

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After the death of Sarah, Avraham remarries to a woman named Keturah. Rashi, following Midrash, states that she was Hagar, the woman whom he had married earlier at the behest of Sarah herself and who became the mother of Yishmael. The Torah records for us that Avraham fathered further children with Ketura and that these children left the house of Avraham to found families and clans of their own in the Middle East. There is discussion in halacha regarding these bnei Ketura and their status vis a vis the Jewish people and Avrahams mission in the world. The bnei Ketura adopted many of Avrahams ways including hospitality to strangers and circumcision of males. However, the Torah makes it very clear that in no way are they the true heirs of Avraham in spiritual terms. It is Yitzchak and Yitzchak alone who inherits the blessings of Avraham and the responsibilities of the covenant entered into between Avraham and God, so to speak. Even in his lifetime, Avraham sends the bnei Ketura away from him and from Yitzchak. The bnei Ketura melt into the general milieu of the different tribes that populated the Middle East of that time. They never challenge Yitzchak nor assert any claim to the heritage of their father Avraham. It is almost as if they are satisfied at being ignored in the whole millennia-long struggle, regarding the advancement of Avrahams ideas and ways against idolatry and cruelty. Thereby they are assigned to the very anonymity that they seemingly craved.

I think that the lesson here is an obvious historical one. Many are delighted to claim great pedigree for themselves. But since in Jewish life pedigree comes with great responsibilities, with a binding covenant whose terms are inescapable and immutable, people are willing to renounce their pedigree rather than bear its responsibilities and obligations. The unwillingness or inability of the bnei Ketura to respond to the challenge of being the descendants of Avraham is what brings them to even lose that distinction of their illustrious pedigree. Throughout the Bible, the Jewish people are constantly reminded that they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. This is not a matter of pride and hubris look how great my family is but rather a call to spiritual arms look at the great mission and responsibility that has been thrust upon us precisely because of who our ancestors were. This is what the rabbis meant when they stated that a Jew must always ask ones self: When will my actions be of the same caliber of holiness and spirit as those of my forbearers? Pride in ancestry is necessary and commendable. But if it only remains a matter of pride without advancing the covenant, commitments and goals of those who went before us, then that pride of ancestry is almost worthless. It leads only to the fate of the bnei Ketura, assimilation, anonymity and eventually the disappearance of the knowledge of ones own ancestry itself. All of Jewish history

testifies to this truism of Jewish life, both in individual and communal terms.

Shabat shalom.

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