

**VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1-22:24)**

## Under the Influence of Dregs

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

To those of us in the field of Torah Outreach, Abraham and Sarah stand out as the perfect role models. Their home was open to visitors of all backgrounds, and no one ever left the Abrahamic tent hungry for food or spiritual inspiration. Guests at the “Hotel Abraham” were fed for free, with only Grace after Meals requested as payment.

Abraham and Sarah worked as a team to teach the world that there is one G-d who created us all, and wants us to treat each other with kindness and charity. As a young boy, Abraham had demonstrated his absolute faith in G-d by allowing himself to be thrown into a fiery furnace rather than compromise his belief in G-d. Miraculously, Abraham was protected from the flames. Anyone who spoke to Abraham was taken by his piety, his compassion, and his integrity. Is it any wonder that his “Yeshiva” was packed with devoted followers?

However, all was not well in the Jewish outreach business. Abraham had taken Sarah’s Egyptian maid, Hagar, as a second wife, and she had given birth to a son, Ishmael. Influenced by his mother’s Egyptian background, Ishmael was making Sarah very nervous.

Sarah saw that her stepson Ishmael was pursuing a life of idolatry and promiscuity. She was afraid that he would exert a negative influence over her son Isaac, whom G-d had designated as Abraham's successor. *"Send this maid and her son away, because this maid's son will NOT share the inheritance with my son Isaac!"* (Genesis 21:10)

Sarah was not concerned about a FINANCIAL inheritance. Indeed, Abraham gave generously to all EIGHT of his sons. (See Genesis 25:1-5) Her concern was with Abraham’s spiritual legacy that Isaac was to pass down to Jacob and the Nation of Israel. Sarah insisted that Ishmael be separated from Isaac so that Isaac’s Torah education would remain unsullied by his older brother’s cynical attitude.

Abraham was distressed by his wife’s suggestion. “My son Ishmael?” he must have asked. “How can I send him away? Who will teach him the right way to live if not I?”

Abraham lost the argument. G-d endorsed Sarah’s request, and Ishmael and his mother were sent away.

I have always been amazed by this passage. What was Sarah so worried about? Sarah was a righteous woman and Abraham was a righteous man. Certainly after all of their experience in *Kiruv Rechokim*, -- Jewish outreach, they would succeed in raising Isaac to become a paragon of Torah values. After all,

Abraham had hundreds of followers who had given up their idolatrous ways and embraced the G-d of Abraham; surely Isaac would follow suit!

The answer, I believe, is that had Ishmael remained, Isaac would not have reached his full potential. He would, no doubt, have become a wonderful Torah Jew with all of the proper philosophies and priorities. But Ishmael's wickedness would have made at least a subtle, perhaps undetectable impact on Isaac. To Sarah, (and to G-d!) this eventuality was simply unthinkable.

A person is the sum total of his life's experiences. Every ingredient in a recipe affects the outcome. You can't add "just a little" poison into your favorite challah dough and assume that the final product will be unaffected. All of the positive ingredients in the challah will not undo the adverse affects of the poison.

When you speak to a Holocaust survivor about the World Series, you may think that the atrocities he experienced are irrelevant to the conversation. Not so. Every occurrence, every episode in one's life does its part in creating the individual's outlook and attitude.

Had Isaac spent 20 hours a day learning *Chumash*, *Mishnah*, and *Gemorrah* in his father's Yeshiva, only to come home to find his brother "surfing the web," he might have remained a Torah scholar, but he would not have been the same Isaac. Exposure to the sins of Ishmael would have tainted Isaac's spiritual existence. Therefore, there was no choice but to send Ishmael away,

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Do we carefully monitor our own exposure to the experiences of the world? To be sure, G-d put us here to "*fill the world and conquer it.*" (Genesis 1:28) We are not supposed to run away from the world. But we ARE supposed to maintain a proper perspective.

Do we really think that when our children watch violence on television that it doesn't teach them, at least subconsciously, that it's okay to hurt people? Do we think that when we expose our children (and ourselves!) to offensive language and objectionable episodes that we are impervious to their subliminal imprint? If we are not yet ready to get rid of our televisions, shouldn't we at least make sure that we scrutinize what we allow them to bring into our homes? (One famous rabbinic author wonders if we would be so quick to allow a sewer to empty its contents into our living rooms!)

And what about the Internet? If you are receiving this message, you obviously have Internet access. There are many wonderful things we can do with the Internet. For example, you can check out some wonderful websites such as ou.org, torah.org, aish.com, and, of course TORAHTALK!!! But cyberspace is a dangerous place for "children of ALL ages" to explore. There's one Torah website out there, (I forget which one) which, at the conclusion of its weekly Torah message, warns the reader of the potential pitfalls of Internet. It advises great discretion in Internet exposure, and concludes, "if you are near a Yeshiva where you can study Torah, go there right now!"

We are very careful about the spiritual quality of the foods that we take into our mouths. Let us make sure that whatever we allow to enter our eyes and ears is equally Kosher.

Have a great Shabbos.

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