

## **Accepting People for Who They Are; and Forgiving Them for Who They Are Not**

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Several months ago, I was walking to shul with my 11 year old daughter—just the two of us—on a Shabbat morning. Typically some of the most interesting questions, the most revealing, poignant conversations happen when I have the opportunity to be alone with one of my children at a time. This particular time was during the days immediately following the death of Hazzan Ozur Bass’s beloved father. Indeed it was during the week of shiva, when we along with so many of you came in such extraordinary numbers to offer support and love to our precious friend, teacher, and Hazzan. I remember exactly where we were when my surprisingly insightful, deep, and inquisitive daughter asked me this question. About three concrete squares of sidewalk along Glen Road just before we turn into Claggett Farm for our short cut to the back of the shul she said: “When your father dies will you mourn for him the way the Hazzan is mourning for his father?” Gasping for breath I asked, “Do you mean will I sit shiva for my father when he dies like the Hazzan is?” “Yeah,” she said. “And will you be sad about it and miss your dad when he dies?” If emotional intelligence could be measured similar to IQ, this kid would be off the charts. She knows my father, sees him once or twice a year. She has come to understand that there is a major discrepancy in that relationship compared to the relationships she has with other family members. As she has gotten older she has asked a lot more questions about my parents’ divorce, about how I grew up for part of my childhood being raised by a single mother, about when my Mom got remarried to my step-father, her Sabba; about Uncle Max, my “half-brother,” who is almost 13 years my junior, and of course, about why my biological father, her paternal grandfather, dwells at some emotional distance from us.

There are certain things that you want to just allow your kids to believe...to preserve their naiveté, their innocence; to stave off the cynicism of the adult world just for a little longer. For example, my six year old son thinks that most people in the world are Jewish (why disabuse him of that so soon!)...Until recently, my daughters thought that all families were intact, wholesome, and maybe even somewhat enmeshed just like theirs! But I can’t protect them anymore. They

know that when it comes to Abba's family (that's me) that there are two households, and two separate families, (three if you count my step-father's family) and that those separate families are rarely if ever in the same place at the same time. They have quickly come to understand that some relatives stay in touch more than others, some visit more than others, take more of an active interest than others...

And the one thing I wanted to shelter them from for as long as possible: they now understand that sometimes mommies and daddies fall out of love with one another; and when they do sometimes one of those parents doesn't stay as connected with his or her children as they once were. I tried for a long time to change the subject, to tell you the truth. I even dreaded flipping through my own wedding album with them, because I didn't want to have to explain who all these different people were; but those darn family trees kept coming home from school, and we needed to add additional branches to the photocopied trees to accommodate all of our complexity. I tried mightily to keep my kids afloat in a bubble of perfect family harmony, to protect them from what even to me are the inexplicable actions and behaviors of relatives, but at some point the bubble breaks; the façade shatters; and whether we like it or not they start to be able to figure out all on their own what is real and sincere and true, and what is not.

For seven weeks every year—between Rosh Hashana and Hoshana Rabba, the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot—we recite Psalm 27, twice a day, morning and evening. Psalm 27, also known as the “Psalm for the Season of Repentance,” is a tender poem about the fragility of life and the yearning for God's presence and care. In fact the words behind me on the wall, “*Shiviti be'veit Hashem kol yemei chayay*” [That I should dwell in God's house forever] happen to be verse four of Psalm 27. But for almost two months out of the year it is not that line I focus on, but verse ten: *Ki avi ve'imi azavuni, va-Adonai ya'asfeini*...when my father and mother abandon me, God will gather me in. It is clear to me that when the Psalmist wrote about being abandoned by our parents what was meant was their death. The Psalmist was describing the mortality, the death of the two people who gave us life. The Mourner's Kaddish is really an inaccurate translation. *Kaddish Yatom*, the original name of that prayer actually means the ‘Orphan's Kaddish.’ Worry not, promises the Psalm 27, when you inevitably become an orphan in the world, God will care for you like a loving parent. Of course we know that sometimes parents tragically bury their own children, but that is a horrible anomaly of nature. It is also an anomaly of nature to feel

abandoned by a parent while that parent is still alive. And I can't help but dwelling on my own reality when I come across those words with such searing frequency at this time of the year. I have a living parent with whom I have limited contact. My children have a living grandparent whom they rarely see. It used to make me so angry. I resented it. I was more upset that my kids weren't being embraced than anything about me. And I admit that there are still times when it eats at my kishkes. When a birthday goes by without an acknowledgement or something like that. I've cried a lot of tears, lost a lot of sleep, and paid for hours of therapy. And I have decided that while I can't protect my kids from this painful reality, that I can turn it into an opportunity to learn something about real life.

You see at some point we have to learn to accept, even perhaps love people for who they are, and to forgive them for who they are not. For whatever reason—perhaps chemical, psychological, who knows—some people are only capable of showing a limited amount of affection. They may be wildly successful in business; they may have a gaggle of friends; they may make gobs of money—but when it comes to family, or to their emotional life, they are stunted; underdeveloped; profoundly inhibited. It seems to me that we have two choices about those people in our lives: We can either cut them off, say goodbye, and leave them in the dust...or we can adjust our expectations to be more in line with what they are truly able to provide rather than holding them to expectations that they will never be able to live up to. This is what I have tried to explain to my children. Some people may have love in their hearts but like other very real disabilities, they may not be capable of expressing or sharing that love, even with members of their own family. The challenge is to harbor *rachmanus* rather than anger. *Rachmanus* is mercy, *rachmanus* is pity, *rachmanus* is sympathy and compassion, and yes, in a way *rachmanus* is also forgiveness. Anger is toxic for your soul...and physicians tell us it's not all that good for your body either. It accomplishes nothing positive, and it only makes us bitter, and more resentful. And it takes a lot of anger not only to cut someone off, but to keep them cut off, to maintain that distance, to make sure those ties are constantly severed. Being estranged from a relative is hard work. You have to remember NOT to invite a person to a bar mitzvah, NOT to call for a birthday, NOT to inquire about their wellbeing. And you have to explain to other people why that person is purposefully out of your life. That's just too much negative energy to devote to someone who doesn't seem all that deserving of so much work to begin with. But adjusting your expectations of such a person means that you are less likely to be hurt or disappointed, because

you enter into each scenario in life with realistic, rather than inflated expectations of what that person can give of themselves. This is the path I have chosen: to accept whatever can be given and to forgive that which cannot be.

When our matriarch Sarah died in Hevron at the ripe old age of 127 years old, the Torah tells us: *vayavo Avraham lispod le'Sarah ve'livkotah*, that her widow Abraham lamented and cried for her.<sup>1</sup> The word lament (*lispod*), is today the same word that is used for eulogy (*hesped*). The Greek word “*eulogia*,” the origin of eulogy, means praise or blessing, while *hesped*, coming from lament, seems to be a more balanced testimonial about the dead. In a *hesped*, we are not supposed to embellish or sugar coat or repackage a person into something they were not. In fact the halakha instructs us to give a eulogy that is *kara'ui*, meaning balanced, and appropriate.<sup>2</sup> Because that's the way we truly are...balanced between competing forces and urges; between good choices and bad ones; between triumphs and failures. And while the passage of time tends to have an idealizing effect on how we remember our loved ones, the truth is that no relationship is perfect and sometimes mourning involves coming to terms with wrongs that were never made right, or wounds that were never fully healed. And this is what I explained to my daughter Mia. When my father some day passes from this world, may it be a long time from now, I will mourn for him—and in much the same as the Hazzan mourned for his father. But I will mourn both for what was and what was not. I will mourn for what we shared and what we were never able to. I will miss the fragments of relationship that were good, and loving, and meaningful, and I will grieve for the painful gaps in that relationship as well. And so her young mind has to grapple with another of life's complexities. But as she tries to figure this out, she will do so while surrounded by so many people who love her, and hopefully she will learn that she may in the future have to learn to combine love and forgiveness, ideal expectations with real ones; and exchange anger for understanding and *rachmanus* for someone in her life too.

There once was a King who quarreled with his son. In a fit of rage, the King exiled his son from the Kingdom. Years passed, and the son wandered alone through the world. In time, the King's heart softened, and he sent his ministers to find his son and ask him to return. When they located the young man, he answered them that he could not return to the kingdom – he had been too hurt,

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 23:2

<sup>2</sup> Lamm, Maurice. The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. Jonathan David Publishers, 2000. Page 49.

and his heart still harbored bitterness. The ministers brought back the sad news to their King. The King told them to bring his son the following message: 'Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to meet you.' ...

Some people can only come so far, and then it is up to us to make up the difference.