

Abraham's Mysterious Gifts

In this week’s Torah portion, *Chayye Sarah*, we learn that just before he died Abraham gave all that he owned to his son Isaac:

And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. [Genesis 25:5]

Targum Jonathan, Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam say he gave Isaac “riches and large amounts of money”.

But he had seven other sons: Ishmael by Hagar and the other six by Keturah. To them he gave gifts and sent them away, far from Isaac:

But to the sons of [his] concubines, [he] gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East. [Genesis 25:6]

From this we learn that Abraham was eager to protect his son Isaac, sole heir of God’s covenant, from the nefarious influence of his half-brothers. Chizkuni adds that he wanted to prevent his other sons from staking a claim to part of Isaac’s inheritance.

The Talmud tells us what these gifts were:

ר' ירמיה בר אבא מלמד שמסר להם שם טומאה

Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Abba says: This teaches that Abraham provided them with the name of impurity [*shem tumah*]. Sanhedrin 91a]

This is a mysterious phrase that is still not completely understood. Commentators provide many theories. Some say *shem tumah* is a supernatural spirit that enables one to perform witchcraft.

But why would Abraham give such a thing to his sons, something he knew the Torah would later forbid? Why not give them something good?

First, how did Abraham even know “the name of impurity”? The Maharsha, from 16th-century Poland, suggests that Abraham learned black magic only to be able to defend himself against it, not to use it for his own benefit. The Maharal adds that Abraham taught these secrets to his sons for the same

reason. Others say he revealed to them Jewish mystical secrets. Indeed, traditionally he is the source of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation.

The Tosafot say that he taught them to defend themselves from the powers of impurity, such as demons. Traditionally, knowing their names helps defeat them.

If Abraham gave “all that he had” to Isaac, one could ask whether the gifts to his other sons were really his to give. But he gave them words, not material possessions. To Isaac, he also gave the power of blessing

Rashi says that he gave them a name of God for impure uses, so that if they used it they would not break the commandment against blasphemy. He also speculates that he may have given them gifts he had received after Sarah’s death, because he did not wish to derive any benefit from them.

The Riva, 11th-century Tosafist, notes that the Torah says:

[In the generation of Enoch] people began to invoke the Name of the Lord, יהוה.
[Genesis 4:26]

The Midrash explains that they would name people and idols with the name of God, believing them to be deities:

The generation of Enoch called their idols by the name of the Holy One, blessed be He. [Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 18:3; Genesis Rabbah 23:7]

So Abraham taught his sons names for their idols that would reflect the impurity associated with them, so they won’t call them by names associated with God.

Rav Hirsch says that Abraham tried to teach them proper spirituality, but failed. Some suggest that Abraham, seeing his other sons wanted to be idolaters, taught them things that would clearly distinguish them from Isaac and the Jews. (A similar claim is found in *Toldot Yeshu*, where it is speculated that the Sanhedrin charged Saul to become the Christian apostle Paul and steer Jesus’ followers away from Judaism, by giving them different customs, so they won’t be confused with the other Jews.)

Abraham sent these sons “to the East”, which understood to mean “East of the Holy Land”. An intriguing possibility is that he sent them to India. Indeed, the three main gods in Hinduism are Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. Brahma is associated with creation and knowledge and created a separate religion, Brahmanism. His wife is Saraswati. Brahma and Saraswati.

Does that remind you of another couple? Brahma is also associated with the Veda holy books of knowledge, as in “Veyada”, meaning “and you will know” in Hebrew. The Zohar seems to support this interpretation:

Rabbi Abba continued: I once found myself in a town inhabited by descendants of the “children of the East”, and they imparted to me some of the wisdom of antiquity with which they were acquainted. They also possessed some books of their wisdom... which they inherited from Abraham, who transmitted it to the sons of the concubines... In the course of time they followed the track of that wisdom into many false roads. [Zohar, Bereshit 1:100b]

However, Chizkuni says he sent them to a country east of Israel to which he had ancestral claims dating back to his father Terach. Indeed, the Talmud and the Midrash suggest that these other seven sons stayed in the Middle-East and tried to try to get a share in the Holy Land, in the days of Alexander the so-called “Great”, when he conquered the Land of Israel in 332 BCE and Jerusalem surrendered to him:

The Ishmaelites and the Ketureans [descendants of the other seven sons of Abraham] brought a lawsuit against the Jews before Alexander of Macedonia. They pleaded as follows: Canaan belongs jointly to all of us, for it is written in the Torah:

Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, [whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maidservant, bore to Abraham... and these are the sons of Ishmael... twelve princes.] [Gen. 25:12]

and it is [further] written:

And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son. [Gen. 25:19]

[Hence, both being sons of Abraham, they have equal claims upon the land.]

-Thereupon Gebiha ben Pesisa said to the Sages: Give me permission to go and plead against them... Should they defeat me, say, “You have defeated one of our ignorant men”; but if I defeat them, say, “The Law of Moses has defeated you.” So they gave him permission, and he went and pleaded against them.

-He asked: “Where is your proof coming from?”

-“From the Torah,” they replied.

-“Then I too,” said he, “will bring you proof only from the Torah, for it is written:

And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But to the sons of [his] concubines [he] gave gifts. [Gen 25:5-6]

[Now,] if a father made a bequest to his children in his lifetime and sent one away from the other, does the one who was sent away have a claim upon the other?

[Obviously not.]

[Sanhedrin 91a, Genesis Rabbah 61:7]

So we see that the current conflict in the Middle-East is a very old story.

Finally, who were these “concubines” (plural)? Abraham had no recorded concubines. The Torah refers to Sarah and Keturah as his “wives”, and as

for Hagar, the Midrash tells us he actually married her. [Gen. Rabbah 45:3] The Ramban explains:

Abraham did not plan on building a family with Hagar rather than Sarah. His only intent was to do Sarah's will so she would be pleased... Sarah wanted Hagar to also be Abraham's wife, so he would have a child with a wife and not just a concubine.

Interestingly, coming from a totally different direction, Radak, from 12th-century France, believes the verse does not refer to any of Abraham's eight sons, but to the sons of the concubines of his male servants, who were "his" only by extension:

He had no concubines from whom he had fathered children, but the concubines in his household were concubines of male servants in his household. Their children were, of course, members of Abraham's household who had been of service to Avraham and who had adopted his lifestyle. He gave them gifts consisting of silver and gold and livestock according to his own evaluation of who deserved how much. He most certainly gave even more valuable gifts to Ishmael and to the sons of Keturah even though the Torah does not specifically mentions this. If he gave gifts to people towards whom he had no legal obligation at all, it is obvious that people towards whom he did have such an obligation would receive their due.

But then why did Abraham feel the need to send all these people away far from his son Isaac?

The matter is still somewhat mysterious.

Shabbat shalom.