

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chayai Sarah  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Chayai Sarah – The straw that broke the camel’s back!<sup>1</sup>

We learn that Avraham was tested ten times<sup>2</sup>. However, there are slight differences of opinion amongst the commentators as to which incidents constitute each of the ten tests.

For example, most commentators include Avraham being thrown into a fiery furnace by Nimrod as one of the ten tests. However, the Rambam excludes this incident because it is only brought in the Midrash and is not specifically mentioned in the Torah. Avot d’Rabbi Natan counts the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael as two separate tests, whereas many other commentators count this as only one test. Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer counts Sarah being taken captive by Pharaoh and then again by Avimelech as a single test whereas most other commentators count these as two separate tests.

However, almost all of the commentators agree that the tenth and final test was the hardest test of all: Akeidat Yitzchak, the requirement for Avraham to offer up his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice.

There is one notable exception. Rabbeinu Yona only counts Akeidat Yitzchak as Avraham’s ninth test. According to Rabbeinu Yona’s list, Avraham’s tenth and final test was the requirement to buy a burial plot for Sarah. We read about this incident at the beginning of this week’s parashah.

Hashem had promised Avraham that the land of Canaan would belong to him. Yet, Avraham had to negotiate with Efron to buy a plot of land to bury his wife Sarah. In the end, he had to pay Efron a very inflated price for that plot of land.

Why did Rabbeinu Yona count this incident as the tenth and final test? Surely, in contrast to the enormous challenge of sacrificing his son’s life, the negotiations with Efron regarding purchasing a plot of land would fade into insignificance?

The fact that Rabbeinu Yona counts this event as a challenge for Avraham can teach us something important about human nature and our attitude to external events in our lives. A problem that may objectively be quite small can be magnified in our mind, especially if we are going through a difficult time.

Let’s try to imagine how Avraham was feeling in the aftermath of the test of Akeidat Yitzchak. According to Rabbeinu Yona’s count, Avraham had just passed his ninth gruelling test and then his beloved wife passed away. We could imagine that his nerves were frayed and he felt ready to retire. Under normal circumstances, the interaction with Efron may have just been annoying. However, after the accumulation of everything that Avraham had just experienced, this altercation with Efron could understandably have served as the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Let’s flesh out this idea by considering the following scenario<sup>3</sup>:

Today, Jonathan has a very important business meeting with a large sum of money at stake. He can’t afford to mess this one up. But things aren’t going according to plan. Firstly, he sleeps through his alarm

<sup>1</sup> This week’s Darchai Noam is based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Garfunkel at a seudah shlishit in Melbourne a number of years ago.

<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 5:3.

<sup>3</sup> Based on an idea heard from Rabbi Akiva Tatz in the name of Rav Ades.

clock. Then he discovers that he is out of coffee. He spills his breakfast on his shirt, and then he discovers that his only other clean shirt has not been ironed. Then, he can't find his car keys. Finally, he is ready to go. He grabs his briefcase and the important papers that he needs for the meeting and he sprints for the door. If the traffic goes his way, he might just make it to the meeting on time...

Jonathan's 5-year old son Benny is learning to tidy up his toys. He put away almost all of his toys yesterday, without his mummy having to ask him. Unfortunately, he just forgot to pack away one toy – his shiny new toy car which he was playing with near the front door of the house...

As Jonathan races towards the front door, he steps on the shiny new toy car and falls flat on his back. His important papers are now strewn all over the floor.

At this very moment, Jonathan's biggest test may be how he reacts to his son. Objectively and in isolation, this test may not seem so difficult. His son's negligence caused him a minor bruise and a slight delay on his way to work. What is the big deal? However, given the importance of his business meeting, in combination with how his morning has run so far, we can understand why this may be such a challenging test for Jonathan.

Human emotion is cumulative. And we are subjective creatures. We can reach certain tolerance points beyond which we may not deal easily with seemingly simple challenges. This may be because our reserves of strength are depleted by the accumulation of our previous stressors. For instance, when we are lacking sleep and at the end of our tether, our emotions kick in and we may find it difficult to think straight. Suffering an emotional trauma (such as Avraham's loss of his wife) takes a huge toll on our energy and patience.

However, let's now make a slight tweak to our story about Jonathan and his important meeting.

Imagine that the night before this important meeting, Jonathan receives a visit from a prophet. The prophet tells Jonathan that no matter what effort he makes, there is no way that he will make it to his meeting tomorrow. However, he need not be concerned. Another business opportunity will come up the following week, and it will be worth double as much. The prophet then tells Jonathan that he is going to have only one test for the entire day - whether he can control his temper with his son Benny after he slips on his toy car.

How do you think this forewarning would help Jonathan's deal with his challenges? Jonathan's attitude would probably be very different. After slipping on the car, he would probably give Benny a hug and tell him that he is proud of the effort that he is making to clean up his toys. He would then gently point out the forgotten car and ask Benny to keep up the good work and try to be even more careful in the future.

Unfortunately, we are not visited by prophets these days. However, though Hashem hides Himself, he is involved in every aspect of our lives. Our job is to find Him! There are many practical strategies that we can put in place to buoy our coping abilities and help us keep anger and impatience at bay in stressful times.

Let's try something this week:

1. Tune in and become more aware of our coping levels throughout the day.
2. Slow down and take a few deep breaths – it's amazing what a calming effect the oxygen and the pause can have.
3. Imagine that our only test for this day is whether we can keep our cool at the exact annoyance we are facing. Imagine that all of the other annoyances that we had to face that day were only for the purpose of bringing us to this point and that Hashem himself is watching to see if we can pass the test.
4. If we know that we have a kind, loving, all powerful King watching over us, we may be more able to rise above our nature and keep our cool, even in very trying circumstances.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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