

Good Shabbos, everyone.

I want to thank the *drasha* sponsors:

- Bruce and Freda Goldman, “in appreciation to the Rabbi and congregation as we leave Baltimore.”

Wishing them a *tzeischem l’shalom* and a lot of *bracha, hatzlacha, and simcha* in their new home.

- Eva Katznelson, in memory of her father, Fred Sterba, whose *yahrtzeit* is 16 Marchesvan. May his *neshama* have an *aliya*.
- Moshe and Esther Preiser, in memory of Esther's, aunt, Chaya Etta bas Yoav Tzvi, a’h, whose *yahrtzeit* is this Shabbos, 10 Marcheshvan. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*.

May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha, hatzlacha, and good health*.

The **Mishna** in **Avos** (5:3) says that עשרה נסיונות נתנסה אברהם אבינו ועמד בכולם בכולם Avraham Avinu was tested ten times and withstood them all. Our *parsha* begins with the first of these tests—*lech lecha*. Avraham Avinu was commanded to leave behind everything he knew and to follow God to an undisclosed location.

בראשית י"ב:א'

ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך.

Hashem said to Avram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

Unlike today, when people move frequently, in Avraham’s days, moving was not at all routine. This test was particularly challenging because Avraham was leaving behind **all** he knew--his land, his birthplace, and his family home. Moreover, the future he was traveling **towards was uncertain**—he couldn’t even put a name to his destination. He had no idea what language they spoke, how he would communicate and survive. He couldn’t put his destination into Googlemaps or Waze before departing...to see if there was a cholov Yisroel pizza store or Starbucks there. He truly had no idea what was in store for him and how he would make it there...

Yet, while we understand why this was difficult and is considered one of Avraham’s ten tests, it seems to pale in comparison with some of the other tests, most notably the *akeida*...the tenth and final test, according to the count of most Rishonim.

Yet a perplexing **Medrash** points out that the Torah uses the phrase לך לך twice—once in describing this journey לך לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך אל הארץ אשר אראך, and again in describing the test of the *akeida* ולך לך אל ארץ המוריה והעלהו שם לעולה. The Medrash understands that the repeated use of this phrase serves to equate the two tests.

The Medrash continues to asks--which was a greater test—*lech lecha* or the *akeida*?

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת וירא פרשה נה: ר' לוי בר חייתא שני פעמים כתיב לך לך ואיך אנו יודעים אי זה חביבה אם הראשונה אם השניה, מן מה דכתיב ולך לך אל ארץ המוריה הוי שניה חביבה מן הראשונה,

How could we even begin to equate a journey, no matter how arduous and demanding, with Avraham’s final *nisayon*, the test of sacrificing his beloved son, Yitzchak?

What are Chazal teaching us by asking this question?

I believe Chazal are teaching us an important lesson. Yes--in a vacuum there is no comparison between these two tests—but taken in context, they are comparable.

The first *nisayon* of *lech lecha* was magnified significantly in its difficulty **simply because it was the first...** and the last *nisayon* of the *akeida* **became possible** because he had already passed nine earlier tests. Context informs the difficulty of tests. If someone has practiced and has a support system, hard tests become more manageable. However, without any practice or support, even apparently “easy” challenges can be daunting.

Avraham was the first to follow Hashem...it was uncharted territory. Taking the step of leaving everything behind to “prove” his faith was a totally new stage in his spiritual development.

Chazal teach us that beginnings are always difficult. כל התחלות קשות

The **Maharal** explains that beginnings are so difficult because they involve the greatest amount of change...

חידושי אגדות למהר"ל שבת דף קלט עמוד א
אמרו במכילתא בפרשת יתרו כל התחלות קשות, וזה מפני שההתחלה הוא שנוי

Continuing something, building on an existing foundation, adding to an existing structure and system...as difficult as it may be... is qualitatively different than laying the foundation... Adding a home to an existing community is a very different challenge than taking down a forest and imagining a new community...

Beginnings are tough...because change is about creating something new...it is therefore always filled with uncertainty and unpredictability.

Taking the first step is always extremely difficult...

But if you can find the strength to take that first step...with each step forward—the next step becomes that much less daunting. By the time Avraham had reached the tenth test, he had built up momentum. He had already invested decades of his life to serving God...he had the support and encouragement of many, and he was able to draw on the strength of the first nine tests...as he looked inside himself for the strength to pass the tenth, and most difficult, test.

It is like this in the mundane world as well...

To give you an example of something that had seemed impossible but became possible, I found an interesting piece of **sports trivia**. Until May 6, 1954, it was thought that no human being could run a mile in under 4 minutes. No one had ever done it. But on that date, Roger Bannister broke the 4-minute mile. Within 46 days it was broken again. To date, about 1,497 people have run a sub-4-minute mile. What changed? Roger Bannister showed that it could be done—everyone else just had to follow.

The same thing happened with the high jump. Until 1956, no one was able to beat 7 feet...and since then the record has been pushed past 8 feet...multiple times...

The first one to beat the record showed others that they could do it as well—and even surpass it.

Avraham, as he approached the test of *akeidas Yitzchak*, was a very different person than he was so many years before when he left Charan, and that contributed to his ability to pass that very difficult test. He could draw on the inspiration of his first nine achievements.

Rav Dessler writes in his famous essay on *bechira*, free will, that every choice we make influences our future choices...

קונטרס הבחירה מכתב מאליהו להר' דסלר פרק ג' אחריות הבחירה
וכל בחירה שבוחר האדם, עושה רושם בכל מצבו לכל ימי חייו, אם מעט ואם הרבה, אם לטוב ואם למוטב. ולא רק בו, אלא באשר יעשה לחינוך בני, וכל אשר יתפתח מזה עד סוף כל דורותיו. . .

He says this is what Chazal mean when they teach us in **Pirkei Avos (4:2)** that one *mitzva* inspires another *mitzva*, and one *aveira* inspires another *aveira*...

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה ב
[*]בן עזאי אומר הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה ובורח מן העבירה שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה ששכר מצוה מצוה ושכר עבירה עבירה :

Choosing good now makes it easier to choose good in the future. And the opposite is true, as well...

Rav Kook in his *Siddur Olas Reiya* explains that every good choice is the product of one's *yiras Elokim*. This means that every good choice makes it easier to perform another *mitzva*, and—conversely—that every wrong choice is the product of a lack of *yiras Elokim* and makes it easier to do another *aveira*.

עולת ראי"ה הראי"ה קוק
...אבל כל חטא, אם בקום - ועשה או בשב-ואל-תעשה, יש לו סבה במעוט יראת ה' ואהבתו, והתמעטות זו של היראה ואהבה הרי היא חלי בנפש, הגורם לקלקול המדות, שהן חוזרות וגורמות לגופי עברות...

God did not put the test of the *akeida* first, because it would not have been possible for Avraham to withstand such a challenge at that point. To be able to pass such a test, Avraham needed first to build his strength of character. He needed to build up his *yiras shamayim* to the point that—many years later—he could pass the final test of the *akeida*....

As the **Sefas Emes** writes in the name of his grandfather (Tehillim 147:16) *הנותן שלג כצמר*, literally *He lays down snow like fleece*, God gives us snow only when we have the wool to keep warm. This means that He gives us tests only when we have the wherewithal to handle them...

But it was passing the test of *lech lecha* that made Avraham who he was. If he had not passed that first test, he would never have been able to continue his journey--encountering the unknown. Later in the *parasha*, G-d directs Avraham to go outside and to look up and count the stars, saying [Bereshis 15:2-5] *כה יהיה זרעך*. The great **Rav Meir Shapiro** of Lublin asks, “What would be *our* reaction if someone told us to go out and count the stars?” Our reaction would probably be to simply ignore the request. We would say, “I know this is an impossible task. I know it is beyond the realm of possibility. Why even bother?”

What did Avraham do? He went out and began to count the stars! He began the task and attempted to do the impossible. G-d responded that this attribute that you are demonstrating here now — when it looks impossible, when it looks beyond the reach of human beings, nevertheless you must try; nevertheless, you must give it your best. You must take the first step, even when future steps seem impossible. That is the characteristic of *Klal Yisrael*. *כה יהיה זרעך*. That is what a Jew is going to be like. Even though the task seems beyond him, even though it seems almost impossible, we still must try.” Maybe we won't finish the task...but if we start---our descendants will have the chance to finish...

But we must always try. And when we try, and take the first step, we sometimes see that amazing things can happen. We may think that we don't have the strength and the ability to withstand that

which life deals us. We may think it is beyond our capability. But if we try and if we are gifted with *kochos* – strengths that we never knew we possessed, then we may very well succeed.

That is the blessing of כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ “Thus shall be your descendants.” *Klal Yisroel* has the attribute of looking at something which seems impossible, but nevertheless taking that first step...never giving up... and being rewarded with powers that they never thought they had.

Each person, each generation is given unique challenges—along with the ability to meet those challenges.

When we face uncertainty in our own lives, when we face tests, when we face change and uncertainty, we must draw upon the lessons of Avraham Avinu. We must be willing to face those tests with confidence—we must be willing to take those first steps. We must be willing to try.

And we must understand that when we create goals for ourselves, the harder we work at the beginning, if we can just take that first step, if we pass that first test—we will find it easier to put one foot in front of the other—to climb higher, greater, and tougher mountains--to deal with greater tests, and to accomplish great things. And the more work we put in, the easier it will be for our children and those who look to us for inspiration to deal with their challenges.

And when we look back after taking those steps—we will be pleasantly surprised to see the places we have traveled...and to see how far we have come.

Avraham Avinu is the father of the Jewish people, the first of the *avos*—and his greatest legacy is his willingness to take that first step...to follow God’s command by accepting the mission of *lech lecha*--because only through that willingness to take that step was he able to achieve all he did, to find the inner strength to accomplish great things.

We are a few weeks beyond the *Yamim Noraim*. If we have not yet taken that first step, incorporating the inspiration from the *Yamim Noraim* into our lives in a meaningful way---now is the time to take that first step...

May we be ready to take those first steps in our lives, and face our challenges and our future with strength and hope, and optimism. May we merit soon to see the day when those steps will lead us to a rebuilt *Beis Hamikdash* and *Yerushalayim, bimhera viyamenu...amen.*