

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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JUST ONE SMALL ROOM

The climax of this week's *parsha* is the *akeida*, an episode which features heavily throughout our *tefilos*, underscoring how central and significant it is. Yet the *mesiras nefesh Avraham* displayed was replicated countless times over by Jews through the ages, by individuals who never received a personal order from *Hashem* to do so, and many of whose overall spiritual state was wanting! The answer generally given is that *Avraham* 'opened the pipeline,' enabling everyone who followed to do the same, but why does this whole incident receive more attention than, say, his being cast into the flames at *Ur Kasdim*?

Moreover, a *Midrash* relates that *Hashem* informed *Avraham* that were he to fail this final test, all his previous trials would be rendered worthless. Clearly, the *akeida* didn't merely eclipse *Avraham's* prior sacrifices, but served as the definitive barometer of whether he had *mesiras nefesh* at all. Finally, *Chassidus* links being *moser nefesh* to the level of the soul known as *yechida*, an element which gentiles are said to be lacking, yet there are copious instances in which non-Jews willingly gave their lives for what they believed, however false!

SELFISH MESIRAS NEFESH

The true definition of *mesiras nefesh* isn't merely disregard for one's own life, but rather committing the ultimate act of self-nullification. It's possible to put one's life on the line – for the very selfish purpose of making headlines and becoming famous. It's

also possible to stand one's ground on the pain of death due to the sense of being unable to go on without something so central to one's life. It's even possible for someone who has advocated

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a particular position his entire life to feel compelled to die for it or else his perceived hypocrisy will undermine his entire life's work. None of these people are acting selflessly, but are instead operating on the basis of a particular self-serving agenda.

Jewish *mesiras nefesh*, on the other hand, is akin to the *emunah* discussed last week, where *Avraham's* earlier work was dismissed because he acted on his own urges, as opposed to a *neshama* which instinctively connects with *Hashem*.

Tanya explains that a soul is likened to fire which longs to detach itself from its fuel in order reunite with its source whereupon it ceases to exist. Typically, *ratzon* serves to expand, to acquire more, never less, yet fire's sole desire

is to reconnect with its source regardless of the consequences. Likewise, the Jewish soul reflexively cleaves to its Creator, without regard for whatever harm might befall it as a result.

SACRIFICING THE SELF

This selflessness was not on display at *Ur Kasdim*, since *Avraham's* work would be ruined were he not to demonstrate the willingness to die in support of his lifelong campaign. The fact that he had this incentive to bolster his legacy therefore

undermines any attempt to discern authentic *mesiras nefesh* in his previous actions.

Only the *akeida* can be deemed true *mesiras nefesh* by this standard. He stood to impress no one by doing this – the event took place in total isolation. In fact, the act of sacrificing his sole successor *Yitzchak* would serve as the death sentence of everything he had worked for! The choice to conduct the *akeida* could only emanate specifically from selflessly heeding *Hashem* no matter the personal loss.

Likewise, *mesiras nefesh* throughout the ages was demonstrated by Jews who weren't invested in spreading Judaism, or even properly observing it! Yet they acted against their own interests simply because their *neschama* acted like fire – gravitating towards its source, even at its own expense. We therefore mention the *akeida* often, not as a reminder of something our ancestor once did, but as a testament to our own ability.

A DEDICATED SPACE

The *Shulchan Aruch* states that we recite the *akeida* daily as a means of overcoming our natural inclinations. But how is it possible to compare what are sometimes our inconsequential struggles to an accomplishment as mighty as the *akeida*?

The answer is that *mesiras nefesh* isn't measured by its scale but by its essential quality: We ordinarily act solely in our own self-interest, and cannot be moved to do even the slightest action which doesn't fit that bill. To spend even a single minute on something for no purpose other than for *Hashem* is therefore reminiscent of the *akeida*. It was *Avraham* who made this

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possible for all of us, empowering us to ignore ourselves, be it even for a minute, and become entirely connected to *Hashem*.

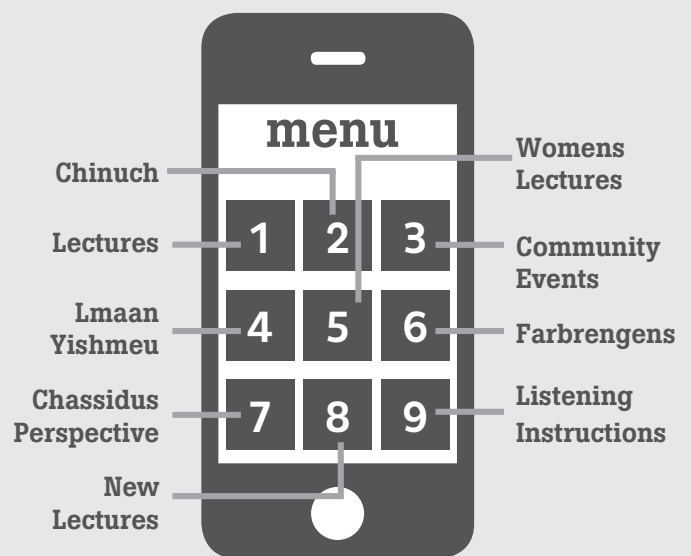
Someone once related that he was present at a *farbrengen* (prior to the Previous *Rebbe's* passing) where the *Rebbe* used the following parable: A king once arrived in a foreign place, and requested lodgings, no matter how sparse, on one condition: That the place be uniquely his, that he not feel like a guest, but rather be allowed to feel entirely in possession of this space. This parallels the concept of the *akeida* which calls for creating a space for *Hashem* completely devoid of self, and when *Avraham* demonstrated this, he paved the way for us, revealing the essence

of precisely what it means to be a Jew.

For further learning see לקוטי שיחות חלק כ' וירא ג'

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