

Show and Tell

Abraham and Isaac: Two Paradigms in Influence and Outreach

By Mendel Kalmenson

There are two ways to influence, inspire, parent or teach: through words and persuasive arguments, or by example and silent behavior.

The latter often speaks louder.

Although no actual words may have passed between the influencer and the influenced, much more than that has been communicated.

The truth has been communicated—not a possible truth, or even a probable truth, but an actual truth. Hence, one worth living.

In the first manner of affecting another, it is the teacher who approaches the student; in the second manner, it is the student who is drawn to the teacher.

The truth has been communicated—not a possible truth, or even a probable truth, but an actual truth

In the first approach, it's the parent who wants something for the child; in the second, it's the child who wants something for him- or herself.

In the first mode, the quantity and quality of the effect depends on the one who inspires; in the second, it depends on the one who is inspired.

Different Paths

Although identical to his father in physical appearance,¹ in spiritual makeup, personality and approach, Isaac was as different from his father, Abraham, as night is from day.

They both served G-d with all their hearts and souls, but they possessed different hearts and different souls. According to the mystics, Abraham embodied unbridled love and kindness, while Isaac personified awe and restraint.

Their roles and destinies, as well, couldn't have been more different. This we know from G-d's dissimilar responses to them in the face of identical circumstances:

There was a famine in the land, aside from the first famine that was in the days of Abraham . . .²

Isaac, like his father, encountered famine. Unlike his father, though, who left Israel for Egypt to escape the hunger, Isaac was checked when he thought³ to retrace his father's footsteps:

G-d appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not descend to Egypt; dwell here in this land . . ."⁴

. . . For you are a blemish-free offering, and territory outside of the Holy Land is not worthy of you.⁵

What about Abraham? Was he not, as well, "blemish-free"?

Isaac, due to a unique spiritual sensitivity, was the only one of our forefathers never to leave the borders of the Holy Land. Endowed with a delicate spirit, he didn't take well to unholiness—then a prevailing force outside of the land of Canaan.

Abraham, on the other hand, was immune to impurity; therefore, Egypt—a land steeped in paganism and lewdness—didn't rattle him.

His dainty spiritual composition was repulsed by even the smallest hint of heretical hogwash

Abraham was thus cut out for outreach. He learned to relate to a sacrilegious world through learning its mindset, heartbeat and lingo. He took the heathen pulse in order to determine how best to respond to its lack of spiritual consciousness and how to most effectively administer new life. He shared company with those "who bowed to the dust of their feet"⁶ and transformed them into monotheists.

Conversely, Isaac was too spiritual to relate to profanity. He did not have it within himself to descend. His dainty spiritual composition was repulsed by even the smallest hint of heretical hogwash. He neither understood nor tolerated a culture that saw value in—let alone worshipped—anything other than G-d.⁷

It would seem obvious, then, that Isaac would have had no effect on his surroundings. Could a man unable or unwilling to interact with his pagan neighbors effect change in them? If he didn't speak their language, nor they his, how could they ever communicate?

But perhaps their means of communication was not made up of words.

A Model Lesson

“Like father like son” did not apply to Abraham and Isaac.

Abraham was a man of dialogue and debate. His eloquent discourses and compelling arguments convinced many to join the folds of his faith. Hence, the verse⁸ dubs Abraham a “maker” of souls: “For he would take them under the wings of the Divine Presence and convert them.”⁹

Isaac, for the most part, kept to himself. One might say that he focused on ascent more than on—his father’s forte—descent. Immersed in study and prayer, his was a journey heavenward; he sought to broaden his awareness and deepen his connection with G-d. He constantly aspired to greater heights.

So, while Abraham didn’t stop teaching, Isaac rarely ceased studying.

But what he didn’t express in words he articulated in deed. Actions are also universally understood; they constitute a currency accepted by all.

Isaac was a walking display of truth. He was a living example of a servant of G-d. All who saw him couldn’t help but be moved and impressed, their lives forever changed.

The Philistines would say, “The manure of the mules of Isaac, and not the silver and gold of [their king] Abimelech.”¹⁰

Poetry aside, these words express the profound impact Isaac had on the Philistines. They recognized the greatness of Isaac and his path, without a syllable coming out of his mouth. Of their own accord they streamed to him, as metal is drawn to a magnet.¹¹

Compare and Contrast

They shared an identical objective, but since their methods were divergent, presumably so were their results

How would Isaac’s influence compare with that of his father?

They shared an identical objective—to bring people closer to G-d—but since their methods were divergent, presumably so were their results.

Abraham descended to the level of his students, while Isaac did not. Consequently, Abraham reached people whom Isaac could not.

Abraham interacted not only with Philistines, considered in some respects more moral than other nations,¹² but managed to touch the lowly Egyptians as well. His guests included those who were so opposed to monotheism that they were willing to pay a heavy price to maintain their pagan beliefs!¹³

Isaac reached no such people. The people he reached were somewhat refined to begin with, which is why they were drawn to him in the first place.

On the flip side, while Abraham descended to the level of his students, Isaac brought his students up to his. In other words, Isaac reached people in a way that Abraham could not.

Precisely because Isaac was only seen and not heard, letting his students do the thinking on their own, the conclusions they drew were their own. In sum, Abraham's reach extended *further*, while Isaac's penetrated *deeper*.¹⁴

Abraham's effect was shortlived, because it was he who affected his students. After his passing, his followers slowly faded away. Since it had been his electrifying presence and convincing arguments that had overwhelmed and obligated them, they no longer felt obliged to follow his ways in his absence.¹⁵

Isaac's influence lived on.¹⁶ Because he caused people to change on their own.

Have you ever been to Beersheba? If you have, you've been influenced by Isaac.

The city was named twice. First by Abraham:

Therefore [Abraham] named that place Beersheba, for there they both swore.¹⁷

Then by Isaac:

[Isaac] named the well Shibah; therefore [i.e., because it was *Isaac* who named the well] *the name of the city is Beersheba until this very day!*¹⁸

What's in It for Me?

At home or in the office, and anywhere in between, we often find ourselves in a position of influence.

Have you ever been to Beersheba? If you have, you've been influenced by Isaac

We wonder how best to educate and inspire. We consider how most efficiently to effect change.

Words are good, but actions consistent with your message are better.

Arguments can engage, but deeds embrace.

The effect of a well-expressed speech about the graveness of sin falls shorter than the instinctive look of horror that crosses one's face upon its encounter.¹⁹ The best homily about ethics and following G-d's words pales in comparison to obvious excitement at the opportunity to practice those values.²⁰

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FOOTNOTES

1. Rashi to Genesis 25:19.
2. Genesis 26:1.
3. See Rashi to Genesis 26:2.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. See Rashi ibid., based on Bereishit Rabbah 64:3.
6. See Rashi to Genesis 18:4.
7. This can provide insight into the Talmud's statement (Shabbat 89b) that "in messianic times, only Isaac will be called 'our father.'" For in that era the Jewish people will never leave the Holy Land, just like Isaac never did—forming a unique bond we will share exclusively with Isaac.

A deeper interpretation: Just like Isaac led a purely spiritual life, "blemish-free," we too, come messianic times, will devote our lives completely to matters of the spirit.
8. Genesis 12:5.
9. See Rashi ad loc, based on Bereishit Rabbah 39:14 and 84:4, and Talmud, Sanhedrin 99b.
10. See Bereishit Rabbah 64:7.
11. Here is an even deeper reading of the Talmudic statement cited above (footnote 7). Isaac's unique manner of influencing—where the ones influenced change of their own accord—will be mirrored in our effect upon the nations of the world in the messianic era. We are told by the prophets (Isaiah 2:2, et al) that the nations will stream to the Holy Temple to serve G-d—completely of their own volition. They will be drawn to the great holiness that will emanate from the Temple.
12. See Rashi to Genesis 12:19 for a distinction between the lewdness of the Egyptians and that of the Philistines.
13. See Bereishit Rabbah 49:4.
14. This sheds light on a perplexity regarding the name of our Parshah, Toldot. It can be said that our Parshah is deeply related to its name, whose meaning is "offspring." For, as opposed to Abraham's manner of influence—wherein only some of what he said penetrated the listener, only that which resonated with him—Isaac's method created a desire in the student to be exactly and entirely like him. Thus, Isaac's spiritual progeny were more similar to him than Abraham's were to him. This Parshah is therefore named Toldot, because it tells of Isaac's extended family who "looked and acted" like him.

15. Thus, though Abraham was a “maker of souls,” we find no mention of his converts after his passing. Where are all of those souls that Abraham made?

16. Moreover, through a particular renewal campaign that Isaac undertook, Abraham’s short-term impact was made long-lasting. As the verse recounts, “Isaac returned and he dug the wells of water which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham’s death . . .” Furthermore, not only did he revive his father’s deeds, he gave new life to his father’s legacy, as the narrative continues: “. . . and he called them [the wells] by the same names that his father had called them” (Genesis 26:18).

17. Genesis 21:31.

18. Genesis 26:33.

19. This point loosely relates to the following story:

The Rebbe was once visited by a distraught Jew who complained that his children were fast assimilating. “What have I done wrong?” the man said despondently. “Why have they strayed from the path I taught them?”

At one point in the painful conversation, he expressed his frustration by uttering a popular Yiddish idiom, “*Ay, vi shver es iz tzu zein a Yid*”—“How difficult it is to be a Jew!” A deep sigh accompanied the phrase. The Rebbe asked him, “Do you often express yourself this way?” He replied, “In stressful times—and of those there are many—I do.” The Rebbe gently responded, “Then that is what your children often hear, and that is the impression they are left with.” With a twinkle in his eye, the Rebbe continued, “There is a different Yiddish saying [from the chorus of a popular Yiddish folk song], ‘*S’iz gut tzu zein a Yid*’—‘It’s great to be a Jew!’ Switch the refrain, and you will note a difference in your children’s appreciation for their heritage . . .”

20. Based on talks by the Lubavitcher Rebbe: Likkutei Sichot, vol. 25, pp. 123ff, and vol. 15, pp. 194ff.

By Mendel Kalmenson

Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson is the rabbi of Beit Baruch and executive director of Chabad of Belgravia, London, where he lives with his wife, Chana, and children.

Mendel was an editor at the Judaism Website—Chabad.org, and is also the author of the popular books *Seeds of Wisdom*, *A Time to Heal Positivity Bias*, and *On Purpose*.

Artwork by David Brook. David lives in Sydney, Australia, and has been selling his art since he was in high school. He is currently painting and doing web illustrations.

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