

# **Educating Children in Sefer Beraishit**

**Rabbi Yaakov Bieler**

**Parshat VaYetze, 5764**

Both Parshiot Toldot, and VaYetze, begin with one of the founders of the Jewish people receiving an important prophecy concerning the future. When Rivka experiences an irregular pregnancy and seeks out Divine Guidance in order to understand what is happening to her, she is told (Beraishit 25:23) “There are two nations in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from your innards, one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” Yaakov too, at the beginning of his journey to Aram Naharaim, dreams of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending and receives the following Divine Message: (28:14-15) “And your offspring will be as numerous as the dust of the earth...and the nations of the earth will bless others by wishing that they should be as successful as you and your offspring will be. I Will Be with you and I Will Protect you everywhere you go, and I Will Cause you to return to this land...”

In order to receive prophecy, an individual must be on a profoundly exalted spiritual level; yet this does not mean that the prophet will entirely understand what is being revealed to him/her. Both Rivka’s and Yaakov’s prophecies dealt in part with the long term future, and the eventual conflicts as well as successes that will make up Jewish history down through the ages. But the matriarch and patriarch also understood the revelations as pertaining to their immediate situations and progeny.

When Rivka applies what she is told by God to her own children, Yaakov and Eisav, she not only recognizes that they would incessantly be in conflict, but she also decides to intervene and attempt to assure the fulfillment of Yaakov’s being designated as Eisav’s superior by means of his receiving from Yitzchak the blessing intended for Eisav. Was this what God wanted of her when he informed her of the nature of the fetuses in her womb? Was the revelation merely informational, or was some sort of specific action on the part of Rivka implied by the Divine Communication? Could she have been mistaken in terms of what she decides to do and how she guides Yaakov?

When Yaakov attempts to interpret his prophecy, while he is told that he would have many children, it is unclear as to just how many, and with whom he would have them. Furthermore God’s Message suggests that he would become materially successful, but the details regarding how this would come about are not disclosed. Was he to attempt to enrich himself during his exile

from his parental home? Should he continue to engage in commercial activities, even after his mother sends for him and informs him that she feels that Eisav no longer poses a mortal threat? Nothing regarding these issues is communicated to the patriarch.

An additional factor that seems to elude both Rivka and Yaakov, despite their prophetic experiences, is the type of upbringing and education that they should be giving their respective children. It's one thing to have children, distinguished or otherwise, but how is one to impart traditions and beliefs to them in order to assure that they will be able to take their rightful places within the Divine Plan?

The lack of concern on the parts of Rivka and Yaakov regarding their children's educations is in stark contrast to Avraham's dedication to teaching everyone around him, including his offspring. From what God Declares about Avraham, it appears that his ability and commitment to educate his progeny in religious and ethical matters is a major reason why he is chosen in the first place to found the Jewish people: (18:19) "Because I Know concerning him that he will command his children and the members of his household that come after him and they will observe the Way of HaShem to do righteousness and justice..."

Some of the education which Avraham gives his children is indirect, i.e., since he is so involved in teaching those outside his family circle, it can be reasonably assumed that the same lessons are not lost upon those closest to him, who often would overhear and observe the patriarch's activities. When he and Sara travel to Canaan, they take with them (12:5) "the souls that they 'made' in Charan", which according to at least one rabbinic view, refers to the individuals that they converted to monotheism. While this practice begins before Avraham and Sara have children, there is no reason to assume that it did not continue after Yishmael and Yitzchak are born. This is obviously the assumption made by commentators when they understand that the "Eishel" that he plants (21:33) is either an inn or an orchard, where Avraham introduces travelers to his ideas about God.

Avraham's courageous confrontation of immoral behavior in others, must have left an impression on his children as well. In his dealings with local potentates, Avraham is not reticent about preaching to them and thereby instructing them concerning proper ethical behavior.(1) He rather blatantly announces that he does not wish to be associated with the King of Sodom and his society in any way and therefore will not accept from him his offer of the spoils of the war that Avraham fought in order to free Lot (14:23). On two occasions he speaks sharply to Avimelech, the King of Gerar. First he upbraids him regarding the immoral atmosphere prevalent in his city state (20:11). And later, when Avimelech offers to enter into a non-aggression pact with him as a

result of the king's recognition that God has made Avraham particularly successful and productive, Avraham again rebukes the monarch for his underlings' improper confiscation of wells that Avraham had dug (21:25). A parent's public face often, but not always, reflects the positions that s/he will take privately with his/her family members.

As for his overt educational efforts on behalf of his own family, servants and followers, several biblical references can be offered as evidence that Avraham proactively engaged in such activities. Rabbinic interpretation explains that the controversy between the shepherds of Lot and Avraham (13:7) concerns the question of allowing animals to graze on land that legally belongs to others. Avraham does not tolerate what he considered immoral and illegal behavior on the part of those associated with him, leading to his insistence that Lot live elsewhere. When Avraham sets out to save Lot from his captors during the war of the four kings vs. the five kings, the Tora notes that he takes with him those "that he was educating" (14:14). The fact that Yishmael is thirteen when Avraham circumcises him (17:25) certainly implies that there must have been some sort of discussion between father and son concerning this ritual, and that Avraham convinces Yishmael to submit himself to this difficult and frightening Mitzva. It would be interesting to know exactly what Avraham says to his son on this momentous occasion. The arrival of the three visitors at the beginning of Parshat VaYera, provides another educational moment according to Rabbinic interpreters, when Avraham orders his "youth", posited by RaShI to be Yishmael, to hurry and get food ready for the family's guests (18:7). Not only does Avraham model the behavior of hospitality, but he makes sure that Yishmael proactively participates in the carrying out of the religious duty of Hachnasat Orchim. The reluctant acceptance on the part of Avraham of Sara's insistence that Yishmael and his mother be banished from their encampment becomes an exercise in "tough love" whereby some sort of egregious behavior on the part of Yishmael—it is unclear what the term "MiTzachek" connotes (21:9) (see the next paragraph below)—is punished absolutely and with zero tolerance. Not only does this per force make an impression upon Hagar and Yishmael; it must have left its mark on the other members of the household, as well as all those who lived in the immediate area, when what had taken place became public knowledge. The Akeida (22:1 ff.) certainly leaves an impression upon Yitzchak, and serves as another occasion upon which education, this time regarding the concepts of Bitachon (trust), Emuna (faith) and Mesirat Nefesh (self-sacrifice) is imparted. Eliezer, Avraham's chief servant, is educated regarding an appropriate wife for Yitzchak (24:3), and the issues of maintaining one's identity, the dangers of assimilation and the undesirability of intermarriage all are suggested in the mission that is entrusted to him.

However, at least one view appearing within a Midrashic debate points to the possibility of Avraham's complicity vis-à-vis the behavior in which Yishmael engages, and which ultimately leads to his expulsion. In Tosefta Sota, Chapter 6,(2) after R. Akiva claims that the verb "Mitzachek" (21:9) that is used to describe Yishmael's actions leading up to his and his mother's banishment from Avraham's encampment, is a reference to one of the cardinal sins, i.e., murder, idolatry, and/or sexual promiscuity, R. Shimon bar Yochai argues: "And I say Heaven Forbid, there could not have been anything like these things in the house of such a righteous man. Is it possible that one about whom the Tora writes, 'Because I Know concerning him that he will command his children and the members of his household that come after him and they will observe the Way of HaShem to do righteousness and justice...', would have permitted his son to worship idols or engage in sexual wrongdoing? But rather the verb "Mitzachek" that appears in this verse refers to Yishmael's mocking Yitzchak's rights to the chief portion of his father's inheritance." RaShBY's (R. Shimon bar Yochai's) view assumes that Avraham not only engaged in preaching to his children and household; he monitored their activities closely, even those of his beloved son, making sure that everyone was adhering to the family standards in all matters. According to this view, it would be inconceivable for Avraham to have allowed the very behaviors and artifacts that he resoundingly opposed within society at large to be brought into his and Sara's home.

The assumption that Yishmael's malfeasance has nothing to do with Avraham's approach to his firstborn son, is countered in an alternate Midrashic explanation of the order of events that lead to Yishmael's exile. Shmot Rabba 1:1, when listing individuals who it considers to be overindulgent parents, writes the following concerning Avraham: "What does the text mean, (Mishlei 13:24) 'The one who hides his staff, hates his son; and he who loves him, blackens him with rebuke'? To teach you that whomever withholds from his child criticism and punishment, will eventually see him become part of an objectionable group of people, with the ultimate result of the parent hating the child that he brought into the world. For this is what we find with regard to Yishmael, who was spoiled by his father Avraham and therefore was never rebuked or punished for inappropriate behavior, which led him to join an objectionable group of people, and in turn resulted in Avraham's hating him and banishing him empty-handed from his home. What did Yishmael do? When he was fifteen years old, he began to bring home statues from the marketplace. He would play with these idols and perform ritual services before them as he had seen others do. Immediately, (21:9) 'And Sara saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian that she had borne to Avraham, Mitzachek.' Mitzachek means nothing other than idolatry...(21:10) 'And she said to Avraham, Banish

this handmaiden together with her son lest my son learn from his ways.’” According to this understanding of the story, rather than picturing Avraham standing watch over his child in order that he not become corrupted by alien influences from without, the father is depicted as failing to nip the problem in the bud, and indulging his son’s improper behavior. It is Sara who draws the line, and is concerned that one child not corrupt the other, who might be tempted to emulate the example of his older brother.

How would this latter Midrash reconcile its understanding of Avraham’s inaction with respect to Yishmael’s inappropriate behavior, with 18:19, where God Says about Avraham that he would educate his children properly? Perhaps Avraham taught the concepts within his home, but did not enforce them or respond unambiguously to behavior that challenged his teachings. Or perhaps he was blinded by his love for his son, and therefore could not see, either literally or figuratively, any danger in what he was doing. Perhaps he thought it was only a stage that his adolescent son was going through, and that he would eventually grow out of. It is also possible that Avraham remembered his own childhood, during which for many years he too practiced idolatry. Why would his son no differently than he eventually realize how foolish such practices were and come to his senses about living an appropriate life?

The latter Midrash resonates deeply with contemporary phenomena. To what extent should parents allow general culture, particularly potentially toxic aspects of it, to be brought into the family home from without? A child learns such behavior and its inherent values by emulating those he sees outside the home, rather than those within it. How closely should a parent therefore monitor his/her child’s friends, choose the appropriate school and camp, decide upon the type of neighborhood that will best serve the interests of bringing up one’s offspring in a certain context and where certain values will clearly be articulated and lived by? How involved should a parent be with a child’s activities when the parent is not present, if the parent is traveling or has gone to sleep and the child is entertaining some of his/her friends in the absence of adult supervision? What is a parent’s responsibility to say something about behavior that is considered untraditional, even idolatrous? When a parent avoids a confrontation in the interests of Shalom Bayit (domestic peace and calm), couldn’t a child interpret the parent’s non-intervention as tacit acceptance and even support? And as for the comment that is often heard, to the effect, “Well, when I was younger, I did the same thing/I did much worse things!”, Avraham, too, as a young boy, worshiped idols, along with the rest of the society in which he resided.<sup>(3)</sup> Does that mean he “understood” what Yishmael was going through, and thought it best to allow him to fend for himself, rather than be perceived by his son as an overbearing, controlling father? For some, allowing their children to engage in “discovery learning”

whereby they personally experience a range of different lifestyles in order to make choices based upon first-hand experiences, rather than listening to lectures and directives from those with more life experience, is the preferred manner in which they wish their children to become educated.

So according to Shemot Rabba, it is possible that Avraham, at least according to his own thinking, was not blatantly inconsistent regarding his own child in contrast to his approach to members of the society at large. It is interesting to speculate concerning the extent to which Sara was aware of Yishmael's activities, before she feared for the older brother's influence on young Yitzchak. Did she essentially write Yishmael off as not her problem since she was at best only his surrogate mother?(4) To blame one parent but not the other for what a child is doing in the family home does not seem to be fair. One of the prerequisites for the Ben Sorer U'Moreh (the stubborn and rebellious son) to be held accountable for his actions is derived from the phrase "VeEinnenu Shomaiah LeKoleinu" (he does not listen to our voices) (Devarim 21:20). Sanhedrin 70b interprets these words to connote that both parents have to speak in one voice, i.e., have to provide their offspring with a consistent message, if they reasonably expect the child to listen to their teachings and demands. Were Avraham and Sara on the same page when it came to Yishmael? Could he discount what one said due to the indifference or even contrary position taken by the other? A more charitable view would suggest that she simply never was around when Yishmael indulged in his idolatrous activities, and therefore only noticed them once she had her own child to take care of. Do members of a family, a community, a people have responsibilities for one another, regardless of the closeness or distance of their blood relationship? The principle enunciated in Shavuot 39a, "Kol Yisrael Areivim Zeh BaZeh" (all of Israel are guarantors and therefore responsible for one another not only in terms of life-and-death situations, but also with respect to everyday behavior) would suggest that we are! Did Avraham and Sara ever have discussions regarding their respective perceptions of how Yishmael was growing up, or were they both too busy spreading monotheism to those outside the family circle, to be overly concerned about their own child?

As for Yitzchak and Rivka's educational interactions with their children, the text's only mention of Yitzchak having anything to do with either of his twins, is that he loved Eisav due to the food that his son provided for him (25:28). Was this the exclusive means by which he taught his son the principle of how to honor one's parent? What else did he expect from Eisav? Or did he not wish to overburden him with responsibilities? The verse appears avoids disclosing to us anything else about the relationship when it suggests that the sole basis for the relationship was the food, and even implying that the love

came about in response to Eisav's initiative, rather than as a result of the child's adherence to the principles set out in Yitzchak's or Rivka's instructions to him.

Rivka certainly could be said to educate her beloved Yaakov; however whether the lessons taught and learned were proper and served the student well in the future can be sharply debated. It was Rivka who encouraged Yaakov to misrepresent himself to his father, to bring food to Yitzchak before Eisav returned from his hunting mission, to put sheepskin on his arms and dress in Eisav's clothes so that Yitzchak would not discover the subterfuge, all in order to obtain the blessing that Yitzchak was intending to give to Eisav (27:1 ff.). One could argue that Rivka's lessons did not have a one-time effect, but served to transform the Ish Tam (simple, innocent man) (25:27) into an individual who would be prepared to deceive in order to achieve some higher purpose. The Rabbis in Megilla 13b interpret the superfluous iteration by Yaakov to Rachel that not only was he related to her father Lavan, but that he was Rivka's son—if Lavan was Rivka's brother, then of course he was related to Lavan!—as stating that however devious Lavan may prove to be, Yaakov feels that he is his match, "his brother", since he was taught these same ways by Rivka. Is this a virtue or a dubious badge of honor? It seems that if Yaakov ever learned Avraham's traditions, we have to assume that he did so in the Yeshiva of Shem VeEver (see RaSHI on 28:9), rather than at home, from his parents. (5)

Finally, when we consider Yaakov's educational efforts vis-à-vis his children, it seems that he is more concerned with the quantity of his progeny rather than their respective qualities. Not once throughout Parshat VaYetze, which describes the birth and the early years of his thirteen children, is there ever a conversation recorded between the father and any child. (While there is virtually no interaction recorded between the mothers and their children either, with the exception of the incident of the mandrakes [30:14 ff.], which at best is a dubious educational lesson, it would be expected that the brunt of the educational responsibility in terms of morality and religious belief would fall upon Yaakov's and his father Yitzchak's shoulders before him, since they were the ones who had grown up around Avraham, as opposed to their respective wives who were raised in Aram Naharaim.)

While there nothing is recorded in terms of Yaakov interacting with his sons during their very early years, when some of them have already become adolescents, there is an unpleasant confrontation between the father and some of his sons. Following the rape of Dina, in Parshat VaYishlach (34:1 ff.), the entire family, including Yaakov, meets to discuss what has happened and how to respond. The Tora appears to emphasize that the ploy to require the residents of Shechem to undergo circumcision in order for the members of Yaakov's family to intermarry with them, is the brainchild of the sons, rather than the father—see 34:13. It is only when Shimon and Levi decide to take advantage of

the weakened state of the residents of Shechem following their circumcision, and proceed to kill all males, followed by the rest of the brothers plundering the city, that Yaakov is quoted as saying something to his progeny. In 34:30, rather than explicitly stating that what they did was wrong and inconsistent with the family's beliefs, he stresses how their reputation has been ruined and that he fears a devastating counterattack on the part of the other peoples of Canaan. Furthermore, when Shimon and Levi challenge his assertion with one of their own, i.e., that what happened to Dina had to be avenged (34:31), it seems that Yaakov is at a loss to respond. He finally does so many years later, on his deathbed, when he roundly condemns Shimon and Levi's actions (49:5-7). One wonders if this wasn't "too little, too late".

The only indication of any formal attempt by Yaakov at imparting his beliefs and ideals to any of his sons is derived by the Rabbis (see RaShI on 37:3) from the implication of the term used for Yosef, "Ben Zekunim"—the son of wisdom (rather than the more obvious interpretation "the son of old age"). According to the Rabbinic interpretation, it was to this son alone that Yaakov imparted the spiritual ideas that he had learned in the past, even to the point where their final interchange before Yosef disappears for 22 years is reputed to have been regarding the Mitzva of Eglu Arufa (the calf whose neck is broken) (Devarim 21:1 ff.)—see RaShI on Beraishit 45:27.(6) Could this have been yet another example of the overall favoritism that Yaakov demonstrated for Yosef, in contrast to his brothers? Was he ready to invest the time and energy required to assure that the traditions of Avraham would be carried on in only a single one of his children? Is this an additional reason why Yaakov is devastated when Yosef disappears, i.e., that the child that he was counting on to bring nascent Judaism forward, was missing and possibly dead? Was it possible to make up for lost time with the others, and did he even want to try?

Obviously, the major problem that the Avot and Emahot (forefathers and foremothers) encountered with conveying tradition to their children was that everything depended exclusively upon them. There were no schools (with the exception of the mysterious Yeshivat Shem VaEver that apparently not everyone wanted to and/or was allowed to attend), no communities, no neighborhoods, no synagogues, no summer camps, no youth groups, no books, no computer programs, etc. to augment or even substitute for parental input. Even the best parent recognizes that not all children learn alike, have the same interests, are equally drawn to religion and spirituality, and therefore the process of education has to rely upon every possible resource if it will have any chance of success. I make it a point to mention in my remarks at every Shalom Zachor, Simchat Bat, and Brit Mila, that while the primary responsibility for bringing up children rests with the child's parents and immediate family, we

should all look upon the children of our community as our own in one way or another. We have to approach all of the younger people with whom we come into contact as if they were in some way our children, extend our love, our direction, our advice, our example to them to try to make sure that they will continue in the Derech of HaShem, and practice Tzedaka and Mishpat. It not only takes a village, it takes a people, a tradition, and deep concern for everyone in our midst.

(1) One exception to Avraham's forthrightness is his silence when Pharaoh returns Sara to him, following miracles that indicated to the Egyptian ruler that this was this man's wife rather than his sister. One could attribute this exception to Avraham's usual behavior as the beginning point of a learning curve that eventually leads to even rebuke God Himself before the destruction of Sodom and Amora. See "Avraham, the Gadfly" at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/VaYera.html>

(2) R. Menachem Kasher, Tora Shleima, Beit Tora Shleima, Jerusalem, 5752, p. 769, on Beraishit 18:19.

(3) See RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Avoda Zora, 1:3.

(4) Biologically, he was Hagar and Avraham's child, despite the fact that it was Sara's idea that Avraham have a child with Hagar.

(5) The reliance upon this "Yeshiva" to make up for lackings in parental spiritual and moral education, is an eerie foreshadowing of contemporary divisions of labor between home and school and the taking over by the latter of responsibilities that previously had been the exclusive purview of the former. See "Stealth Tora Teachers" at <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Noach.html>

(6) The issue of the apparent anachronism of Yaakov and Yosef discussing a Mitzva in the Tora that has as not yet been given, swirls around the Rabbinic interpretations for Beraishit 26:5.