Dvar Torah Hayei Sarah

Genesis Chapter 25

And Abraham took another wife and her name was Keturah.

2And she bore him Zimran and Jokshan and Medan and Midian and Jishbak and Shuah.

3And Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan, and the sons of Dedan were Ashurim, Letushim, and Leumim.

4And the sons of Midian [were] Ephah and Epher and Enoch and Abida and Elda'ah; all these were the sons of Keturah.

5And Abraham gave all that he possessed to Isaac.

6And to the sons of Abraham's concubines, Abraham gave gifts, and he sent them away from his son Isaac while he [Abraham] was still alive, eastward to the land of the East.

There are a number of questions that emerge from these verses.

1. Who is Keturah? Midrash Rabbah says that she was Hagar and that Isaac helped arrange her re-marriage to his father Abraham. This lens removes some of the earlier tension when Abraham sent her and Ishmael away. Abraham is reunited with Hagar and both Isaac and Ishmael bury their father. However, there is another opinion in the Yalkut Shimoni that Keturah is a descendant of Yafet. If this is the case then Abraham in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, has wives from each of the children of Noah. For a full discussion of this, please see https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/chaye/sha.html

Sarna in his JPS commentary on Genesis argues that given Abraham's old age and that the descendants here are described as the children of concubines, Keturah is not a later marriage for Abraham, but rather a much earlier relationship he had that produced children. Although placed here, this story does not take place after Sarah had died.

See also See also http://thetorah.com/our-step-mother-keturah/

2. What are the gifts Abraham gave to these children? How does it relate to Abraham giving Isaac all that he possessed?

Sarna explains that while Isaac is the sole heir, the other children are given gifts by Abraham either as a gesture of generosity to secure their good will toward Isasac or in compensation of further claims. Simple peshat according to Ibn Ezra is that these were gifts of money.

Rashi
Abraham gave gifts: Our Sages explained that he gave them "the name of impurity" (Sanh. 91a). Another explanation: All that was given to him because of Sarah and the other gifts that were given to him, all these he gave to them, for he did not wish to benefit from them.

In Sanhedrin 91a Rashi says the "shem tumah" name of impurity, refers to the powers of witchcraft.

This raises an interesting question: why would Abraham transmit to them something which is associated with idolatry and forbidden by the Torah? Rashi's second opinion is that the children received not what Abraham had earned but only which he had received and retained for political purposes. The gifts were not truly gifts as commonly understood but as a convenient way to get rid of them. Abraham as the model re-gifter!

Whichever lens you view the story and who Keturah was, in the end Abraham repeats what he had done earlier. Potential rivals to Isaac are sent away or banished from him. There is however one crucial difference between the earlier banishment of Ishmael and the children here. Earlier Abraham sent away Hagar and Ishmael with only the barest provisions of a skin of water and a loaf of bread, and as Rashi points out, no silver or gold. Here when the children are sent away, notwithstanding Rashi's understanding, with gifts which implies something substantive.

This story leaves us with a powerful question. In realizing Isaac is the child to inherit the covenant, the Torah seems to allow the other children to be sent away. The issue is not the sending, but how they are sent, with minimal provisions or with something substantive. This picture is not one of broad inclusion, but rather exclusion of those who could be a negative influence. For the covenant to be successfully transmitted, some must be rejected. While we do not decide policies or halachah directly from the Torah, there is at least one voice here that suggests our tent might/should be smaller and not bigger.