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### Building the World Through Kindness

“Hashem appeared to him in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat of the day. He lifted his eyes and saw: And behold! Three men were standing over him. He perceived, so he ran toward them from the entrance of the tent, and bowed toward the ground.”  
(*Bereishis* 18:1-2)

Picture the scene. Avraham is having a prophetic experience, communicating directly with God

Himself. He then sees three guests and says to God, “Pardon me, Almighty, I have to go take care of my guests. I’ll be right back.”

Why does Avraham take leave of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence), in the midst of experiencing the transcendental, to entertain three nomadic strangers? Imagine that you are hosting the Queen of England and while having a private face-to-face talk with her, you see three strangers passing by. Would you tell the Queen, “I’ll be back in 45 minutes, I need to go whip up dinner for these guests”?

Amazingly, the Talmud (*Shabbos* 127a) teaches us that Avraham was actually correct in what he did, for "*Hachnassas orchim* (welcoming guests) is greater than experiencing the Divine Presence.”

#### Being Like God

How do we understand what the Talmud is saying? If the Creator of the universe, the infinite, all-powerful Source of existence, would appear to you, even an atheist would tell you not to budge! There can be no greater experience than communing with the Divine. So how can welcoming guests possibly trump that?

The answer is clear: Greater than talking to God is emulating Him. The most powerful way to understand and connect to God is by becoming like Him. "*Just as Hashem is merciful and compassionate, so, too, you should be merciful and compassionate*" (*Shabbos* 133b). The Almighty is infinite and perfect, which means there is nothing He needs. He does not gain anything from our keeping the mitzvot. His creation is a perfect act of altruism; it is 100%

*chessed*, kindness, aimed at giving us the deepest pleasure and meaning attainable simply because He loves us.

If you want to understand the Almighty's love for you, then you have to become like Him, and one of the essential ways to emulate Him is by doing acts of kindness and loving other human beings. Becoming a giver is really the only way to understand Who Hashem is and what life is all about.

If you want to really appreciate the Almighty, then undertake to be like Him and take care of as many people as you can. Even if you're sick, try to give another human being pleasure. Work at it, make it your priority – and by doing so you will understand just a little bit more what existence is all about.

If you do not change yourself by inculcating Hashem's attributes, you will never fully understand Hashem. He will remain an abstraction. By way of illustration, one of the criteria for appointing a judge to a Sanhedrin, a Jewish court that can judge capital offenses, is that the candidate must be a father of children. Rambam explains that this is necessary “in order to ensure that he will be merciful” (*Laws of Sanhedrin* 2:3). He may be the greatest Torah scholar in the world, but if he does not have children he cannot sit in judgment, because he cannot fully grasp the reality of Hashem’s compassion for His children. He can be a prophet who communes with the Almighty, but he cannot judge a capital crime. To truly have compassion you must be a father; likewise, to fully understand Hashem you must become like Him.

### Just Do It

The Torah goes into great detail when describing Avraham’s *chessed*:

“Let some water be brought and wash your feet, and recline beneath the tree. I will fetch a morsel of bread that you may sustain yourselves... So Avraham hastened to the tent to Sarah, and said, "Hurry! Three se'ahs of meal, fine flour! Knead and make cakes!" Then Avraham ran to the cattle, took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the youth, who hurried to prepare it. He took cream and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and placed these before them; he stood over them beneath the tree, and they ate.”  
(*Bereishis* 18:4-8)

Every detail here teaches us an important insight about kindness. First, you need to run to do *chessed*. Don’t procrastinate, don’t kvetch about it. Run and joyfully embrace the opportunity to give to another human being.

Avraham offered the wayfarers bread and water, but when he sprang into action he prepared them a lavish meal. “*Emor me'at ve'aseh harbeh* – say little and do a lot” (*Ethics of the Fathers* 1:15). Talk is cheap. Momentarily it may create the appearance that you are doing something, but in the end you are just a bluffer, and everyone will know it. The sign that someone is serious about doing good is that he says little and does a lot. Don’t grandstand. Don’t promise a lot. Just get the job done.

### The Power of Kindness

The Midrash asks, “Who was the person who did *chessed* to those who did not need it? It was Avraham Avinu, who gave to the ministering angels” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 34:8). Amazingly, the Torah's paradigm of *chessed* is an exchange that in the end did not even benefit the recipients. Angels don't eat bread! They don't even eat tongue with mustard. Avraham's kindness didn't do them a bit of good.

Yet the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 86b) describes the incredible reward Avraham received for doing this kindness:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: Whatever Avraham did for the ministering angels himself, the Holy One, blessed is He, likewise did for his children Himself. But whatever Avraham did through an agent, the Holy One, blessed is He, likewise did for his children through an agent. “Then Avraham ran to the cattle,” corresponds to, “A wind went forth from Hashem and blew quail from the sea and spread them over the camp.” “And [Avraham] took cream and milk,” corresponds to, “Behold, I will rain down for you food from heaven.” “And [Avraham] stood over them beneath the tree and they ate,” corresponds to, “Behold, I shall stand before you by the rock.” “And Avraham walked with them to escort them,” corresponds to, “Hashem went

before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way.”

[The above are all examples of actions that were taken directly by Avraham or the Holy One, blessed is He. The following two verses describe actions taken through an agent:]

“Let some water be brought,” corresponds to, “And you [Moshe] shall strike the rock, and water will come from it and the people will drink.”

The Jewish people had water to drink for 40 years in the desert because Avraham gave the three guests some water. All of Avraham's descendants miraculously ate manna from heaven for 40 years in the desert because Avraham gave the three travelers milk. The Jewish people were surrounded by Clouds of Glory for 40 years in the desert because Avraham escorted his guests.

Look at the incredible impact of every act of *chessed* Avraham did. His actions affected the entire Jewish nation that descended from him, even though in reality he did not give the angels anything.

The Sages make the following *kal v'chomer* (a *fortiori* argument): “If the Holy One, blessed is He, rewards the children of a person who does *chessed* to someone who doesn't benefit from that *chessed*, then all the more will He reward the person who does *chessed* to someone who does benefit from his *chessed*” (*Vayikra Rabbah*, *ibid.*).

Avraham's *chessed* yielded no real benefit, yet look at its impact! Now imagine the reward

Hashem will give to your children and grandchildren as a result of your doing something to tangibly help a fellow Jew. Chazal are teaching us that your reward will be even greater than Avraham's!

The Talmud makes an additional point. Avraham told a messenger to get the water; he delegated. So the Almighty also delegated, and instead of giving water to the Jewish people directly, He gave it through the rock that was hit by Moshe. But Hashem gave *Bnei Yisrael* the manna directly because Avraham fetched the milk himself.

Chazal are telling us that how you do a *chessed* makes a tremendous difference. In the desert, the Jewish people could have had water pouring down to them straight from the Almighty, and that would have made it a totally different experience. Water that comes directly from Hashem is very different from water that comes from a rock – just as the bread that came directly from Hashem was not just regular bread, but rather manna. And the shelter they enjoyed in the desert was not just protection from the sun, but rather an experience of being enveloped by the *Shechinah*, the presence of God.

It is an altogether different act of kindness when you do it yourself.

Whatever *chessed* you do, whether it is direct or through an intermediary, the impact and reward are mindboggling. "*Olam chessed yibaneh* – the world is built through kindness" (Psalms 89:2). And so are we.

*Chessed* is the Almighty's trademark. Seize the opportunities to do *chessed* for other. You will become like God Himself.



## Creating a Spiritual Calendar

We all rely on calendars. Our schedules correspond to them. We use them to record important dates, to mark appointments, and to remember meaningful occasions. Our weekly, monthly, and yearly calendars fill up.

How many of us, however, are equally aware of our "spiritual calendars"? Our Sages relate that every physical phenomenon has a corresponding spiritual parallel. Just as we account for physical time, so too, we should become accountable for the spiritual content infusing the moments of our lives. The quality of our spiritual lives can be measured within its own unique context.

The *Zohar* describes how each day in a person's life has its own challenge and mission. Benjamin Franklin's oft-quoted saying "Don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today" applies to spiritual and personal growth as well as to physical tasks.

Maximizing one's potential starts with the valuing of one's time. Increasing our focus and becoming more mindful of our time is the starting point. Are we using our moments purposefully, or do we use time as an escape? Are we "killing time" and "wasting time," or are we creating lasting imprints in time?

Meaningful, transcendent moments in time create a spiritual imprint upon the fabric of eternity. Just as we are aware that, physically, we leave a carbon imprint, so too, our spiritual imprints affect our lives and those of future generations. The Torah reveals to us that our deeds have merit. Our thoughts and actions can generate positive and/or negative energies. The way that one thinks, as expressed through words and deeds, has the potential to influence generations. We can be influencers, yet also be influenced by the actions of others. We are both generators and receptacles. It's all a matter of context and degree.

By becoming more aware of how we use our time, we can strive to infuse each day with spiritual growth and meaning. How is this done? The way we respond to challenges and provocation is what strengthens or weakens our spiritual core. A positive, resilient response can be to the soul what a physical workout is to the body. We build spiritual muscle through resistance. Rising above our instincts and our circumstances raises our spiritual bar. Stretching beyond our "comfort zones" to transcend ourselves has a lasting effect. It creates an enduring spiritual imprint.

Time is life. How many of us have a spiritual daily schedule? Do we record our spiritual

growth? Are we moving forward spiritually? Are our spiritual lives and calendars empty and static or dynamic and filled? A spiritual calendar can help us record and visualize how actively we are engaged in actualizing our inner potentials. It acts like a journal, in which milestones, victories, and personal growth are recorded and dated. A spiritual calendar can be a record of your thoughts. It has its own rhythm and criteria for inner growth. It helps you become more aware of and sensitized to the intangibles in life. To what extent do our actions reflect our core values? Are we living what we know? How accurately does our choice of words express our inner convictions? Does our outer behavior match up to, and express, our inner beliefs? What do we believe and value? To what degree are we actualizing those beliefs in our daily lives? Do our schedules and calendars reflect them?

There is always a disparity between who we are presently and whom we have the potential to become. This is not about career achievements, but character achievements. The disparity is measured in terms of character refinement and spiritual growth. This is a lifetime pursuit that develops and unfolds incrementally. Success is reflected in the quality of our relationships and in the meaning attached to the details of our daily lives. In this week's Torah portion the Torah uses the term "*ba'im ba'yamim*," coming with days, (Genesis, 18:11), when referring to the lives of Abraham and Sarah.

People of spiritual greatness "come through life with all their days accompanying them." Their days are utilized properly and purposefully. This

is the significance of the expression *ba'im ba'yamim*, literally, “they are coming with days.”

The Jewish People, both as individuals and as a nation, are still affected by Avraham’s and Sarah’s deeds, which reverberate until this day. Their spiritual DNA has been passed on to us. Avraham and Sarah were prototypes for every Jewish man and woman. They have imbued each of us with the latent potential to “come with our days.” With effort and mindfulness, we too can transform mundane moments into meaningful, transcendent—indeed, infinite—imprints in time.

This week’s Torah portion begins by recounting how, on the third day after Avraham’s *bris milah*, ritual circumcision, God appeared to him. Through his deeds and unwavering belief in God, Avraham had been elevated to a new spiritual vantage point. From this plateau, Avraham was keenly aware of God’s Presence in his life.

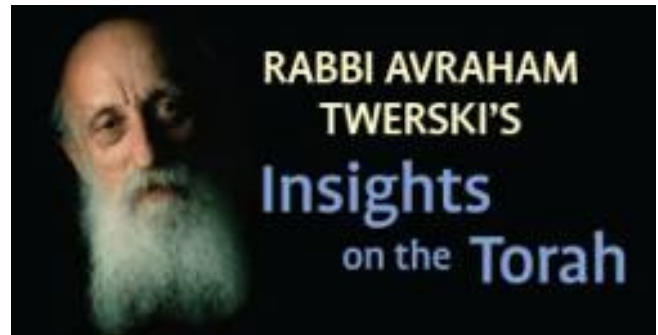
Just as Avraham increased his perception of God’s Presence in his daily life, so can we. In our spiritual reality, God is communicating with us constantly. How well are we able to pick up the signals and receive the transmission? As we begin to recognize God’s Presence in our daily lives, we gradually change our perceptions regarding life’s challenges. Realizing that the source of each challenge is Hashem, our wills to overcome, learn from, and transcend them are magnified. Awareness of their Divine origin strengthens our resolves to reflect deeper into why we’ve been tested. Accordingly, we develop greater clarity about what we’re meant to learn from each experience. Our eyes are then opened wide.

## Making it Relevant

1. Prioritize daily time for learning Torah in your schedule. It can be five minutes or an hour, but in increments, it becomes cumulative and makes a difference.
2. Just as you find time to nourish and care for your body, your inner essence—your soul—needs daily attention. It needs to be nourished through Torah learning.
3. Even one moment can become great, when used for good.

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## The Most Powerful Parenting Technique

He (Lot) said, “Behold now, my lords; turn about please, to your servant’s house; spend the night and wash your feet, then wake up early and go your way...” He made a feast for them and baked matzos, and they ate (19:2-3).

Many books have been written about parenting. There is universal agreement that the single greatest influence on children is their parents' behavior. All other techniques parents may employ are not nearly as effective as what they themselves do. Parental behavior is deeply engrained in children.

The Torah teaches us this in the character of Lot. Lot was a rogue who rejected Abraham, saying, "I want neither Abram nor his God" (Rashi, Genesis 13:11). Lot chose to live in the corrupt city of Sodom, fully aware of their decadence (ibid 13:13). He married a woman of Sodom, who turned into a pillar of salt as punishment because when Lot asked her to give his guests salt, she said, "Are you trying to bring this wicked trait of hospitality to us?" (Midrash). According to the Midrash, giving food and shelter to wayfarers was punishable by death in Sodom.

Yet this depraved scoundrel, Lot, risked his life to take in guests, and indeed aroused the entire populace against him. He put himself in even greater danger when he defied the populace and sought to protect his guests. This seems to be incongruous with his degenerate character.

R' Meir Rubman (Zichron Meir) says that having been exposed to his Uncle Abraham in his youth and having witnessed the overwhelming dedication which Abraham had to *hachnasas orchim*, welcoming guests, made an indelible impression on Lot. There is every reason to believe that Lot assimilated to his environment, and indeed, he was spared from the destruction of Sodom solely because he was Abraham's nephew (Rashi, Genesis 19:17). In spite of his depravity,

he could not extirpate this particular trait, to the point of risking his life to be hospitable to guests.

This is a convincing example of the power of early imprinting. It is commonplace that children who were victims of parental abuse may swear that they will never be harsh to their children, yet they often repeat the very abuse they despised. This may seem to defy logic. However, the early imprinting of a behavior may overwhelm logic. There is only one effective method to teach children proper behavior, and that is for parents to practice it themselves.



## Why Does God Test Those He Loves?

Imagine dedicating your entire life to a single mission. For decades, you've sacrificed everything - your homeland, your family's legacy, your reputation - all in pursuit of spreading a revolutionary truth to the world. After years of struggle and waiting, you finally have a son who will carry on your life's work, the child God Himself promised would become a great nation. Then one day, God asks you to give it all up. To

take that son, that promise, that entire life's mission, and offer it as a sacrifice.

This is the test of the Binding of Isaac, perhaps the most famous trial in human history. On this otherworldly event, the Midrash asks, "Why does God put righteous people through tests?"

At first, we might be tempted to answer, "Because He wants to see if they can pass the test!" That might be true of a medical school exam, but God is all-knowing; He already knows the end result before He administers the test. So what are tests for?

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> offers three cryptic metaphors:

- A flax worker beating his finest flax
- A potter testing his strongest vessels
- A farmer choosing his best ox for the heaviest yoke

At first glance, these images might seem puzzling. But within them lies a profound understanding of how tests transform us. Let's decode these metaphors one by one:

- When a flax worker beats his flax, he's not testing it - he's transforming it. The more he works it, the more beautiful it becomes.
- When a potter strikes his finest pots in the marketplace, he's not checking their quality - he's demonstrating their strength.
- When a farmer selects his strongest ox for the heaviest load, he's not testing its capabilities - he's utilizing its full potential.

The Maharal of Prague, one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the 16th century,

renowned for his mystical and philosophical works, teaches that every aspect of human existence can be understood through three fundamental relationships: our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others, and our relationship with God.<sup>2</sup> These three dimensions form the foundation of all spiritual growth and purpose.

Remarkably, these three metaphors from the Midrash map perfectly onto these relationships:

1. Man to himself (The Flax): Ever participate in a race or sporting event where the competition forces you to reach deep down within yourself to access a new level of power? Like beaten flax transformed into fine linen, tests push us to actualize our hidden potential.<sup>3</sup>
2. Man to fellow man (The Pottery): Just as a potter's demonstration inspires confidence in his wares, our trials can inspire others. When someone emerges stronger from adversity, he or she lights a path for others to follow.<sup>4</sup>
3. Man to God (The Ox): God created an unfinished world, inviting us to become partners in its completion. Like a farmer's strongest ox helping to plow the fields, our tests give us the opportunity to participate in perfecting creation.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Abraham and Isaac embodies all three dimensions. Through this supreme test, Abraham reached unprecedented spiritual heights within himself, set an eternal example of faith that continues to inspire the world, and established the

Jewish people's role as partners in God's mission for the world.

This understanding transforms how we view life's challenges. Instead of seeing tests as mere evaluations, we can recognize them as opportunities for growth, inspiration, and partnership in the divine plan.

**Practical Application:**

Consider a significant test in your life right now. Ask yourself:

- How might this challenge help me grow stronger? (The Flax)
- Could my response inspire others facing similar trials? (The Pottery)
- How might overcoming this trial contribute to making the world better? (The Ox)

When we reframe our tests through these lenses, we can face them not with dread, but with purpose and even enthusiasm. After all, tests aren't meant to break us - they're meant to bring out the best of ourselves, our fellows, and our world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

*Inspiration for this essay comes from my Rosh Yeshiva and primary mentor, Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld*

1. Bereishit Rabbah 55:2  
ה' צדיק יבחן ונרשע ואהב תמוס שנאה נפשו (תהלים יא, ה), אמר רבי יונתן הפשטני הנה כשפשתנו לוקה אינו מקיש עליו ביותר מפני שהיא פוקעת, וכשפשתנו יפה הוא מקיש עליו ביותר, למה שהיא משתבחת והולכת. כך הקדוש ברוך הוא אינו מנסה את הרשעים, למה שאין יכולין לעמד, דכתיב (ישעיה נז, כ): והרשעים כים נגרש, ואת מי מנסה את הצדיקים, שנאמר: ה' צדיק יבחן, (בראשית לט, ז): ויהי אחר הדברים האלה ותשא אשת אדניו וגו'. ויהי אחר

הדברים האלה, אמר רבי יונתן היוצר הנה כשהוא בודק את הכבשן שלו אינו בודק את הכלים המרעעים, למה שאינו מספיק להקיש עליו אחת עד שהוא שוברו, ומה הוא בודק בקנקנים ברורים, שאפילו הוא מקיש עליו כמה פעמים אינו שוברו, כך אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מנסה את הרשעים אלא את הצדיקים, שנאמר: ה' צדיק יבחן. אמר רבי אלעזר לבעל הבית שהיה לו שתי פרות אחת כחה יפה ואחת כחה רע, על מי הוא נותן את העל לא על אותה שפחה יפה, כך אין Ad-nai tries the righteous; and His soul hates the evil ones and those who love violence (Ps. 11: 5). Rabbi Yonatan said: When a flax worker knows that his flax is of good quality, the more he beats it the more it improves and the more it glistens; but if it is of inferior quality, he cannot give it one knock without it splitting. Similarly, Ad-nai does not test the wicked - why? Because they cannot withstand it, as it is written "And the evil ones He expels like the sea" (Isaiah 57:20) and who does God test? The righteous, as it says "Ad-nai tries the righteous." "And it was, after these things, his master's wife cast [tishah] [her eyes upon Yosef and said, "Lie with me." (Gen. 39:7) "And it was, after these things" - Rabbi Yonatan said: A potter does not test defective vessels, because he cannot give them a single blow without breaking them. What then does he test? Only strong vessels, for he will not break them even with many blows. Similarly, the Holy One of Blessing does not test the wicked but the righteous, as it says, 'Ad-nai tries the righteous.' Rabbi Eleazar said: When a man possesses two cows, one strong and the other weak, on which one does he put the yoke? Surely on the strong one. Similarly, God tests only the righteous, as it says, 'Ad-nai tries the righteous.'

2. Maharal, Derech Chaim to Avot 1:2 – “We seek achievement in three spheres of spiritual endeavor: the personal, the religious, and the interpersonal. Man’s capacity for goodness can be divided into three parts: His own intrinsic goodness; his goodness in his relationship with God; and his goodness in his relationships with his fellow human beings...”
3. The Ramban, the great medieval Spanish commentator, emphasizes the first approach, writing that "The purpose of a test is for the one being tested. God commanded this act in order to actualize Avraham's potential, that he should receive reward for his good acts and not just his good intention." The Radal (Mishnayot Sanhedrin 10:1) similarly quotes Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer (31) stating that the test was for Avraham to "know his heart."
4. The Rambam takes the second approach: "Know that the aim and meaning of all the trials mentioned in the Torah is to let people know what they ought to do or what they must believe... The purpose not being the accomplishment of that particular act, but the latter's being a model to be imitated and followed." (Guide to the Perplexed, III:24)
5. Rashi takes the third approach: (Rashi on Bereishit 22:12) FOR NOW I KNOW — From now I have a reply to give to Satan and to the nations who wonder at the love I bear you: I have an opening of the mouth (i.e. I have an excuse, a reason to give them) now that they see that you are a God-fearing man (Genesis Rabbah 56:7).