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Tzar U'VeSimcha: The Biggest Deal in Mitzvot

The Derasha

1. Why So Many Details About Avraham's "Guest Meal"?

Our parasha tells us:

"Vayeira elav Hashem be'Elonei Mamre..."

"Hashem appeared to Avraham in the plains of Mamre."

Why? Rashi says: **Bikur Cholim**.

Avraham is sick after his **brit milah**, and Hashem comes to visit the ill.

Then the Torah zooms in:

- Avraham is **sitting** at the entrance of the tent
- It is **blazing hot**
- He sees three "men" approaching (the angels)
- We hear exactly what he serves them — the whole menu!

And the commentators ask:

Why do we need **that** much detail?

Does the Torah really have to tell us every course at Avraham's historical Shabbat dinner? What he grilled, what he baked, the sauces?

Why are we told:

- That his tent was open on all sides

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- That it was the **third day** after his brit
- That he **runs** to the guests, **runs** to the cattle, **runs** to the tent?

It seems excessive — unless every detail is a clue.

2. How Much Was Avraham Actually Suffering?

Let's read how the classic sources describe Avraham that day:

- **Ramban:** It was already the **third day** after his brit milah — the most painful day. Avraham is old and **weak**.
- **Midrash Tanchuma:** He is sitting because his **milah wound is still bleeding**.
- **Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer:** He is in **intense pain**.
- **Maharal:** His **whole body** is suffering.
- The Torah says “**yoshev**” — sitting — to indicate he **couldn't stand**.

So picture this:

- Avraham is **99 years old**
- It's the **hottest day ever** (Hashem turned up the heat so guests wouldn't bother him)
- He is **fresh from surgery**, still bleeding
- He is **weak, sick, exhausted**
- He **can't stand** unaided

And in *that* state, he sees guests on the horizon and **runs** toward them.

This is not “I'll get up and say hello.”

This is **Insane Bolt**, not Usain Bolt.

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3. One Mitzvah in Pain vs. 100 Easy Ones

The **Avot de-Rabbi Natan** (a parallel version of Pirkei Avot) teaches:

**“Yafah mitzvah achat b’tzaar
m’meh mitzvot she’einan b’tzaar.”**

One mitzvah done **with pain** is better than **100** done without pain.

Ratio: 1:100.

Then an anonymous classic Mussar sefer (Gate of Simcha) writes:

A mitzvah done **with joy** earns **1,000 times** the reward of a mitzvah done as a burden.

So let's do the math:

- One mitzvah in pain → **100x**
- Same mitzvah in pain **and** with joy → $100 \times 1,000 = \mathbf{100,000x}$

That's not a nice little spiritual bonus.

That's a **lottery**.

4. The Case of the Lost Money and the Brutal Ma’aser Bill

Yesterday, in the morning class, we discussed a wild story:

A man finds **a large sum of money**. Later he sees someone on the floor surrounded by people. They're trying to revive him: smelling salts, water, nothing works. He faints, wakes up, faints again.

This man walks over and whispers in his ear:

“I found your money. I’m giving it back.”

The man stops fainting.

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When they told this story to **Rav Elyashiv**, his first question was:

“Did he give **ma’aser** before returning it?”

Halachically:

- If you **find** money with no identifying marks, it’s yours.
- Once it’s yours, you’re obligated in **ma’aser** (10% to tzedakah).

So if you found \$1,000, you owe **\$100** tzedakah.

If you then heroically decide to return the full \$1,000 to the original owner, that’s your choice — but you still owe **\$100** to charity.

Where do we learn this from?

From **Avraham** in last week’s parasha:

- He wins the war, captures all the spoils
- The Torah says he gives **10%** to Malki-Tzedek
- Then the king of Sodom says, “Give me the people, you keep the money.”
- Avraham replies: “I will not take even a **shoelace**.”

But if he is returning all the money,

why did he give 10% first?

Answer: Once Avraham **acquired** the spoils, they halachically became his. Ownership = obligation of **ma’aser**, even if he later gives the rest back.

Now be honest:

If you found a big sum of money, willingly gave it back, and then some rabbi told you:

“By the way, you still owe ma’aser on that...”

You’d lose your mind.

It’s one thing to do the right thing and return money.

It’s another thing to now **pay extra** on top of the lost gain.

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That **hurt**.

That's **tzaar** — and that is exactly the kind of mitzvah Avot de-Rabbi Natan is praising: **100x reward**.

If you managed to do **that** mitzvah with **joy**?

Multiply again by **1,000**.

5. So Why All the Menu Details?

Now we understand why the Torah records every detail of Avraham's hospitality:

- The running
- The heat
- His weakness
- The meat, the bread, the butter, the milk (don't ask how the kashrut worked, that's a separate class)

Because unlike all his other thousands of acts of chesed,
this one was **done in pain**.

Every step, every slice, every instruction, every rush to the calves,
was worth **100x**.

And if you think he did it with joy (and we know he did) —
another 1,000x.

So:

- The mustard wasn't just mustard. It was **Grey flipping Poupon**.
- The pita wasn't just pita. It was **spiritually compounded pita**.

The Torah itemizes it because every detail was astronomically valuable.

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6. Jews, Deals, and the Ultimate Spiritual Bargain

Let's be honest: Jews love many things.

- Syrians love **mazzeh** – there is no hour of the day or night where we'd refuse it. Put last Shabbat's mazzeh in the air fryer — **expiration date erased**.
- Ashkenazim love **gefilte fish, herring, chopped liver, gala** (which I may or may not have called the “Jewish bologna” recently).

But more than we love food, we love a **good deal**.

Put two Jews together and they don't tell you about the object, they tell you:

- What they paid
- How much other people paid
- And how they *obviously* got the best price.

So let me present to you the **greatest deal** in Judaism:

Tzar + Simcha = 100x × 1,000x reward.

And the broker for this deal has a name:

“Tzar Simcha” – Pain and Joy together.

7. But How Do You Smile When It Hurts?

That's the hard part.

Gritting our teeth and doing the mitzvah anyway? Maybe.

But **smiling**?

Finding **joy** in the moment of pain?

How?

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Enter the **Vilna Gaon**.

The Etrog Story

One freezing Lithuanian winter, the Vilna Gaon sends students out to find an **etrog**. None are available. They travel and travel — nothing.

Finally, on the way back, they see a man with **one etrog**.

It might be the only etrog in all of Lithuania and Russia.

They beg him:

“Please, sell it to us — it’s for the Vilna Gaon!”

The man refuses all money.

He says:

“I’ll give you the etrog for free, but on one condition:

I get all the reward for the Vilna Gaon’s mitzvah. Not him.”

They’re torn. Without this etrog, the Gaon won’t do the mitzvah at all.

They accept the condition and bring it back.

The Vilna Gaon does the mitzvah with immense joy. Only afterwards do they confess the condition.

Instead of being sad, the Gaon **starts dancing**.

They ask him why.

He answers:

“My whole life, when I did mitzvot, I *knew* there was great reward, even if I tried to do it purely for Heaven.

For the **first time ever**, I did a mitzvah with **zero reward** waiting for me.

It was 100% lesheim Shamayim.

Do you know how happy that makes me?”

My rebbe used to say:

“Do you know how much reward he got for *that dance*?”

(And yes — technically, that reward also went to the man on the train. But you get the point.)

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The Gaon's joy came from realizing:

"This is the purest, most precious kind of mitzvah."

8. Creating Joy in Painful Mitzvot

So how do we get to simcha when a mitzvah hurts?

Step 1: **Acknowledge the pain honestly.**

This person hurt me.

This situation is humiliating.

This task is exhausting.

Step 2: **Remember the multipliers.**

One in pain = 100x.

One in pain with simcha = 100,000x.

Step 3: **Realize what that multiplier actually means.**

It's not "points."

It's a measure of how much **pleasure** this gives Hashem.

The more it hurts and the more we smile through it,
the more it says:

"Hashem, I love You more than I love my comfort."

Even if your initial joy comes from thinking about the reward — that's allowed.
Chazal say:

"Mitoch shelo lishmah, ba lishmah."

Start from the wrong reason, you'll arrive at the right one.

Because right beneath the "reward" layer is the deeper truth:

"If the reward is this huge, it's because the *nachat ruach* to Hashem is enormous."

9. Practical Examples: Sukkah, Simchat Torah, and Sweat

This past Sukkot, my son Yitz and I slept in the sukkah almost every night.

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One night, I woke up with **over 20 mosquito bites**.

I had an allergic reaction to the histamine. My body was lit up.

Halachically, if you're suffering, you're **patur** from the sukkah.

But the bites came **after** I was already in. So that night was covered.

The test came the **next night**:

Do I go back out again?

We schlepped the mattress again.

We set up citronella candles everywhere (probably looked like a pagan ceremony).

We got eaten a bit again.

But the **simcha**?

- Sleeping in the sukkah with my **only son**
- Fulfilling a mitzvah together
- Choosing a bit of discomfort for the sake of Hashem

Priceless.

Same with **Simchat Torah**:

We danced at Safra until **5:15 PM**. Mincha was at **5:30 PM**.

By the time I went upstairs to change, every layer:

- Shirt
- Undershirt
- Tzitzit

was **soaked through**.

I put on a dry T-shirt, then had to put the **wet tzitzit** back on.

There is nothing quite like slipping a cold, sweat-filled garment back over your shoulders.

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We open the aron: “**Sisu ve-simchu b’simchat Torah...**”

I can’t feel my legs. No voice left. No energy.

And that hakafah — that last, painful, drained dance — is worth **more** than all the earlier ones combined.

Why?

Because:

Tzar u’Simcha. Pain + joy. 100x × 1,000x.

10. “I’m Lovin’ It” vs. “I’m Growing From It”

The most treif thing you can think of in the world?

McDonald’s. The Big Mac.

Their slogan?

“I’m lovin’ it.”

That’s the philosophy of a life lived only for:

- What’s easy
- What tastes good
- What’s comfortable

And that’s exactly why people get spiritually sick, emotionally sick, physically sick.

Judaism’s slogan is something else:

“I’m lovin’ Him.”

Even when it hurts.

Especially when it hurts.

Hashem should bless us to **seek out** mitzvot that stretch us,

to do them **b’tzaar** and **b’simcha**,

and to know that in those moments we are as close to Avraham Avinu as a Jew can be.

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Baruch Hashem le'olam, amen ve-amen.

Takeaway

- A mitzvah that **hurts** is worth **100** easy mitzvot.
- A mitzvah that **hurts and is done with joy** is worth **1,000 times more** than a dry, burdened mitzvah.
- Combined: **100,000x spiritual ROI**.
- The Torah tells every detail of Avraham's hospitality to show us what that looks like in real life.
- Our job is to **look for those moments**, not run from them — and to tell ourselves, like Jackie Mason:

“I just told myself a better joke than I told you.”

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Shabbat-Table Questions

1. **What mitzvah in your life clearly falls into the “this really hurts” category?**
How might you approach it differently if you viewed it as a 100x/1,000x opportunity?
2. **Can you recall a time you did something right and then discovered it would cost you even more?**
How did you react? How do you wish you had reacted?
3. **Which relationship in your life would become a “lottery ticket” mitzvah if you chose to act with kindness despite real hurt?**
4. **How can you let your children (or students) see you struggle with a mitzvah in a healthy way, so they learn what “tzar u’vesimcha” really looks like?**