

Lech Lecha | Why do we struggle?

Friends ? tests are part of the essential fabric of life. They are what make us what we are. Through adversity and struggle that we stretch ourselves to the limits of our abilities, and discover our true potential.

And in fact, the Torah and the prophetic writings are replete with great leaders who endured difficult tests and travails.

This week's parsha begins with a test for Avraham, when G-d asks him to leave his home and his birthplace and his family to journey to an unknown destination ? which was ultimately to be the promised land for the Jewish people. This was in fact the second in a series of ten extremely difficult trials that would test Avraham's mettle and mould him into the father of the Jewish People. Among them were being commanded to circumcise himself at the age of 99; his wife Sarah's abduction at the hands of Pharaoh; and, most powerfully of all, G-d's command that he sacrifice his only son, Yitzchak.

These were tests of his courage and conviction, of his commitment and stamina; of his faith in G-d's justice and ultimate goodness.

Many other great leaders of the Torah faced similar ordeals. Joseph famously withstood many tests of his moral principles and integrity. Potiphar's wife attempted time and again to seduce him, and though he was an anonymous 17-year-old slaveboy, far away from home, he did the right thing and warded off her advances, even though it eventually cost him his liberty. Languishing in the dungeons after Potiphar falsely accused him, and then later, as viceroy of Egypt ? both challenging situations for different reasons ? he maintained his faith and integrity ? to the extent that our Sages describe him as Yosef HaTazaddik, ?Joseph the Righteous?.

King David was another leader who passed many tests of his faith in Hashem's justice and compassion. He was pursued by his father-in-law, King Saul; his own son led a military coup against him which forced him to flee his palace. Yet throughout he remained faithful and devout.

Like Avraham, Yoseph and King David, our lives are filled with episodes that challenge our faith in G-d, and their unwavering belief under extreme duress serves as inspiration to us all.

And these tests do not have to be dramatic; they occur actually every single day of our lives. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, explains in his classic work, *Mesilat Yesharim*, that everything in life is test; that wealth and health and success can be a test because it can lead to arrogance and a sense of smug satisfaction with oneself. And on other hand poverty, illness and suffering, can also be a test, because they can challenge and can cause us to be bitter and resentful. And so every encounter in life can be a test in one way or another.

What is the purpose of a test, and what does it mean in the context of our relationship with G-d? Firstly, it is important to accept that we can never fully understand the rationale behind G-d's workings in this world. The Gemara (Berachot 7a) describes how Moshe asked Hashem why some righteous people suffer and some wicked people prosper. G-d answered, ?No man shall see Me and live? (Shemot 33:20), which, on a simple level, means that human beings, constrained by the limitations of our minds, can never fully comprehend the depth of the Divine. Yet despite these limitations, our Sages help us understand the idea of tests and challenges in general terms.

Conventionally, the purpose of a test is to assess the abilities of the one being tested. When G-d is the examiner, however, this makes no sense: He knows everything. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what our capabilities are. What, then, is the purpose of being tested by G-d? Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban, explains in his commentary on Bereishit that the tests we undergo during our lives aren't for G-d's benefit, they are for our benefit. They give us the opportunity to transform our inherent potential into actual spiritual achievements; by putting the emotional, spiritual and physical resources we were blessed with into action, we become self-actualised beings, and ensure we can be rewarded not only for our good intentions but also for our good deeds.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, proves from Talmudic sources that G-d only gives us tests and challenges we are capable of overcoming. If we are successful, if we are able to rise to the challenges, we emerge stronger, more elevated and more meritorious.

In his commentary on Bereishit, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says that the Hebrew word for test, nisayon, is related to the word nassa, meaning to raise or to elevate, as well as the word, nisiya, which means to travel or move forward. Every test, every challenge, is an opportunity to move forward, to grow, to become stronger and more elevated, through exercising the latent powers within our soul.

Not only do challenges uncover hidden reserves, they can also be the impetus for creating new strengths, new reserves; indeed the human soul has miraculous capabilities beyond what we can rationally comprehend. We contain multitudes, untold depths. The Torah (Bereishit 1:27) tells us that human beings were created 'in the image of G-d'; alone among the creations, we are imbued with a heavenly soul, a spark of the Divine.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 55:6) relates the word nisayon also to the Hebrew word nes, which means a banner or a flag. The miraculous, seemingly superhuman strength exhibited by people who withstand severe tests with faith and resolve, is a flag, a signal to the world, hoisted high to inspire us all. When facing life's challenges, the superhuman strength and courage of an Avraham or a Yoseph or a King David can inspire us. We need to have faith in G-d to give us strength and guidance to withstand our tests and actualise our potential, but also have faith in ourselves 'in the power of our G-d-given souls.

This idea 'of converting our potential into reality' is actually the fundamental purpose of our lives. The Torah calls the first human being Adam, which comes from the Hebrew word adama, meaning 'earth' or 'ground'. What is the connection between the two? The Maharal explains that humans are similar to the ground in one essential respect: they are both pure potential. Whether or not a piece of land will produce fruit depends on what is done with it. Even the most fertile piece of land will not produce fruit if it is left to lie fallow; it needs to be ploughed, fertilised and cultivated. So too, the human being is pure potential, and to live a fruitful, productive life requires great and continuous efforts. We come into this world as pure potential and through the process of life we actualise that potential. And it's up to us; we have been given free choice to turn that potential into personal growth and mitzvot and spiritual greatness 'or we can choose to squander it and simply let it lie dormant.

But ultimately, it's through the process of struggle and difficulty, even failure, that a person can transform their potential into greatness. I'll close with a remarkable letter written by Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner (Igrot Pachad Yitzchak 128) in response to a student who had written to him complaining of the tests and challenges he faced in his personal development:

'A failing that many of us experience is that when we focus on the lofty level of accomplishments of great people, we only focus on how they are complete in this or in that area. At the same time, we omit mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals came out of the land of their Creator in ideal form.

Everyone is awed at the purity of speech of the Chofetz Chaim, considering it a miraculous phenomenon. But who knows of the battles, struggles, and obstacles, the slumps and regressions that the Chofetz Chaim encountered in his war with the yetzer hara [evil inclination]? There are many such examples to which a discerning individual such as yourself can certainly apply the rule. The result of this misconception is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls, and slumps, he imagines himself unworthy '.

Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquility of the yetzer tov [good inclination], but rather in the battle of the yetzer tov. The English expression, 'Lose a battle and win the war,' applies to this phenomenon?[King Solomon,] the wisest of all men, has said, 'A righteous man falls seven times and rises again' (Proverbs 24:16). Fools believe that the intent of this verse is to teach us something remarkable: the righteous man has fallen seven times and yet he resiliently rises. But the knowledgeable know that the source of the righteous person's ability to rise again is precisely through his seven falls?

When you feel the turmoil of the yetzer hara within yourself, know that by experiencing that feeling you resemble great men far

more than if you were to experience the feeling of deep peace, which you desire. In those very areas where you feel yourself failing most frequently ? particularly in those areas ? do you have the greatest potential for serving as an instrument of distinction for the honour of G-d ? Had your letter told me about all your mitzvot and goods deeds, I would have said that I have received a good letter from you. Now that your letter tells about the slumps and falls and obstacles, I can say that I have received a very good letter from you.?