off to

spiritual growth. The young man recited some *Tehillim*, offered a short, personal prayer to Hashem and then called his *chavrusa*, study partner, “Hi! I was just informed that I have more time to learn. Perhaps we can add to our learning.” During the next few weeks, his learning intensified. He had time, because he had no reason to leave. He even discovered he had a talent for teaching. A short while later, an article he had written for a local Jewish magazine was “discovered.” Could he write other articles? His articles became the springboard for a popular podcast on Torah *chinuch*. His personal setback was actually a hidden opportunity to reevaluate his life, dig into his talents, and redirect himself toward greater success.

Rav Tzucker cites a story, related by the *Ohr Zarua* (a *halachic* compendium authored by Horav Yitzchak ben Moshe of Vienna in the thirteenth century and not brought to print until the

nineteenth century). The story is incredible in its simplicity and powerful in the message it imparts.

In a small town lived a Jew who made it his business to attend *shul* services daily. He was the first one at the *minyan*, most often opening the *shul*. He made an effort to recite the *berachos* slowly, carefully, meticulously, and he would walk around the *shul* answering *amen* to the *berachos* recited by the other *misparallelim*, congregants. No one lives forever, and this wonderful Jew's life came to an end. Two days after the funeral, the *shul's gabbai*, sexton, walked in and what he saw before him almost caused him to pass out. Standing in front of the *bimah*, lectern, was the Jew who had been buried two days earlier!

In a shaky voice, the *gabbai* asked, “Are you in *Olam HaZeh*, this world, or in *Olam Habba*, the World To Come?” (“Are you dead or alive?”) The deceased replied, “It has been two days since I entered into *Olam Habba*. However, since for years I was of the *asarah rishomin*, first ten men to make the *minyan*, and, as a result, I inspired others, for my *tikkun*, repair (every *neshamah* must go through a process during which it repairs whatever spiritual deficiencies it has), I was permitted to return to the *shul* in which I had *davened* for so many years.”

The story is mind boggling! What is especially impressive is that it is cited as fact by none other than the illustrious *posek*, *Ohr Zarua*. He concludes by saying that he wrote the story about a simple Jew who was devoted to the first *halachah* in *Shulchan Aruch*, “One should rise like a lion to serve the Creator.” This man made it a point to rise early every day to be among the first men to *daven* to Hashem. As a result, he merited immediate entry into *Gan Eden*! The lesson: Hashem does not necessarily test us with challenges, such as the *Akeidah*. A simple test, such as rising early in the morning to go to *shul* to *daven*, is enough to gain entry into *Gan Eden*. (Obviously, how one spends the rest of the day plays a critical role in his reward.)

Horav Yehudah Tzadkah, *zl*, writes in the name of his saintly Rebbe, Horav Yehudah Pesachyah, *zl*, who was one of the illustrious *mekubalim* of his time, that there was a *shul* in Iraq where all the congregants rose early in the morning to attend *shul*. They would learn before *davening* and go into *Shacharis* straight from their learning. As a result, claimed Rav Pesachyah, throughout the

entire area, no one became ill and no one died prematurely. When a person succeeds in overcoming a challenge, he elevates himself and everyone around him.