

When a New Test Demands New Answers

This week's *parsha* presents us with the culmination of Avraham Avinu's journey through his ten *nisyonos*. The Maharal teaches in many places that the number ten represents *kol ha'tzadim* - every possible dimension of a thing. Avraham wasn't simply tested ten times to see how much he could endure. Rather, each test challenged a different aspect of his being, a different dimension of his avodas Hashem.¹

The Avraham who left his father's house in Lech Lecha could not have passed the test of the Akedah. Not because he lacked faith - he had already entered the fire of Nimrod - but because each test required him to develop new spiritual muscles, new approaches to serving Hashem. The hospitality that defined him in the beginning of our *parsha* - running to serve three strangers - seems almost contradictory to the solitary journey up Har HaMoriah with Yitzchak at the *parsha's* end. The commitment to Yitzchak's future that necessitated the banishment of Yishmael is challenged by the command to sacrifice his spiritual heir.

Avraham's trials were not abstract; they demanded that he respond differently to each new moment. Our own moment, after the Mamdani election, poses not just a political test - but a spiritual one as well.

Mamdani's victory in New York City elections was perhaps a perfect storm - the presence of Sliwa, anti-Trump sentiment, economic concerns, the war in Israel. And yes, in our Orthodox neighborhoods, we got out the vote; our communities didn't support him. The OU, Agudah, our RCA rabbis in NYC, and other organizations worked tirelessly to mobilize our community, and in that effort, we succeeded.

But that success was not enough, And here is where Avraham's tests speak to us today with urgency. [Rabbi Norman Lamm](#) z"l, drawing on the Kotzker Rebbe, teaches us that the real *nisayon* of the Akedah wasn't when Avraham raised the knife - it was when he had to lower it. After investing everything - his emotions, his understanding of God's promise, his very identity - into the willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak, Avraham had to hear "stop."

The Kotzker explains that taking Yitzchak off the altar was infinitely harder than putting him on. Why? Because of what Rabbi Lamm attests to be human nature: "What we have invested in time and energy, loyalty and commitment, prestige and reputation in a certain approach, we do not want to change, we cannot change, lest we thereby declare that our entire past has been invalid and inauthentic."

This is our challenge today. We've invested so much in certain approaches - political advocacy, community organizing and getting out the vote. These weren't wrong! But like

¹ Derech Chaim to Avos 5:3. See page 96 in the Hartman edition.

Avraham at the moment the angel stayed his hand, we might need to be willing to add to our past strategies, but because new circumstances demand new responses.

No, we cannot abandon our approaches to this point:

1. We must, as rabbanim, provide *nechama* and *chizzuk* to our congregants and to each other as rabbinical *chaveirim*. This is not a time for panic, but for pastoral leadership. We feel scared, betrayed by our fellow Americans, and confused. But the Jewish community has faced many greater threats - even in the past few years - and seen the guiding hand of Hashem protecting us. This is but one election in a country that is largely behind the Jewish People.
2. In New York City, we must remember Rabbi Chanina S'gan HaKohanim's directive (Avot 3:2) to pray for *shalom hamalchus* - and to remember that he was talking about the evil government in Rome! This isn't the first time the Jewish people have prayed for or worked with those who hate Israel or aren't friends of the Jewish people. Avraham himself had to negotiate with Pharaoh, with Avimelech, with the kings of Sodom - not all of whom were friends.
3. And throughout the Diaspora, we must stand up for our rights as citizens. For those rabbanim involved in civic affairs, or who have *baalei batim* working in NYC government, the politics of pragmatism require us not to cede our influence in the city halls of power. We cannot give up, and must serve, both inside and outside government as watchdogs, advocates, and activists to keep any new administration accountable. We must simultaneously keep our eyes on races nationwide where future Mamdanis will attempt to replicate his success.

But we must also be *ro'im es ha'nolad*, to admit that lines have been crossed and that new realities are before us, and that we must seek new answers to age-old questions.

Rabbi Lamm's words must challenge us at the deepest level: sometimes the greatest act of faith isn't persisting in what we've always done - it's having the courage to stop, to pivot, to embrace new approaches. Avraham's willingness to take Yitzchak off the altar, to accept that what seemed like the ultimate spiritual moment was actually meant to end differently, required more strength than all his previous tests combined.

We must be genuinely open to solutions we may have previously thought unnecessary or never seriously considered. We cannot simply double down on yesterday's strategies and expect different results. The political landscape has shifted. The demographics have changed. The challenges are new. And like Avraham standing with the knife in his hand, hearing the angel say "stop," "pause," we need the courage to lower our old weapons and pick up new ones, even if it feels like we're betraying things we've worked for until now.

1. **We cannot simply *increase* our efforts to fight antisemitism but must shift our focus *dramatically* to address the threats that face us.** If we do not have strategies or solutions ourselves, we must rethink how we give our time and resources to those on the front line. Working a little harder won't suffice for the threats that face us; like Avraham, we need to take a second look at the sacrifices we were willing to make, the sacrifices we were certain would be sufficient to fulfill the *ratzon Hashem*, and to reevaluate our next steps. National organizations, including the RCA, must make this fight central to their missions.
2. **We need to work *together* as a Jewish community - and as a society - to protect the Jewish people as proud American / Canadian citizens and to support Israel.** We need to sit with individuals and organizations with which we may not fully agree to develop a comprehensive strategy to push back against segments of society that have gone off the rails. We need to unite, not as cowering victims, but as proud Jews who understand the truth about Israel, the contributions of our people to world and the justness of our beliefs.
3. And even as we fight for North American society, **Aliyah must be seen not as an admission of defeat, but as a calling to positively reshape Jewish destiny in a new direction.** Just as Avraham's first test required him to leave his birthplace, perhaps some of us are being called to make that same leap of faith. (If you are willing to discuss aliyah in this context, see here for a remarkable comment from R. Chaim Vololzhiner in his [Ruach Chaim commentary to Avos 5:3](#) on Avraham's ten tests.) But whether we are ready or able to move at this time, or simply remain open to Israel in the future, **we must remember that Israel, our now accessible homeland, is what makes 2025 different from 1939 and allows us to remain here and fight.**

V'Avraham zaken, ba bayamim - Avraham was old, advanced in days. His *zikhah*, his wisdom came from his experiences. He had gathered insight from each test, each phase of his life. He knew when to argue, when to negotiate, when to fight, when to sacrifice, and crucially - when to stop what he was doing and try something entirely different.

This is our tenth test moment. The question isn't whether we have the strength to continue what we've been doing - it's whether we have the courage to stop, to change, to admit that what brought us here might not take us forward. May Hashem help us find within ourselves Avraham's ultimate strength: not just the faith to persist, but the faith to pivot, not just the courage to sacrifice, but the courage to start anew.