

CHAYEI SARAH (GENESIS 23:1-25:18)

Will You Marry Me... Again?!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

“It is not good for man to be alone; I will create a companion appropriate for him.” (Genesis, 2:18)

G-d does not want man to be alone. Abraham, himself a “bachelor” due to the loss of his beloved wife Sarah, wanted to be sure that his son Isaac would not be alone. He assigned his trusted servant Eliezer the task of finding for Isaac *“a companion appropriate for him.”* This week’s Torah Portion describes, in great detail, Eliezer’s efforts to locate a suitable “Mrs. Isaac.” He returned, mission accomplished, with Rebecca.

Satisfied that Isaac had found a wife, Abraham turned his attention to himself. *“It is not good for man to be alone.”*

Abraham remarried. A respected chieftain in his part of the world, he was, no doubt, considered to be a “good match.” It is not surprising that he was able to find a bride. His choice, however, is of interest:

Abraham proceeded and took a wife whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. (ibid. 25:1) (Most people are aware of two of Abraham’s sons, Isaac and Ishmael. The existence of our other six groups of cousins is a little less known. With the noted exception of Midian, -- and possibly Medan in one instance -- these nations seem to be inconsequential to Jewish history.)

Who was this Keturah? Why was she, of all women, chosen to be Abraham’s companion in his old age?

It turns out that Keturah was no stranger to Abraham. She was none other than Hagar, the mother of Abraham’s oldest son Ishmael. Hagar had been Sarah’s maid. Seeing that she was unable to bear children, Sarah suggested that Abraham build his family through Hagar. (See “The Surrogate Mother and the Terrorist”) However, as a result of Hagar’s idol worship, and her son Ishmael’s wickedness, they were both sent away. (See “Under the Influence of Dregs”.)

Now that Sarah was gone, Abraham decided to remarry Hagar.

Two questions:

1. How could Abraham do such a thing? Where was his respect for the memory of his wife Sarah?

Sarah obviously had no objection to Abraham having more than one wife. She, after all, had suggested the original match. But she had serious objections to Hagar’s behavior! She was the one

who told Abraham to send Hagar away! Now that Sarah is out of the picture, he goes back and marries this wicked woman??!!

2. Why the name change? Why doesn't the Torah simply tell us that Abraham remarried Hagar?

The answer is that the Hagar that Abraham sent away was not the Hagar whom he remarried. She, like her son Ishmael, mended her ways. She no longer worshipped idols. She was a new person.

The name "Keturah" comes from the word "Ketores" -- incense. Incense was used as part of the daily Service in the Temple. Our Sages tell us that Hagar was now called Keturah because "her deeds were as pleasant as incense."

Very nice. But why did she have to change her name?

The Kli Yakar explains that it was actually Abraham who gave her the name Keturah. People knew why Hagar had been sent away. Abraham wanted to show the world that Hagar had changed. He wanted everyone to know that she was now a righteous woman.

Our Sages point out that one of the ingredients in incense had a foul odor. Yet, in total, the incense had a sweet smell. ("Galbanum in Spice, so Everything's Nice!") Similarly, our Sages tell us that when a wrongdoer repents fully, even his transgressions are transformed into good deeds.

By changing her ways, Hagar became Keturah, a sweet-smelling incense who had no negatives against her. Her mistakes of the past were forgiven and forgotten.

We tend to look at Hagar's oldest son Ishmael as an enemy. He ridiculed the Torah of our father Abraham. He mocked our father Isaac. His children are at war with us to this very day.

Yet, the Torah tells us that Ishmael repented. Ishmael and his mother Hagar had been, at one time so evil that they were not welcome in Abraham's camp. That changed. Hagar was righteous. Ishmael was righteous. There are numerous sages in the Talmud named Rabbi Ishmael. We do not name children after evil people.

People change. Don't judge others on the basis of what they once did. Judge them based upon who they are today. Call up that fellow who insulted you 30 years ago. He's not the same person anymore.

People change. Don't judge yourself on the basis of what you once did. Judge yourself based upon who you are today. Perhaps you didn't always observe every Mitzvah. Don't use a previous lack of commitment to certain areas of religious life stop you from growing today.

You are the sum total of your life's experiences. Are there a few things you did that don't smell so good? Don't worry about it. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Start fresh. Be a Keturah. You'll come out smelling like a rose!

Have a great Shabbos.

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