

For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem. (18:19)

The angels had just recently informed Avraham *Avinu* of the wonderful news that Sarah would have a child. Yet, the Torah writes that Hashem loved Avraham for his parenting skills in imparting the way of Hashem to his offspring. Was this not a bit premature? Avraham did not yet have any children. The Patriarch was not yet a parent. **Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita**, derives from here that one's focus on how he will raise his children begins prior to marriage. Everything depends upon one's purpose in marriage, what it means to him. If one's goal is to increase *kavod Shomayim*, the glory of Heaven, by producing and establishing generations of believing Jews who will continue in His way, then he is, by his very marriage, demonstrating his parenting skills.

Avraham was the *mechanech*, educator, who taught us on what a parent should focus, what is important and what is not. Monotheism-- obedience to one G-d, emulating His ways, following His precepts-- this comprised Avraham's mantra to the world – and his family. His offspring, descendants, would have to carry on his work. It is, therefore, no wonder that, when Avraham heard that his son Yishmael was not “with the program,” he had gone off the *derech*, path, and had fallen into evil ways, he became distressed.

The Torah (*Bereishis* 21:11) writes, “And the matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son.” Simply put, this means that Avraham was upset that Sarah *Imeinu* wanted Yishmael out of the house. The deeper meaning, however, as expounded by the *Midrash*, is that Avraham was disturbed by his son's behavior. He was not his only son – but he was his son! A child is a child, regardless of how large his family is. When a child veers from the prescribed Torah way, it destroys a parent! If the Torah feels it is important to relate that Avraham was distressed concerning Yishmael's behavior, it is a lesson for us all. Parents should care – and they do. Some have difficulty showing the pain, the hurt, the humiliation, the distress, but it is there. Otherwise, they are not parents.

Rav Gamliel writes that he knew a man whose son had taken a “hiatus” from Judaism, eschewing observance and the way of life taught to him by his parents. His *yarmulka*, *kashrus*, and *Shabbos*, were all things of the past. After a while, his *Rosh Yeshivah* met the father and commented that he had noticed some positive movement on the part of his son. It appeared the crisis had passed, and he was slowly returning to traditional observance. “What happened?” he asked the father. “How were you able to stem the tide of his non-religious advances?”

The father's answer should inspire us all to some serious thought: “I approached anyone I knew - even people I did not know- and asked them to recite *Tehillim* for my son. I organized *minyanim*, quorums, all over, so that *Tehillim* could be recited in a communal fashion. I did all of this for one simple reason: If my son would have been physically ill and at the point of death, would I have

done any less? Now that he is hovering at the precipice of spiritual extinction, should I sit by with folded hands and allow my child to waste his life away? Indeed, one who is spiritually ill is in worse shape than he who is gripped by physical illness. Spiritual disease affects eternity! I could not allow this to happen to my son!”

Thus, although Sarah *Imeinu* had achieved a greater spiritual plateau in *nevuah*, prophesy, Avraham still refused to accept *tanchumim*, words of consolation, from her. When a child goes out to *tarbus raah*, spiritually goes off the deep end— there is no accepting comfort. Only when Hashem told him, *Al yeira b'einecha*, “Be not distressed over the youth,” *ki b'Yitzchak yikarei lecha zera*, “since through Yitzchak’s offspring will be considered yours,” did Avraham accept *tanchumin*. He was assured that Yitzchak would be his son for eternity.

Rav Gamliel derives another important parenting lesson from Avraham’s reaction to Sarah’s demand that Yishmael be sent away. *Rashi* tells us that, although Sarah was greater than Avraham in *nevuah*, he listened only to Hashem. Until Hashem told him to listen to Sarah, the Patriarch was not closing the door on Yishmael. Despite his son’s reprehensible behavior and his imminent negative influence on Yitzchak, Avraham was not prepared to shut Yishmael out of his life. Why? Because Yishmael was his son, and, even when a son strays from the path of observance, he is still a son. We do not close the door!

Lamentably, it happens—more often than we are willing to concede—that not all Jewish children are prepared to tow the line. Some break away; others snap. What is a parent to do? What should be his reaction? Avraham *Avinu* showed us the way. He refused to send Yishmael from his home. He did not distance himself from him. He kept the light on, the door open. This is especially true in contemporary times, when sending a child away creates serious friction and even enmity, ingredients that generate more intense and lasting alienation from *Yiddishkeit*.