

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Parshat Chayei Sarah 20 “Final Test”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. I always refer to Parshat Chayei Sarah as the parsha that teaches us lessons about marriage and other relationships. It tells about the union of Yitzchak and Rivka, the first official wedding we have in the Torah, since the narratives about previously mentioned couples do not explicitly discuss this topic. Ironically, it's also where we read about Avraham buying a burial plot for Sarah, a transaction which becomes the source of marriage law in the Torah.

Unique among the commentators, the Rabbeinu Yonah contends that the purchase of Sarah's plot, and **not** the Akeida, was the final test imposed on Avraham. How could such a low-key event be considered a greater challenge than the Akeida? My Rebbe Rabbi Yissocher Frand offered a noteworthy explanation. The midrash says that Sarah died from a stroke, which she suffered upon hearing about Yitzchak and fearing he would die. Avraham returned home after Yitzchak's brush with death, only to discover that his wife had died as a direct result of the Akeida. Despite the intense grief he must have felt, he had to make the mundane arrangements for her burial. He encountered Ephron Hachiti, an annoying salesman who haggled for an exorbitant price. Avraham not only agreed to purchase the overpriced plot, he spoke respectfully to the salesman and to the locals and even called Efron master in front of all his peers.

We tend to think of accomplishments in terms of how we grapple with major events and dramatic scenarios. But the real test of character, the real achievement, is found in the way we treat each other day to day, in mundane interactions, when we are under stress. It would be perfectly understandable if Avraham had reacted harshly to Ephron - after all, he was under severe emotional strain. But he did not use that as an excuse to let himself off the hook.

The same lesson can be applied to marriage and our other significant long-term relationships. It is easy to see the importance of remembering anniversaries and other major milestones. But in truth, the most important challenge is to maintain our composure when no one (except God) is looking, when there is no fanfare, during our day to day interactions – to resist acting with impatience, frustration, and anger, when we are feeling stretched to the limit.

That's the greatest test we have in our lives – to be kind to our families and other loved ones, especially during this time when life is so difficult, with daily bad news about the spread of Covid and the hardship of being stuck at home, with fewer outlets for our stress. True greatness comes from the small things we accomplish with each other in private, when no one else is watching. Shabbat shalom.