



ברית יצחק: בחירה אלוקית

The Covenant with Yitzchak: A Divine Choice

■ Time to be Tested

Our lives are replete with tests – milestones that help us advance step by step and climb up from one rung to another. Some of the tests are administered to us by our fellow men, while others are orchestrated by Hashem.

Mortals need to run tests on others – for instance, a teacher tests his students – in order to ascertain their level and abilities. Hashem, however, already knows perfectly well the strengths and abilities of His creations. Rather, the tests He administers aim at giving us a chance to prove our abilities and make the best of our potential. When we succeed, we find that we have been uplifted – not only in our own eyes, but also in the eyes of those around us.

Furthermore: Success in one Divine test means the opportunity to go on to a new and higher level. Sometimes, a person is afraid to advance too much, and so he “allows” himself to fail, so that he will not have to go much further, or be promoted to a more demanding position or job.

Every test is alike, however, in that the testee remains alone, whether it is given by man or by G-d. During a Divine test, G-d hides Himself and leaves the person to deal with the problem all on his own, using his own qualities and abilities. The struggle itself develops his responsibility and maturity. Consider a child learning to swim, for instance: the instructor can explain and demonstrate, and can even hold him up in the water, but the child will never know how to swim until he does it on his own.

In the Torah, various Names of G-d are used to demonstrate different modes of Divine guidance and supervision. Among these Names is the sacred *Havayah* Name, beginning with the letter *yud* and followed by *heh*, *vuv* and *heh*. These letters are of the root meaning “to be,” and the Name

they spell refers to Divine Supervision. Another Divine Name, *Elokim*, generally refers to the way G-d works with and through nature.

When G-d tests a man, He hides His *Havayah* Name within the *Elokim* Name, meaning that He conceals His Divine Providence over the world within existing natural laws. Let us consider some examples.

■ The Test of the Akedah

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם...

It happened after these things that Elokim tested Avraham... (B'reshit 22,1)

This verse introduces the classic Divine test, that of the Binding of Yitzchak, *Akedat Yitzchak*. Avraham had faced nine tests previously, but this one – the offering up of his beloved and long-awaited son as a sacrifice to G-d – was of course the hardest. Nevertheless, Avraham passed it with flying colors: “*Avraham outstretched his hand and he took the knife to slaughter his son.*” (verse 10)

Throughout the entire account of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the *Havayah* Name is “hiding,” and only the Name *Elokim* appears. This indicates that Avraham is being left “alone” with the laws of nature, without direct G-dly direction. This phenomenon is quite blatant, in that the *Havayah* Name actually does appear both immediately before and after this passage. In the last verse of Chapter 21, just before the *Akedah*, we read:

וַיִּקְרָא שָׁם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֵל עוֹלָם.

*Avraham proclaimed the Name of G-d (Havayah),
the L-rd of the world.* (21,33)

And immediately afterwards, we read the following:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהֵי מְלֶאכֶה ה' מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם...

An angel of G-d (Havayah) called to him from the heavens... (22,11)

The *Havayah* Name appears before and after, but during the test itself, it disappears and is replaced with *Elokim*. For instance, when Yitzchak realizes they are headed to offer a sacrifice, he asks his father where the sheep is. Avraham answers: “*Elokim will choose the sheep for the offering, my son*” (verse 8). But later, after the test has ended, Avraham uses a different Name, calling the place “*Hashem (Havayah) Will See*” (verse 14). That is, during the test, it was *Elokim* Who was choosing, while afterwards, the G-d of *Havayah* will be active.

The significance of the difference is this: When *Elokim* chooses, He guides Avraham to recognize naturally that there is a suitable ram nearby that can be offered as a sacrifice; the name *Elokim* is used in the context of natural law. But “*Hashem will see*” means that G-d will announce via prophecy the chosen place for His Holy Presence to dwell.

Avraham prayed that G-d would do so, because he had previously experienced a test in which Hashem did not provide him with relevant information. It occurred just before *Akedat Yitzchak*, when Avraham had to find the place of the *Akedah* himself. He had received no specific prophecy telling him where to go, other than that it would be “*on one of the mountains that I will tell you*” (22,2). Avraham had to meet this test all on his own, albeit with concealed Divine help, using his natural senses to figure out where the Mountain of G-d was located.

בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֵק.

*On the third day, Avraham lifted his eyes and saw
the place from afar.* (verse 4)

Let us sharpen this point by comparing it to the anointing of King David. Hashem gave the Prophet Samuel clear, prophetic instructions to go to Jesse of Bethlehem and anoint one of his sons as King of Israel: “*Invite Jesse to the sacrificial feast, and I shall inform you what you shall do, and you shall anoint for Me the one I shall tell you*” (Shmuel I 16,3). Though Shmuel was told exactly where to go, as opposed to Avraham, his test was to see if he could identify the future king. He did not succeed; he thought one of David’s older, more impressive-looking brothers would be chosen. G-d rebuked him by saying, “*Man sees what is visible to the eyes, while G-d sees into the heart*” (16,7). Hashem finally tells Shmuel His choice: Yishai’s youngest son, David:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' קוּם מְשַׁחֵהוּ כִּי זֶה הוּא.

*And Hashem (Havayah) said, “Arise, anoint him [David],
for it is he.”* (verse 12)

■ The Test of the Tree of Knowledge

Let us now study carefully the first test ever given to a human being, namely, the famous command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. When we read Chapters 2 and 3 in B’reshit, we see that the Divine names of Hashem (*Havayah*) and *Elokim* appear together. Once the snake

begins to entice Adam and Eve, we see that *Elokim* appears alone. Only when the test is over (having ended in failure), does the *Havayah* name return.

Elokim is used once the snake appears on the scene (3,1), and is used alone several more times. Only after Adam and Eve sin and then abruptly realize that they must put on clothing, does the double Divine name of Hashem-*Elokim* reappear (verse 8). How are we to understand the disappearance of the *Havayah* Name?

Let us once again compare these two Divine Names.² Chapter 1 of B'reshit describes the Creation of the World, and uses the name *Elokim* exclusively, from the first verse "*B'reshit bara Elokim*," and up to the last verse, "...*asher bara Elokim la'asot*." The picture that emerges shows us the "first floor" of Creation, with the following basic elements:

1. A system of laws of nature created by Hashem – one law for all
2. Divine Providence – equal for all
3. Divine Determination, with no Free Will for man

Chapter 2 repeats the story of Creation, emphasizing a new combination: the double Divine Name, Hashem *Elokim*. The first verse states "...*on the day that Hashem Elokim did...*", and the next-to-last verse of this account, referring to G-d's banishment of Adam from Eden, also uses the name Hashem *Elokim*. It is in this passage that we read, for the first time, of G-d issuing commands to man:

וַיִּצַו ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל.

Hashem Elokim commanded the man, saying: "You may eat from all the trees of the Garden [except for the Tree of Knowledge]." (2,16)

All this clearly alludes to a "second floor" in the workings of the world created by G-d, with components in total opposition to those mentioned during the Six Days of Creation:

1. A system of justice and Divine ethics
2. Specific Divine Providence – not equal for all
3. Free Will

This we must know: Just as the Name *Elokim* stands for absolute laws of nature that we cannot oppose or resist, so too, His very presence and the appearance of His word essentially dictates our adherence to His laws - for

2. as we did in our lesson for Parashat Noach entitled, "G-d's Name in Two Tiers".

who can disobey a clear Divine command with G-d standing right over him?!

Therefore, for Adam to truly have Free Choice, and so that equal forces for good and evil be brought to bear upon him, G-d must do two things: He must equip Adam with a very clear command that will serve as a counter-balance to the pull of physical lusts, and He must hide His presence.

This, then, is the reason for the disappearance of the *Havayah* Name as soon as the snake starts talking – so that Adam can stand truly alone and on his own, without Divine “help,” in facing this test. This also explains why the *Havayah* Name appears only before and after the test of the *Akedah*, but not during the test itself.

■ The Mount Sinai Test

Let us now turn to Mount Sinai and the great test of the Giving of the Torah to Israel. This seminal event was intensely dramatic from every standpoint. The mountain was covered in smoke and fire, while from above came lightning and a thunderous din, accompanied throughout by a long, powerful shofar blast. Not surprisingly, “*the entire nation in the camp trembled.*” (Sh'mot 19,16)

Throughout the account of the Ten Commandments, the *Havayah* Name is used time after time, sometimes joined by *Elokim* and sometimes not - except for the opening verse:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר.

Elokim spoke all these things, saying: (Sh'mot 20,1)

The same is true right after the Ten Commandments:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה, דַּבֵּר אֵתָּה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים כִּי פֶן נָמוּת.

The people said to Moshe, “Speak with us yourself, and let not Elokim speak with us, lest we die.” (verse 16)

In between these two exclusive mentions of *Elokim* – which tell us that the speaker is *Elokim* – the name Hashem is repeatedly cited throughout. The Ten Commandments appear to be one package, wrapped up front and back by *Elokim*. Afterwards, when the people complain that they cannot bear to hear G-d talk to them directly, Moshe responds: “*Do not fear, for Elokim is coming merely to test you*” (verse 17). The next verse, as well, uses the Name of *Elokim*: “*The people stood from far, and Moshe approached the fog in which was Elokim.*”

We see that the dramatic experience of thunder and lightning, blasting sounds, fire and cloud, is the style in which G-d communicated with them. This is the style of *Elokim*. Moshe explained to them that this was a test by which to evaluate their spiritual level. That is, Hashem wished to raise Bnei Yisrael to ever higher spiritual planes, by activating the pressures of frightening natural phenomena, such as thunder, lightning, and fire – represented by the Name *Elokim*. The more Bnei Yisrael would succeed in standing up to these pressures without fear, the stronger would be the Divine Revelation. The pressures grew ever stronger until finally the people cried out: “Enough! We can’t absorb any more!”

The level at which they stopped G-d’s Revelation was the spiritual level that they set for themselves.

The Torah expresses this sensation of near-abandonment by G-d and their feeling in the middle of the test that they were about to die (verse 16) by emphasizing the *Elokim* name instead of the *Havayah* Name. This is meant to show that Bnei Yisrael remained now only under the control of natural law, as opposed to Divine supervision. Only once the test has ended, does the *Havayah* Name return:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...

Hashem said to Moshe: Say to the Children of Israel as follows: (verse 19)

It must be reiterated that tests are necessary stages in life; they cannot be negated or fought. Tests are forced upon men quite against their will, but for their ultimate benefit. They must show strength and faith, and they must succeed in the tests placed before them. Every upward climb from rung to rung requires the passing of a test, which gives us the tools by which to assess our standing-power without obvious Heavenly help, and helps us progress and improve.

■ The Covenant of Yitzchak

This brings us to the Torah portion of Lekh Lekha, in which we read the commandment of Brit Milah (ritual circumcision) and G-d’s choice of Yitzchak as Avraham’s successor. Given that we have learned that a Divine test is a critical rung in the climb to sanctity, the following verse is quite surprising: *Elokim said [to Avraham], “But your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call his name Yitzchak, and I will establish My everlasting covenant with him for his descendants after him.”* (B’reshit 17,19)

To establish or forge a covenant with G-d requires very hard work in order to reach the highest levels of ethics, justice and piety. Yet here we see G-d forging a covenant with someone who has not yet even been born, and certainly has not proven that he can reach the suitable spiritual level!

This teaches us that there are some exalted systems in which there is simply no Free Will; everything is Divinely determined. We see in this verse that G-d has determined the future for Avraham – including even his son's name: 1) Sarah will have a son, 2) his name will be Yitzchak, and 3) G-d will make a covenant with him and with his descendants forever afterwards. This was all signified by the opening words: “*Elokim said*,” standing for immutable, natural, unchangeable law. The covenant with Yitzchak is a Divine decision that cannot be opposed.

Similarly, the entire passage of the Covenant begins with the name *Elokim*: “*Avram fell on his face, and Elokim spoke to him, saying... ‘Circumcise all your males...’*” (17,3-14)

This explains why the only commandment in which we have no choice is that of Brit Milah. No one asks the baby if he wants to be circumcised; it is rather a fact-on-the-ground determined in advance by Hashem for the Nation of Israel, holy from the womb (based on Yirmiyahu 1,5). No Jew can change or forsake his Jewish identity; this sign of his covenant is engraved upon him.

Despite all of the above, G-d introduces and proposes the Covenant to Avraham with His *Havayah* name (17,1). Avraham is granted free will here, and he in fact agrees to G-d's offer. But from here on in, the picture changes totally, and Avraham enters a framework whose rules are dictated from above: The name *Elokim* is exclusively used, until the end of the prophetic vision. The last verse shows that this was done quite intentionally; *Elokim* abruptly ends the conversation, thus emphasizing that the matter is final and that Avraham has no choice in the mitzvah of Brit Milah:

וַיִּכַּל לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ וַיַּעַל אֶל-לְהִים מֵעַל אַבְרָהָם.

He finished talking with him, and Elokim went up from Avraham. (verse 22)

Only then, after the vision has ended, and after Avraham and his household were all circumcised, does G-d return and speak with him with His regular *Havayah* Name:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו ה' בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵה וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם.

Hashem appeared to him in Elonei Mamreh, and he was sitting at the entrance to the tent in the heat of the day. (18,1)

And still another proof that Avraham has no choice in this pre-determined matter can be found in this passage. Avraham prayed to *Elokim* on behalf of Yishmael: “*If only Yishmael will live before You.*” And *Elokim* responded, “*Indeed, your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you shall name him Yitzchak, and I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.*” (17,18-19)

That is, when Avraham tried to mention Yishmael, Hashem responded quite firmly: “These matters have already been determined, and you have no say. I chose your son Yitzchak even before his birth, and it is with him that I will forge My covenant, and not with Yishmael” – and at this point, He cuts off the conversation.

We can compare this abrupt end to another dialogue G-d had with Avraham, before the destruction of S'dom and Amora. There, the *Havayah* Name of Hashem is mentioned, not *Elokim*, showing that the matter was not set in stone. In fact, G-d gave Avraham all the time he needed to ask whatever questions he wanted. Only after Avraham finished, did G-d take leave of him. (18,32-33)

Everything now falls into place. The birth of Yitzchak was something that had to be (G-d chose him even before his birth), and the covenant with him was pre-determined; there was no mortal choice in the matter. It therefore had to be ensured that this would happen in the most sanctified manner. Thus, Avraham had to be circumcised before the birth, so that Yitzchak would be born to a circumcised father. And this is also why the letter *heh* from G-d's Name had to be added to the names of Avraham and Sarah.

In short, these incidents “fell” upon Avraham without his consent or knowledge; he had no choice concerning them. That is why these incidents are recorded with the name of *Elokim* - for they were as absolute as the laws of nature and *had* to occur.

And finally, here is additional evidence for this approach from Parashat Vayera. The story of the birth of Yitzchak begins with the *Havayah* Name (21,1), but continues with *Elokim* when Yitzchak was actually born (verse 2) and when he was circumcised (verse 4). And so on: The name *Elokim* is consistently used, indicating that the entire story of Yitzchak's birth, the

covenant, and the banishment of Yishmael was Divinely decreed, with no human intervention allowed.

Let us note, too, that the entire story of Yishmael's banishment from Avraham's home was against Avraham's will. "*It was very grievous in his eyes,*" we read in verse 11. But he had no choice, for G-d appears to Avraham with the Name *Elokim*: "*Elokim told Avraham, Whatever Sarah says, listen to her - for your seed shall be manifest in Yitzchak.*" (21,12)

Once again, we see that G-d's choice of Yitzchak is absolute, unchanging, and immutable. No one can oppose it. Only at the end of the chapter does the *Havayah* Name of Hashem return:

וַיֵּטֵעַ אֱשֶׁל בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם בְּשֵׁם ה' אֵל עוֹלָם.

Avraham planted a tree in Be'er Sheva, and proclaimed there the Name of Hashem, the eternal G-d. (verse 33)

Let us conclude with yet another allusion to this explanation from another passage in B'reshit: Yitzchak's blessing to his son Yaakov (whom he thought was Esav):

וַיִּתֵּן לָהּ הָאֱ-לֹהִים מִטֵּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ...

May Elokim give you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land... (27,28)

The use of *Elokim* shows that Yitzchak's blessing to his son was backed by the immutable Divine decree that Yaakov was to receive it, and not, as Yitzchak had planned, Esav. It was not given to human choice, and thus Yitzchak said: "By Divine command, I bless you that only you, and no one else, will receive this blessing."

