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INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yosef ben Avraham, Joseph Kaplan. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

ישיבה וכולל בית משה חיים
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Selfish Giving

The two angels came to Sdom in the evening and Lot was sitting at the gates of Sdom; and Lot saw and stood up to meet them and bowed, face to the ground (19:1).

This week's *parsha* contains a remarkable contrast of the *chessed* of Avraham with that of his brother-in-law Lot. Just as Avraham had been sitting in his tent gazing towards the highway looking for visitors, so too the Torah tells us regarding Lot; *"and Lot was sitting at the gate of Sdom (ibid)."* Rashi (ad loc) explains that Lot had learned from living in the house of Avraham to seek out guests.

Avraham is known as the patriarch of *chessed*. Yet by Lot we see a level of *chessed* that seems to transcend that of even Avraham, the quintessential paradigm of kindness.

Lot invites the angels who came to Sdom to stay at his home and, even after they politely demure, he insists that they take him up on his offer. Bear in mind, showing kindness to strangers was a serious crime in the city of Sdom; merely feeding the poor of the city was a capital offense (See *Sanhedrin* 109b and *Midrash Tanchuma* on *Vayeira*).

By offering to host the angels, Lot was literally putting himself and his family at grave risk. In fact, Lot was well aware of these potential consequences; once the angels agreed to take him up on his offer, he told them to take a roundabout route so that the inhabitants of Sdom wouldn't take notice that they were staying in his home (see Rashi 19:2). This seems to be a very high level *chessed*.

Moreover, when the people of Sdom do find out and surround his home to attack them, Lot makes an extraordinary offer: *"I have two daughters that have never been with a man, I shall bring them out to you and you may do as you please with them. Just do not harm these men because they have come under the shelter of my roof"* (19:8). Clearly, Lot goes above and beyond to protect these visitors. How is it possible that he isn't the quintessential "*bal chessed*"?

While it's true that doing kindness is an admirable trait, there are often different motivations for being a *bal chessed*. Helping others is a very fulfilling experience, one feels that he has done the right thing and this is very satisfying. However, another aspect of a being a *bal chessed* is the feeling that one has now become a greater person for becoming a *bal chessed*. One who is known as a magnanimous person is admired and held in high esteem.

True *chessed* requires one to diminish oneself. We see this from Hashem Himself: The world was created as an act of *chessed* (see *Derech Hashem*, Part One) and in order to effect a real act of creation Hashem constricted Himself (the *tzimtzum*), as it were, to give mankind a feeling of an independent existence. Thus, Hashem limiting Himself effected the original act of *chessed* and now defines how true *chessed* is accomplished: through a diminishment of the benefactor.

Avraham Avinu did *chessed* in exactly the same way; *"Avraham ran to the cattle […] he took cream, milk, and the calf which he prepared, and placed it before them; and he stood over them […]"* (18:7-8).

Even though Avraham was very wealthy he didn't just snap his fingers and have servants prepare everything and serve his guests. On the contrary, he ran himself to prepare all the foods and then acted as a waiter to serve the food himself — even hovering nearby to see what else they might require.

On the other hand, the Torah tells us exactly Lot's motivation: *"for they have come under the shelter of my roof."* He didn't want the people of Sdom harming anyone who was under his protection because that would be a violation of his power to shelter someone. For Lot, his magnanimity was about his power and his reputation; it was really all about him. This is reflected in his outrageous offering of his daughters to the people of Sdom to protect his reputation.

An Amazing Sacrifice

And it happened after these words that Hashem tested Avraham […] (22:1).

At the end of this week's *parsha* we find the famous story of the *akeida*, where Hashem asks Avraham to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a sacrifice. This is the last and hardest of Avraham's tests from Hashem.

Just as Avraham passed the first nine tests, he perseveres in this test as well. Thus, he is accorded great righteousness and devotion for being willing to sacrifice his son at God's request. Obviously, Avraham's achievement is enormous.

Yet, we must delve deeper. Unfortunately, Jewish history is replete with tragic stories of losing family members. In fact, we find by the tribe of Levi that when Moshe called them to action after the episode of the Golden Calf, they had no qualms about murdering their families (their brothers, parents, grandchildren, and grandparents, see Rashi *Shemos* 32:27 and *Devarim* 33:9), all of whom had taken part in the sin of the Golden Calf. They too sacrificed beloved relatives for the sake of Hashem!

We also find the story of Chana and her seven sons (*Gittin* 57b): The Caesar demanded that her children be brought to him and bow down to worship an idol. One by one they refused and were put to death. When the Caesar saw that his threats had no impact on their resolve, he approached the last child and told him, "I will merely throw down my signet ring and you will bend down to pick it up, so that people will say you have accepted the king's authority." The child refused, saying; "If you have such concern for your honor, how much more so do I have to be concerned for the honor of the Almighty!"

When he was taken out to be killed, Chana begged to give him a final kiss. She told him, "Go tell your patriarch Avraham that he did one *akeida* altar while I did seven *akeida* altars." In truth, Chana's sacrifice seems to be even greater than that of Avraham Avinu's, what was it about Avraham's act that made him so unique?

People deal with horrific situations in various ways, but the most common way is to disconnect themselves from either their body, their emotions, or both. We see this almost daily in the news, people explaining that they endured the most horrific acts by physically and emotionally disconnecting. This is how most people cope and, unfortunately, it wreaks havoc on a person's state of mind.

This is how the members of the tribe of Levi were able to kill so many of their relatives: they emotionally disconnected themselves from what they had to do. This is also how Chana coped with the loss of her seven sons. However, this tragedy took an incredible toll on her; the story ends with her committing suicide by throwing herself from the roof.

Avraham Avinu was different. When Hashem asked him to bring his beloved son as a sacrifice he didn't disconnect himself. On the contrary, Avraham was fully engaged emotionally: he was filled with love for Hashem (see Rashi on 22:3) and joy in fulfilling God's command (see Rashi 22:6). Avraham wasn't a cold and distant person, on the contrary, he is known as the "patriarch of kindness." Nevertheless, his absolute faith and connection to Hashem allowed him to go forth with the terrible act of sacrificing his son with true love, joy, and devotion. He didn't have to disconnect himself. This is what made Avraham's fulfillment of the test of the *akeida* so unique.



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