

Understanding & Dealing with *Nisyonot* (Difficulties & Challenges) — Part 1 Introduction, Insights from the *Akeidah*, Understanding *Nisyonot*

Introduction:

There are many important issues and questions to clarify with *nisyonot* (tests):

Are there different types?

What is their purpose or purposes?

Is everyone given tests?

Should we view them as positive or negative?

Are they absolutely necessary for our growth and development?

Is it really the case that we are always capable of passing whatever tests we are given?

What does it actually mean to pass a test?

And, finally, how can we be most successful with our tests?

The classical examples of *nisyonot* (tests) in the Torah were the ten that Avraham went through. In fact, they are what transformed him from Avram, the child of an idolater, into Avraham, father of the Jewish people.

Insights from the *Akeidah* — When Hashem Commanded Avraham to Offer Yitzchak up on the Altar

Rabeinu Bachya writes on the verse (*Bereshit* 22:1) — “Hashem tested Avraham” —

Even though the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* (5:3) tells us that Avraham was tested with ten tests, only the *Akeidah* is explicitly referred to in the Torah as a “*nisayon*.” This is because it was the greatest of all the tests. When Hashem wants to test a person with a big *nisayon*, He doesn't test him with that *nisayon* at the beginning. Rather, He initially tests him with small tests, to accustom him to standing up to tests. He will develop the strength to stand up to a big test through this, and the greatness of his love for Hashem will then be revealed.

The **Maharal** (*Derech Chaim* 5:2) discusses the fact that there were [a **complete** number of] ten *nisyonot* with which Avraham was tested —

Since the world was created complete and perfect, the *Mishnah* (*Pirkei Avot* 5:2) tells us that it was created with 10 *ma'amarot* (statements) — so it should include everything. For this same reason, Hashem tested Avraham with 10 *nisyonot*, in order that Avraham be tested with every type of *nisayon*. It is possible for a person to stand up to one type of a test, but not to a different type of test. And similarly, the 10 *nissim* (miracles) which were done for our forefathers in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) were because Hashem wanted to do *nissim* of every single type for them.

The **Malbim** (*Bereshit* 26:1) clarifies —

The main point of a *nisayon* is for *ahavat Hashem* (the love of G-d) to grow within a person's heart to the point that all other loves he has are nullified to it, and whatever he loves the most will be sacrificed and dedicated to it [which is, of course, exactly what the *Akeidah* itself expressed]. Avraham was tested because he had come to recognize his Creator through philosophical thought and analysis. G-d wanted him to have complete *emunah* (belief), independent of his intellectual understanding — simply to follow after G-d's will in all circumstances. Therefore, He tested him with ten *nisyonot* to determine whether Avraham would question how G-d dealt with him. In contrast, Yitzchak, who had already received strong *emunah* from his father, did not need these tests.

The **Medrash Shmuel** explains the meaning of what the *Mishnah* (*Pirkei Avot* 5:3) says — “[Avraham] stood up to all ten tests [he was given]” —

The nature of people is to be pained when they have *yissurim*, even when they are *tzadikim gemurim* (completely righteous). Therefore, the *Mishnah* tells us that, even when Avraham was being tested with the ten tests, he fully stood up to all of them. He did not feel that their difficulty

pulled him down, but rather they established his stature, since he was emotionally settled with them.

The **Ktav V'HaKabala** (*Bereshit* 22:3) writes similarly that —

When the Torah tells us that “Avraham got up early” [for the *Akeidah*], it is teaching the remarkable enthusiasm of Avraham, who was then 137 years old. In fact, this was the main accomplishment of Avraham. The main *nisayon* of the *Akeidah* was not whether he was going to bring Yitzchak up as an offering, since Avraham was not going to disobey G-d. Rather, Avraham not only obeyed G-d's command, but he did it with great joy and enthusiasm. Therefore, our Sages learn from this verse that the one with excitement rushes to do *mitzvot*. Nothing expresses *simcha* (joy) as much as *zerizut* (enthusiasm).

The **Rambam** (*Moreh HaNevuchim* 3:24) emphasizes that —

The *Akeidah* is...to make us aware of just how far the love and fear of G-d reaches. The command in this area [with his own child] was beyond any comparison; more than giving his money or even his life. It was greater than anything else which could possibly happen to him, or what the nature of a person could ever imagine.

The **Ramchal** (*Derech Eitz Chayim*) explains —

Greatness does not happen through randomness. Rather, all happens through cause and determination. When we see the stature of the giants, the holy *Avot* (our forefathers), we understand that there is a path and approach to building oneself. What is this? With *nisayon* after *nisayon*, greatness after greatness. Because the power of greatness and actualization are the *nisyonot*. (*Da'at Tevunot* 1:136)

This explains to us the great wonder everyone is amazed by — how can it be that despite all of the challenges and difficulties which have come upon the Jewish nation, throughout all of the exiles these thousands of years, they are still existing and standing... The actions of the *Avot* are roots, and the tree of the Jewish people grows from them. We derive nourishment, life, and existence from the strong roots of our holy *Avot*, all throughout the *galut* (exile). All of the winds of the world will, therefore, not move us from our place, since our roots cannot be moved... *Nisyonot* have the ability to build a person. The *nisyonot* of Avraham Avinu were for the sake of creating and building his stature and completion... There is no doubt that there was an order to them, like there is an order to every structure. Only with all of them together did he achieve his perfection. It is thus certain that if Avraham would not have stood up to the final test, not only would he be missing that final step, but his entire perfection would have been lacking. And then, even the earlier tests [and achievements] would have been lost. (End of *Siftei Da'at* on *Pirkei Avot*)

The **Tosfot Yom Tov** points out the reason why Avraham is called Avraham Avinu (Avraham, our father) [in the context of the *nisyonot*] —

Because we (i.e., all future generations) merit and receive benefit as a result of him standing up to all of his *nisyonot*. (*Mishnayot Mesivta* on the *Akeidah* — #28)

The **Abarbanel** (on the *Akeidah*) writes —

An additional lesson which the *Akeidah* teaches is *emunah* (belief) in the continued existence of the soul, and its spiritual *s'char* (benefit). If Avraham would not have believed in the existence of spiritual *s'char* [and the world to come], he would never have been able to pass this test.

The **Shelah HaKadosh** points out a remarkable insight in the name of the **Zohar** —

At the time of the *Akeidah*, the *neshama* (soul) of Yitzchak flew away and a new *neshama* entered him. While his previous *neshama* had not been able to have any children, this new *neshama* was now fit to have children. The *Ohr HaChayim* points out that this is why the birth of Rivka [his wife that he would have children with] is mentioned immediately after the *Akeidah*. Now that he had become fit to have children, his soul mate was born.

We can learn a tremendous lesson from this. Avraham thought the *Akeidah* of Yitzchak was nullifying the promise that his descendants would come through Yitzchak, and there would, therefore, be no continuation to *Klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people). However, it was actually just the

opposite! The *Akeidah* was specifically what allowed Yitzchak to become fit to have children. And it actually fulfilled the promise that Avraham's descendants would come through Yitzchak. (*Ohr Gedalyahu — Vayera Hei*)

Understanding *Nisyonot*

The **Medrash Shmuel** (*b'sheim* HaRav Rebbe Yitzchak dei Leyon) explains very simply — Every occurrence which is difficult and painful for a person is called a *nisayon*. It tests and evaluates a person in terms of which level of perfection and completion he will be able to attain in his *avodat Hashem*. (*Mishnayot Mesivta — Pirkei Avot 5:3 — #27*)

The **Medrash Tanchuma** addresses the obvious question regarding *nisyonot* — At that time, Avraham asked Hashem — Master of the Universe, a person tests his friend since he doesn't know what is in his heart. But You do know what is inside the hearts and kidneys. [Therefore, why do] You need to do this [test]? (*Siftei Chaim — Parshat Va'era*)

The **Malbim** (*Bereshit 22*) explains —

There is a distinction between a *nisayon* and a *bechina*.

A *bechina* is an evaluation of what is...in terms of the nature of something. For example, one can evaluate gold to determine whether it is gold or counterfeit.

A *nisayon*, however, is testing whether there is some potential which is not presently known. Is a person, for example, completely dedicated to Hashem?... And will he stand up in righteousness beyond the nature of most people?

A *nisayon* has no limit. Avraham was tested with ten tests and each one was greater than the previous one.

The **Torat Avraham** (*Nisayon*) discusses the concept of *nisayon* —

The meaning of *nisayon* is not something which is simply hard for a person to do, since man was not created to do easy things. As the verse says — “*adam l'amal yulad* — a person was born to toil.” One who desires easy things is simply lazy or rebellious. The goal of a person in his life is *avoda* (service) and *ameilut* (toil). [Look] how much effort a person will put into physical matters [which people generally desire], without even tiring from it. The desire will lighten the effort until he barely feels it... And if the person would [also] have a will and desire for *ruchniyut* (spirituality), then he would [also] toil in it fully, without feeling the toil. Therefore, there is no *nisayon* for toil alone. This is something natural, what one was created for, which simply requires a decision... A *nisayon* is [rather] something which is against the *teva* (nature) of people... For example, the *nisyonot* of the *Avot*... Their *nisyonot*, even according to the simple perspective of the world, were against the *teva* of the creation.

The **Sefer Chassidim** (#13) explains that *nisyonot* are required for the sake of justice — Hashem would not bring things through *nisayon* except that when He speaks about doing good to man, the Satan, who is *midat hadin* (the trait of judgment), comes before Hashem. He says — “Master of the Universe, it is not possible to do good for him until he stands up to a test.”

The **Siftei Chaim** (*Parshat Vayera — Akeidah*) quotes the *Gra* who asks a question on the benefit of *nisyonot* —

The truth is that — “*s'char mitzvah b'hai alma leika* — there is no *s'char* for a *mitzvah* in this world.” If so, how are we benefiting from the *zechut* (merit) of the *mitzvot* which were done by our *Avot*? The explanation is that we are not benefiting from the *guf* (body) of their *mitzvot* in this world. However, the *zerizut* (enthusiasm) and the *hidur* (beautification) of the *mitzvot* of our *Avot* is what we are consuming in this world.

The **Tiferet Yisrael** (chap. 38) writes very succinctly — The expression of love is standing up to tests (Maharal on *Pirkei Avot 5:3* — note #130).

This should be *I'zechut ul'iluy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h, bat Asher Zevulun*