



TIMELESS TORAH

KINLOSS

Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays: 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

Vayera:

Tests of Kindness: Building Unexpected Strength of Character

Parshat Vayera contains two seemingly paradoxical central themes. The first is Avraham Avinu's defining characteristic of *chesed*, kindness. The second theme, which seems to run in direct contradiction to the value of *chesed* that he so strongly espoused, is the culmination of the ten *nisyonot* (trials), to which Avraham was subjected. By analysing the relationship between these two themes, we can learn a number of vital lessons about what it means to live a life of both kindness and commitment to our faith and heritage.

More Important Than Speaking to God?

The *parshah* begins with the episode of the three angels, disguised as wayfarers, and a description of Avraham's superlative *hachnasat orchim*, inviting these strangers into his home and serving them a meal fit for a king. Incredibly, the background to this episode is that Avraham was sitting in the entranceway of his tent, engrossed in a personal meeting with Hashem Himself. We can imagine the dilemma in which Avraham found himself when he saw the three men come towards him. On the one hand, everything about Avraham is kindness, and he understands that it is Hashem's will that he invites these weary guests into his house and serve them food and drink. Yet, he is now in the middle of a dialogue with Hashem. How can he interrupt this Divine experience to deal with mundane matters? Which of these values must Avraham prioritise?

Rashi, in one of his explanations, reveals to us one of the most magnificent moments of the whole Torah. The verse says, "*My Master! Do not pass by your servant.*" This plea, says Rashi, was not addressed to the wayfarers, but to none other than Hashem Himself. Avraham turned to Hashem and said to Him, "Please don't go away. I have just got to do something that is really, really important. I have to look after these guests who might need a place to stay."

How could Avraham have the audacity to do this? The only possible answer contains an incredible lesson in how to balance our personal lives with our spiritual lives. Avraham Avinu must have been so attuned with how Hashem wanted him to live that he knew that it was Hashem's will that he should interrupt their conversation to invite in the guests. He knew that this is what he needed to do now.

The critical message here is that *more than Hashem wants us to speak with him, He wants us to act like Him*. This is our life mission; this is our overarching responsibility.

The Heritage of Kindness

How do we build this into ourselves and the lives we lead? The answer lies in another trait that the *parshah* reveals about Avraham. Before the overturning of Sodom, the verses tell us how Hashem decided not to conceal the impending destruction from Avraham because, *I know that he will command his children after him to do righteousness and justice (Bereishit 18:18)*. As Rabbi Sacks זצ"ל, whose Yahrzeit falls this coming week, points out, this is the only place in the Torah where we explicitly discover the reason why Avraham was chosen to be the progenitor of the Jewish people. He had proven that he would teach his children to continue in the ways of Hashem. Avraham is the forefather of our nation because Hashem knew that even in a world full of paganism and idolatry, Avraham would teach his children and successive generations to practice justice and righteousness.

To understand a little of how Avraham's attributes of *chesed* reached us, we must have a look at yet another point in the *parshah*. Chapter 21 verse 33, tells us that Avraham eventually settled in Be'er Sheva, where he established an *eshel*. The exact meaning of the word *eshel* is debated by the Sages. One opinion is that Avraham planted an orchard to supply fruit to his guests, and another opinion is that it was an inn

to provide food, drink and a place of rest for passers-by. Either way, the impact is the same. He set up a vehicle to allow him to deliver kindness and to look after people. And there, too, the verse continues, he *called out in the Name of Hashem, God of the universe*. He used this establishment of *chessed* to teach people about Hashem.

A insightful Midrash (Midrash Tehillim 110) teaches us that not only was *emunah*, faith in Hashem, missing from the world at that time, but *tzedek*, righteousness and kindness, was also dormant. Avraham brought to the world the concept of faith and belief in one God, but at the same time, he introduced the concept of kindness for its own sake. He was the one who pioneered the idea of what it means to reach out to someone else who needs you. Avraham was able to transmit the messages of faith and the values of monotheism because he was someone who genuinely and deeply cared for others.

Remarkably, this *eshe/* did not disappear after Avraham's death. Much later in *Sefer Bereishit*, the Torah tracks Yaakov's journey to Egypt. Although he was in a rush to meet his beloved son, Yosef, Yaakov made a stop in Be'er Sheva before continuing his journey southward. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 94) explains that he went to Be'er Sheva to cut down some of the cedar trees that his grandfather, Avraham, had planted there. Yaakov Avinu knew that eventually, his descendants would travel through the desert and would need wood with which to build the Mishkan (Tabernacle). He wanted these special trees that had formed Avraham's shelter of kindness and faith to serve as the beams of the Mishkan.

This gives us an outstanding perspective on how to pass on a sacred value to our children. Avraham had dedicated his life to bringing people under the wings of the Divine presence. The cedar trees of his *eshe/* were literally imbued with *chessed*, and Yaakov wanted those trees to pass on a message that would be contained within the future Tabernacle in the desert, the home for Hashem's presence built by his descendants.

Avraham's Paradox

With all this in mind, learning about the episodes of Yishmael's banishment and *Akeidat Yitzchak* (the binding of Yitzchak on the Altar) become exceedingly difficult to understand. Let us take a closer look at what happened.

Yitzchak is born, and there is a problem in the way that Yishmael is interacting with him.

Avraham and Sarah are upset, to the extent that Sarah prevails upon Avraham to drive out Yishmael and his mother, Hagar. Yishmael, Sarah declares, will not inherit with my son, Yitzchak.

Avraham is terribly distressed at this, but Hashem says to him, "Do not be upset about it; don't think badly of it. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you to do because your line will continue through Yitzchak." And of course, Avraham does so. He gets up early in the morning, takes bread and a flask of water and gives it to Hagar. He places the food on Hagar's shoulders, together with the child, and she wanders in the desert.

It is painful to imagine the scene. Avraham was looking from his tent, watching his own wife and son wander through the desert with barely anything to sustain themselves and he had to hold himself back from helping them. When we compare this to the scene depicted at the beginning of the *parshah*, where Avraham rushes to serve three total strangers with fresh meat and drink, the image is astounding.

What is going on here? At least the beginning of the answer is that Avraham demonstrates through this that he is in complete control of his emotions. Here, Avraham shows that every act of kindness he does is because he believes this is Hashem's will. Even when he must act in a way that is completely contrary to his nature, he does so. Overcoming this and understanding that this too, is God's will was the essence of this test.

Equally difficult to understand is Avraham's alacrity in taking Yitzchak on a three-day journey that he knows will culminate in him slaughtering his beloved only son. The Rashbam (d. 1158) teaches that the *Akeidah* was, on some level, a reprimand to Avraham for him having made a pact with the Avimelech, king of the Pelishtim. Avraham had been promised that the Land of Canaan would eventually belong to his descendants, and he should not have made peace with a king that he might one day have to fight against.

Avraham was being taught a fundamental lesson. Although *chessed* is an amazing attribute, there can be a dangerous side to an over-exuberance of kindness. Sometimes, we must express *gevurah*, strength of will, which is the opposite of *chessed*, in order to balance ourselves and ensure that we always do the right thing. These lessons from Avraham Avinu's life guide us in leading a life of true *chessed*, in which the kindness we perform is defined by our faith.