

# Chayei Sarah: The Last Test

- Eliyahu Shulman.

Why did Avraham in particular need to undergo tests? We translate "Nisayon" incorrectly. It is not a test, but a trial, to transform and elevate the personality. The other Avot "were born on the mountain". Avraham was unique, in that as the child of pagan ancestors he transformed himself more completely than anyone else. That transformation was through the "nisyonos".

## CHAYE SARAH: THE LAST TEST

by R' Eliyahu Baruch Shulman, Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshiva University

One of my daughters is in high school now. And the bane of her life is tests. It seems that every other day she has another test, to prepare for which all her free time is required.

But she doesn't hate her teachers for it. Because she knows that all these tests have a purpose; they're not an end in their own right. She's not just taking test for the sake of test taking. Not at all; she needs to take all these tests, she knows, for a higher goal; so that ultimately she will be well prepared for - Regents.

I mention this because the subject of tests comes up naturally when we talk about Avraham Avinu. Avraham Avinu also had to take a lot of tests. Asarah nisyonos, the Mishnah says, were given to Avraham - the last of these, according to Rabbeinu Yonah, being the difficulties he encountered in this week's Parsha burying Sara. And he passed all of them.

It's interesting that we don't find the same focus on tests in regard to the other Avos. Certainly none of the Avos had easy lives; Yaakov's life, especially, was filled with tragedy. But it is only in Avraham's life - as understood by Chazal - that the idea of nisayon looms so large. Even the Akedah, in which Yitzchock took such a central part, is described as Avraham's nisayon rather than Yitzchock's. Indeed, the Torah itself indicates that it was Avraham's nisayon. Because after the Akedah Hashem appears to Avraham - and not to Yitzchak - and says: Atah yadati ki yerei Elokim atah. Somehow, it seems, it was particularly Avraham who required testing. Why should that be?

I once heard from a great man, that Hashem doesn't give someone a nisayon unless he knows he can pass it. And that seems difficult to understand. If Hashem knows that he can pass the test then what is the purpose of the test in the first place?

Actually, our translation of nisayon as "a test" is not really accurate. The word nisayon, the meforshim explain, is related to nes, a pole, which is used to elevate something - as in Aseh lechah nachash visim oso al nes. And so a nes is an event, a trial, whose purpose is to elevate the person undergoing it.

A person may be born with the great potential. But that doesn't mean that he was born great. No one is born great; at most, he may be born with great potential. That potential has to be realized, and it can be realized only by the force and the press of circumstance.

The greatest world leader of the twentieth century, the largest person - at least in the non-Jewish world - of the twentieth century, was, perhaps, Winston Churchill. Churchill was undoubtedly born with tremendous gifts, both intellectual and moral. But had he not been called upon to lead England in its hour of trial, that greatness would never have been fully tapped. Not only would it have remained hidden, it would not have existed, except in unrealized potential.

A nisayon is not a test, but a trial. It is a critical event, which causes that untapped potential to be transformed into reality.

And so the purpose of the Akedah, for example, was not to discover whether or not Avraham Avinu was a yerei Shamayim, even to the degree that the Akedah demanded. Hashem didn't need a test to discover that. He could have simply looked into Avraham's heart. The purpose of the Akedah, rather, was to raise Avraham to the level of the Akedah; to take the potential within him, and bring it to fulfillment and realization.

Perhaps that is why it is particularly in regard to Avraham, more than to any of the other Avos, that the concept of nisayon is so central.

Avraham Avinu was born into a pagan family. His life's story is a story of transformation. It is perhaps the most incredible transformation the world has ever seen – from pagan child to the father of monotheism, the unique figure that transfigured all of history.

The other Avos, who followed Avraham, each staked out their own path in Avodas Hashem. But, nonetheless, they were born on the mountain. They weren't required to transform themselves in that radical sense that Avraham had to.

And so, more than any of the other Avos, Avraham had to be elevated - transformed - into greatness. And that required nisyonos. Through the force of the nisyonos the greatness within him was brought to the surface, and realized.

It is also significant that Chazal speak of ten nisyonos. Because ten represents, in the thought of Chazal, a complete Shiur Komah, a complete set. (Thus, for example, the world was created with ten maamaros, utterances; and the luchos, of course, contained ten dibros.) So that what Chazal are indicating is that Avraham Avinu's entire spiritual stature was built up through these ten successive nisyonos.

Klal Yisrael today, especially in Eretz Yisrael but around the world, as well, are experiencing nisyonos. We don't seek them. We say in davening each day: Al tivieni... Lidei nisayon. But when nisyonos come it is valuable to realize that their purpose is not to test us. G-d doesn't need to test us. The purpose of a nisayon is to change us; to elevate us; to bring to fulfillment the capacity for emuna and bitachon, for calm and unquestioning trust in the Ribono Shel Olam, that we have inherited from Avraham Avinu, in whose footsteps we follow. And ultimately the purpose of these nisyonos is to transform us; each of us, individually, all of us as a people, and ultimately - through us - to transform the world, into a place where Hashem's presence and kingship will be felt and acknowledged by all, Vehaya Hashem leimelech Al Kol Haaretz. Bayom hahuh yihiye Hashem echad Ushemo Echad.