

## Four Lessons from Avraham Avinu

Avraham Avinu is the first individual in the Torah who actively educates others. Rambam (*Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 1:3) notes that Avraham would travel to teach about Hashem and his beautiful Torah. Rambam writes that he had tens of thousands of followers. Of all of Avraham's students, the Torah only discusses a handful of them: Avraham's sons, Yitzchak and Yishmael, born to different mothers, one to become the heir to his father's spiritual kingdom and the other cast aside. Additionally, we are told about Eliezer and Lot. Eliezer is Avraham's most trusted servant and Lot his nephew. Let us highlight four lessons, one from each student and with this we can get a glimpse into Avraham's educational methodology.

### Lot

Lot traveled with Avraham from Canaan and benefited from the bracha that Hashem promised Avraham. This allowed Lot to maintain a large flock. Avraham's and Lot's shepherds got into a dispute. Avraham resolves that the best path forward is to separate. Avraham went one way and Lot the other.

After Lot departs from Avraham, the Torah (Bereishis 13:14) tells us Hashem spoke to Avraham. The midrash (*Pesikta Rabasi* ch.3) comments that the whole time Lot was with Avraham, Hashem didn't speak to him. Avraham sacrificed his communication with Hashem in an attempt to positively influence Lot.

The Gemara (*Bava Metzia* 62a) quotes R. Akiva that *chayecha kodmin l'chayei chavercha*, when one must decide between his own life and someone else's, his own life takes precedence. Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe*, Kedoshim) wonders: does that mean that the mitzvah of *veahavta l'arayacha kamocho*, love your neighbor like yourself, is suspended

whenever someone has personal needs? He suggests that *chayecha kodmin* only applies in situations of physical needs. If one's physical safety is at risk, the Torah states that saving his own life comes first. However, when discussing matters of *ruchniyus*, spiritual matters, such as teaching Torah, one must give up on his own Torah to teach others. Like, Avraham, who made a spiritual sacrifice in order to teach Lot, we too, must make sacrifices in order to teach others.

*Lesson 1: Education will at times take personal and spiritual sacrifice from the educator.*

### Yishmael

Avraham's oldest son was Yishmael, born to his wife Hagar. After the birth of Yitzchak, Yishmael acted malevolently towards his half-brother, and was involved in many *aveiros* too. At a certain point, Avraham is confronted by his wife Sarah, who is concerned for the welfare of their son Yitzchak. For Sarah, her concern with Yishmael's behavior demanded that Avraham kick Yishmael out of the house. For Avraham this was extremely difficult. Yishmael was his oldest son! How could he send him into the desert? Despite this concern, Hashem told Avraham to listen to Sarah's voice and to send Yishmael and Hagar away.

Shortly after Yishmael was kicked out of the house, he is seen as righteous in the eyes of Hashem, implying he did teshuva. [See *Bereishis Rabbah* 53:14, quoted by Rashi, Bereishis 21:17, on the concept of *ba'asher hu sham*.] The Gemara (*Bava Basra* 16a) confirms Yishmael did teshuva in the lifetime of his father Avraham. This is confounding. If Yishmael was able to do teshuva on his own, why was there a need to kick him out of the house? Why didn't Sarah just rely on Avraham's ability to positively influence people?

Rav Avigdor Miller explained that Yishmael's removal was not only to protect Yitzchak, but for Yishmael's own



**Rabbi Ephraim Miretzky**

*City Director, Denver NCSY*

personal development. He needed to be in a different environment to blossom. Yishmael would become a partner to Yitzchak in spreading monotheism around the world, and that was not going to happen under Avraham's tent. While extremely difficult emotionally, Avraham needed to allow Yishmael to go elsewhere to create his own acceptance of, and personal relationship with, Hashem.

*Lesson 2: Every educator is not going to be able to educate every student. While we try our best, finding an alternative strategy, environment, or person to connect with the student may be the best approach.*

### Eliezer

Avraham told his servant Eliezer to go to Haran to find a wife for his son Yitzchak. Avraham gave strict guidelines to Eliezer about what to look for. He required Eliezer to swear that he would uphold these guidelines. Eliezer couldn't choose from the daughters of Canaan, he was to choose from Avraham's family in Haran (Bereishis 25:1-9).

However, many of the things that Eliezer did do to find Yitzchak's wife weren't determined by Avraham. For example, the tefilla that Eliezer prays, as well as the method of finding and evaluating Rivka. Eliezer was regarded as "*Damesek Eliezer*" someone who drew and distributed the "water," Avraham's Torah, to others (*Yoma* 28b) Why would he veer, or add, to the words and methods of Avraham, his master and teacher?

Eliezer was looking for someone with the *middah* of chesed. If she was going to join Avraham's family and become one of the imahos, then she needed to mirror Avraham's mode of chesed. Avraham's chesed was above and beyond. He waited outside in the strong heat for guests three days after having a bris milah. When they did arrive he did everything possible for them. These actions are above and beyond ordinary chesed.

Eliezer was looking for someone whose chesed mirrored that of Avraham and he found that in Rivkah. Her chesed was also above and beyond. The sun was setting, and it was getting dark (24:11), which normally would mean it is time to head home, yet Rivkah stayed out. When Eliezer asked for water, she did not hand him the water, Rivka poured it directly in his mouth. She offered to get water for his camels. A young girl, working on her own with no help, fetching water for dozens of camels is above and beyond ordinary chesed.

Eliezer was a direct witness to Avraham's acts of chesed (*Bava Metzia* 86b). He watched with a keen eye how his rebbi

would act and understood that this is how chesed is done. This lesson was never stated, but Eliezer understood through observation. Our actions can penetrate the hearts of our students in ways that words cannot.

*Lesson 3: Students watch everything their teachers do. It is integral for an educator to realize that students will learn from actions.*

### Yitzchak

The Torah transitions from the story of Avraham to the story of Yitzchak at the beginning of Parshas Toldos. There the Torah says *v'eleh toldos Yitzchak ben Avraham, Avraham holid es Yitzchak*, these are stories of Yitzchak son of Avraham, Avraham produced Yitzchak (Bereishis 25:19). Many of the commentators ask: what necessitates the second part of the pasuk? Avraham is Yitzchak's father, so what's the need to repeat this information within the same pasuk?

The Rav (*Darosh Darash Yosef* pp. 70-71) notes that it is the word *holid* that is critical. When the Torah describes the birth of Yishmael (25:12), the Torah

uses the word *yalda*, which connotes the simple biological process of continuity. *Holid*, however, implies something greater. The Rav points out that the plural form of *holid* is *yuldu* which is used to describe the birth of the children of Ephraim and Menashe (Bereishis 50:23). Ibn Ezra there says *yuldu* means to actively raise and educate children. Rav Nisson Alpert (*Limudei Nissan* pg. 209) also suggests that *holid* is referencing Avraham's active *chinuch* of Yitzchak.

The necessity of the second half of the pasuk shows that Avraham was doing something different. Raising Yitzchak wasn't simply a biological process or necessity. It was to create a multi-generational educational process with an eternal effect. The way to do this is to be engaged and active with our children and with our students.

*Lesson 4: To pass our mesorah to future generations, there must be an active process. This requires love, care, and interest towards our students.*



RIETS PRESS

# RIETS PRESS

*Bring The Beis Midrash to Your Bookshelf*

Shop now at [www.RIETSPress.org](http://www.RIETSPress.org)

