

WHEN TO WALK AWAY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Amidst the great joy and celebration surrounding the birth of Yitzchak, it is easy to forget that Avraham already had a teenager living at home. Thirteen years prior to Yitzchak's birth, Sarah had given her maidservant, Hagar, as a concubine to Avraham, and she had borne him Yishmael. As the two lads grew up together, it became apparent to Sarah that Yishmael had the potential to be a negative influence on Yitzchak, and asked that Avraham send him away. Avraham was greatly distressed by her request. After all, Yishmael was his son - his flesh and blood. It was not until the Almighty Himself told Avraham (21:12), "Be not distressed over the youth nor over your slavewoman: Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice!" that he came to terms with what she was asking him to do.

While we tend to understand and interpret the events of the Torah with the benefit of hindsight, it is not at all difficult to place oneself in Avraham's shoes. No matter how challenging a child may be, a parent does everything he can to try and help him. For a parent to simply give up is untenable. Surely, Avraham was not blind to Yishmael's violent and immoral tendencies. Nonetheless, he still hoped that Yishmael would one day "turn out okay," and was thus greatly distressed by Sarah's request that Yishmael be sent away on a path of no-return.

After heeding G-d's command to banish his son, Yishmael almost dies after running out of water while wandering with Hagar in the desert. Hashem again intercedes, and appears to Hagar, who had begun weeping over the impending death of her son. "G-d heard the cry of the youth. And an angel of G-d called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her: 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for G-d has heard the cry of the youth where he is...' Then G-d opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled her skin with water, and gave the youth to drink. (21:17-19)"

Rashi cites a Midrash which describes what exactly transpired in heaven when Yishmael was saved. "Angels came and pleaded with Hashem not to perform a miracle for Yishmael. They knew that, were he to live, in the future his offspring would persecute and murder Jews. Hashem responded that He does not judge individuals based on the future, but according to their present state." This, explains the Midrash, is the meaning of the angel's words, "For G-d has heard the cry of the youth where he is," i.e. based on his present status.

There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand, Hashem sides with Sarah that indeed, Yishmael must be sent away lest he exert a negative influence upon Yitzchak, and is not swayed by Avraham's desire to continue to raise Yishmael in the hope that he may after all turn out okay. Yet

when the angels ask that Hashem not save Yishmael, they are rebuffed: "I do not judge people based on what they may do or become. Is he not now righteous? If so, then I will treat him as I would a righteous man!" The reader is left wondering: Are we - or are we not - to deal with people based on our perception of what may be the eventual outcome?

Rabbi Goldenstein, the menahel (principal) of a budding yeshiva, was once faced with an agonizing dilemma. He was under tremendous pressure to expel a certain student from his yeshiva. Many parents and board members felt that Tzvi's misbehaviour and refusal to conform to yeshiva rules and policies was beginning to have an effect on their sons as well. "Why should we sacrifice our sons' chinuch (education) on account of one no-good'nik?" they challenged. Rabbi Goldenstein asked for patience. Tzvi's family pleaded with him to keep him in Yeshiva. If he were to be expelled from Rabbi Goldenstein's yeshiva, they feared, the blow to his ego would be too great, and any hope that he may one day grow up to be a good Jew would be lost.

Eventually, the board's patience ran out. They demanded that Rabbi Goldenstein expel Tzvi post-haste. Left with no choice, he contacted Tzvi's family, and told them that Tzvi was no longer welcome in his yeshiva. Understandably, they were crestfallen.

Years later, Rabbi Goldenstein ran into Tzvi. He almost didn't recognize him. Here stood before him a young man who had obviously grown up to become a ba'al middos tovos (man of great character). His whole manner had changed. He prayed with tremendous concentration, and his face shone with the joy known only to those who study Torah. It seemed as if Tzvi had undergone a complete metamorphosis.

Afterwards, he discussed this strange turn of events with a friend. "It just goes to show you..." said the friend.

"Yeah - what does it show you?" challenged the Rabbi.

"Well, it goes to show you that you should never give up hope. Look - who would have ever thought that Tzvi would have turned out like this?"

"But don't you see - I did give up hope! I sent him away."

"Yeah - you're right. I don't know what it goes to show you. Expel a troublemaker - and one day he'll be your Rabbi?"

While expelling Tzvi was extremely difficult, it was, Rabbi Goldenstein felt, the right decision based on the circumstances. It would not have been conscionable to allow him to continue in a yeshiva where he didn't belong. Hashem, however, had different plans. Tzvi (perhaps as a result of being expelled?) eventually found a yeshiva where he grew and flourished.

Hashem does not judge people based on what the future seems to hold for them. "For Hashem does not desire the death of the wicked, but rather that they repent from their evil ways - and they will

live. (Yechezkel 18:32)" In Hashem's books, it is never too late. At the same time, Hashem does not expect humans to blindly ignore what in our eyes will be the result of our actions, or inaction.

I believe that this was Hashem's message to Avraham. "You do what Sarah tells you to do," for she is right - the time has come to separate Yishmael and Yitzchak. Not doing so is likely to endanger Yitzchak's future as a patriarch. Hashem, on the other hand, functions on a different plane. For Hashem to "give up hope" in an individual would mean taking away his free-will, which includes the ability to repent. To the very last, Hashem leaves the gates of repentance open for he who wishes to pass through them.

This understanding turns the expression "playing G-d" on its ear. Normally, we would consider making decisions based on one's understanding or perception of future events as "playing G-d." Who are we to say what the future holds in store? Yet, at least in this context, playing G-d is actually the decision not to take action, even when common sense dictates that the time has come to do so.

Sometimes, life presents us with painful situations, when it becomes apparent that it is in our best interest to distance ourselves or our children from others with whom we may once have seen eye to eye. While it may seem appealing to invoke the old "never give up hope" idiom, it behooves us to remember that it is G-d Who never gives up hope. As humans, we may at times be forced to end relationships in order to protect ourselves from harm's way. It's never an easy call, and it's not something one should do without great deliberation. Nonetheless, inaction itself is a form of action, and where painful decisions must be made, it is foolish and dangerous to bury one's head in the sand and pretend problems will just go away. Above all, we must ask Hashem for the insight to know when to keep trying, and when to walk away.

Have a good Shabbos.

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