

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah – September 26, 2014

In order to understand the stories of our Torah, we often need to learn a bit of Midrash, the collection of Rabbinic insights that provide a deeper meaning of our text. Today, when we read the stories of Abraham and Sara, when we focus so much on the roles we all play in our families, I want to share a Midrash about parenting, about what we expect from our children and how adult children relate to their own children through the lens of the older generation.

The Midrash is about a man who made out his will with one important stipulation: my son shall not inherit anything of mine until he acts the fool. When the Rabbis of the community wanted to see what this actually meant, they went to the son's house and peeked in through the window. When they did, they saw the young father crawling on his hands and knees, with his young daughter riding on his back.

As they stepped away, they realized that he was doing exactly as his father wanted. He knew what all young parents eventually learn – at times we need to be on the level of our children and playing the fool can help us connect to them on a personal level.

This Midrash teaches us a number of lessons.

It starts out as an obscure anecdote about estate law. The Rabbis are trying to be attorneys attempting to make sense of this strange provision in a client's will: "my son shall not inherit anything of mine until he acts the fool."

We quickly learn that this Midrash is not only about inheritance but also fundamentally about parenting. The man makes his son's inheritance contingent on "acting the fool" – a poetic way of saying, being an engaged and loving father. And though the question of estate law may be financial on the surface, the inheritance at stake is more important and timeless than money.

Every Rosh Hashanah we read our tradition's poster text of parenting and inheritance, the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. Every year we read about the instructions from God to Abraham to sacrifice his son. We read these stories and cringe. It is a difficult story and hopefully when we re-read it each year, we find a new connection and new insight that helps us connect to our personal life.

What does this story teach us about family relationships? What does it teach us about communication and trust? What does it teach us about faith and belief? What does it teach us about questioning authority and about personal sacrifice? I am concerned that people who read these stories may begin to think that the father of our faith was such a fanatic. I struggle every year with how to present these stories to adults and I struggle more when I work with our educators on how to present these stories to students. If we want our young people ever to come back for services and programs, we have to be careful how we help everyone learn the right lessons and ask the right questions.

One of the core lessons of the Akedah is how important it is to strike a balance in our lives between our home life and our professional life. How important it is to achieve that balance than many of our Biblical ancestors did not achieve. Perhaps the Akedah can be a warning for us about how our own choices demand certain sacrifices from our children. I know that Abraham was never able to learn from the great lessons we can find in modern literature but there is so much to teach us today. One of the most powerful sources on parenting that I have read is a book by Bruce Feiler, titled [The Secrets of Happy Families](#).

Bruce Feiler, who after being diagnosed with cancer, began to think more about his role as a father and lessons he wanted to share with other fathers. In an online interview he states, "...most people have either a great family and an average career, or an incredible career and an average family. The only way to have both is to apply the same level of passion and energy to your family as you do to your work".

Our ancestor Abraham could have learned a great deal about parenting from Bruce Feiler. Whatever rewards Abraham's act of faith in God reaped, he devastated his family. For so long, I read this story of Abraham sacrificing his son on the altar that day. As I get older I realize that perhaps what Abraham sacrificed that day was his parenting. As I look deeper into the story, I am struck by the fact that Abraham's devotion to God was at the expense of his devotion to his son and his wife. According to the Torah, after the Akedah, Abraham and Isaac never speak again and by the time they return home, Sarah died. This imbalance of faith and family in Abraham's life teaches a profound lesson.

To read these stories on Rosh Hashanah, the time when we reflect on our past, when we celebrate new

beginnings, give us reason to pause. We read these texts to help us evaluate the health of our families and what role we can play to keep things balanced. The new realities today bring new pressures and distractions that challenge how we take care of our families. As Feiler writes,

“No matter what kind of family you are part of, an enormous new body of research shows that your family is central to your overall happiness and wellbeing”. “Yet among the things proven to make us the least happy are raising children and tending to aging parents.”

Most of us probably do not need others to tell us that, but Feiler wrote his book to shed light on what happy families actually do. I want to share with you several of his themes that dovetail with the blessings that Jewish life has to offer us as families.

Before I do that, I want to address those who do not have children, or a spouse, or an otherwise “traditional” family. I know that it may seem that so much of the focus of synagogue life and other parts of our society today are directed towards families with two parents, two children, a nice dog, a big house and white picket fence. But in reality, families all face challenges and our role as an individual is extremely important. We have people in our congregation who are divorced, never married, without children and we welcome you as we welcome others. We welcome individuals and families, including families with same-sex parents. The lessons of the Akedah and the lessons about family life can speak to all of us as individuals and as members of a greater community and will hopefully inspire us to think about what role we can play to improve the lives of others and ourselves. Although Feiler’s book targets most of its advice to families with children, the lessons are universal. Humans are by nature social beings, and what goes for biological families also goes for whatever group or community we surround ourselves with. After all, we are all God’s children so that makes us part of one big family.

In our contemporary world, it seems that we are all so busy. We are pulled in a thousand directions, and we are pulling our children with us. They barely have time to breathe during the school year, let alone have dinner with the family. And finding a night of the week when everyone’s schedule syncs up is challenge enough. But if we don’t make the effort, we are cheating ourselves and our families.

Feiler writes,

“A recent wave of research shows that children who eat dinner with their families are less likely to get involved in the wrong things. They also will have larger vocabularies, better manners, healthier diets, and higher self-esteem. The most comprehensive survey done on this topic...discovered that the amount of time children spent eating meals at home was the single biggest predictor of better academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems. Mealtime was more influential than time spent in school, studying, attending religious services, or playing sports.”

Jewish tradition has known this truth about family meals for centuries. Shabbat was created as a day of rest, and our people made it into a day of family. The early Zionist thinker Ahad Haam once said, “More than the Jewish have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people.” In particular, the traditional Shabbat rules limiting how far one can travel ensure that families and neighbors spend Shabbat together. As non-Orthodox Jews, we may not be as strict about these rules but we need to remember the essence of the day – being together as a community in the synagogue and being together with our family around the Shabbat table. In our hustle and bustle of our busy lives, we need to keep something sacred and that can be the family being together on Friday night. When I say sacred, I mean without any screens or electric devices and instead, just some good old fashioned, conversations – face to face; speaking and listening; sharing and responding. And if the spirit moves us, singing and praying. Lighting candles as a family sets the day apart. Reciting Kiddush raises the meal to a new spiritual level. Allowing our children to lead us in the rituals they learn in Religious School provides opportunities to feel proud. Inviting friends to the table brings an element of uniqueness and warmth and camaraderie – it makes it Shabbat. We need to create unique experiences for the family and they do not all need to take place in the synagogue but instead at home or at a familiar setting. The experience of Shabbat and Holidays as a family can change one’s life and our kids may even thank us for these experiences years from now.

As we are looking for things to talk about at the Shabbat dinner table, I have a suggestion – the family’s collective past. Back in 2001, a group of psychologists did a study comparing psychological evaluation of children with their knowledge of their family history, which was measured on a “Do You Know?” scale using 20 questions like:

- Do you know where your grandparents grew up?
- Do you know where your parents met?
- Do you know of an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?
- Do you know who was the first generation in your family to come to the United States?

The results were striking. “The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger was their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The ‘Do You Know?’ scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness”.

As it happened, months after the study, September 11th happened. The psychologists went back and studied how the same children responded to that trauma. The results were the same: “The ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress”.

To explain this result, psychologists coined the term “intergenerational self” – a sense that we are part of something bigger, a larger narrative. We Jews know quite a bit about being part of something bigger and about family dynamics and we understand that all generations have an important role in raising the children with good values and with a commitment to family. That is why we are so proud of the program in our Religious School for our Seventh Grade Zayin Students – The Zayin Museum when they learn and then tell their family’s story. By gathering the artifacts and telling their stories, they students realize the higher purpose: we tell our children that they are not alone, that they are part of a larger story, that those who came before them had struggles and triumphs just as they do.

Perhaps that is why the Passover Seder is so popular – it gives us a chance to tell the story of our people and to discuss how we fit into that story today. Whether it’s through Jewish ritual like the Passover Seder, or our own gatherings, we need to tell and retell our stories. We must make sure to not wait until the storytellers are gone to wonder what stories never got told. It is amongst the things that we Jews do best – we tell stories. Great educators know that if we can link storytelling to a ritualized activity, we will dramatically increase the chances that our children will remember them and passed on to the next generation.

There are so many rituals that our children learn in religious school or at summer camp and we can reinforce what they learn by allowing those rituals to become part of our Friday night dinner. Our people have embraced these rituals for centuries and it is up to us to make them relevant today. Judaism is designed to enrich lives by strengthening families. Judaism is a rich family story that invites us to be a part of it and reap the benefits in meaning, wholeness, and unity, for our family, our community, and ourselves.

As we begin the New Year and we think about ways we can feel more connected to our family and our people, here are some questions to consider:

- How could we rearrange our priorities to include more family meals, and a better-known family story?
- How high would we score on the “Do You Know?” scale about our family history? – How high would our children score and what are we going to do to improve that?
- How could we be more intentional about the wellbeing of your family?

Put in terms of our opening Midrash, how will we “act the fool” for our children, for our community, for those we love? The father in the story presented a life-affirming gesture of loving horseplay – his active engagement with the next generation – as a model for us all. It is not incidental to the story; it is the story.

Rosh Hashanah provides us with the opportunity to set goals for the New Year and to think about what we need to do to achieve the important personal goals we set for ourselves. Even if the goals are personal, we do not need to achieve them alone. We can do so as a family and as a supportive community for one another.

In the New Year, I want us to consider how will we create opportunities for sacred time, perform rituals for lasting memories, and share our personal stories? If so, then we will prove ourselves worthy of inheriting our ancestors’ legacy, and we will give the next generation something truly precious to enrich their lives and hand down to those who follow. It has been said that the Shabbat is one of the greatest gifts the Jewish People gave to the world. I also think it can be the greatest weekly gift we can give to ourselves. In a few hours, we will begin the first Shabbat of the New Year. I hope we can make it the beginning of a new special family Shabbat experience that will lay the foundation for more great Shabbat experiences with our family and dear

friends in the New Year.

Shanah Tovah and Shabbat Shalom