

“Hannah Montana is Dead: The Vulnerability of Childhood & The Power of Parenting”

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It is with great sadness that I share with you today the following obituary notice. “Hannah Montana, the bubbly, fun, wholesome American teen pop idol died during the MTV Video Music Awards after losing a long and courageous battle with Miley Cyrus. She was 14 or 15 or thereabouts.”

According to witnesses, the death occurred when Miley Cyrus, 20, joined Robin Thicke for a rendition of his smash-hit...*Blurred Lines*, during the VMAs. Cyrus, wearing a skin-coloured latex bikini [twerked her derriere], misused a foam finger in all kinds of iniquitous ways, and let her tongue hang out of her mouth for too long, invariably exposing her to any number of air-borne pathogens.

Viewers watching her performance who were not paralyzed by shock tweeted such words as “disgrace,” “uncomfortable” and “mortified,” and asked fellow tweeters to remind them to never let their children go into show business. Others simply urged her to “THINK OF THE CHILDREN!”

“People close to Hannah Montana say they knew she was doomed as many as four years ago when Miley Cyrus, then 16, pole-danced during the Teen Choice Awards. Her fate was sealed as Cyrus continued to distance herself from her Disney alter ego and began wearing clothes during her concerts that were more Madonna than Snow White.”

Tributes have been pouring in for Hannah Montana since her death. One fan wrote, Watching Cyrus on the stage that night made me grieve for the little girl from Nashville, Tennessee. Clearly the purity ring she so proudly wore at 15 has disappeared forever from her hand.

“Miley Cyrus performing on VMA. I was shocked. She was a great singer and actress. Was. RIP Hannah Montana. RIP childhood,” said another.¹

¹ Modified from Peter Scowen’s piece in *The Globe and Mail*, “Obituary: Hannah Montana dies of neglect and shame at the VMAs,” August 26, 2013.

Now for those of you who have no idea what I'm talking about, I'll try to fill you in. Hannah Montana was a character on a popular Disney show who lived a double life: By day she is a normal teenager named Miley Stewart. But by night, she dons a wig and assumes her alter ego as a famous teen pop singer named Hannah Montana. The whole show revolves around Miley not getting found out by her classmates and neighbors for being the popular rock star Hannah Montana. It was a really cute show—I know this because I watched every single episode with my daughters who happened to be its precise target audience when it was on television just a few years ago. It was clean, it was fun; there was nothing objectionable about it. And it spawned an empire of products, from pink Hannah Montana lunchboxes, to pajama sets, to shower gels, to backpacks. We had it all in our house as I'm sure your children and grandchildren did...I think one of my kids even had a Hannah Montana birthday cake one year. A couple of years ago the show went off the air, and sweet little Miley began to pursue a career of her own...only it had none of the trappings of the once fresh-faced tween idol that she left behind. The long hair that she would stuff up under her Hannah Montana wig got chopped off in place of a scary spikey hairdo, and her concerts became increasingly suggestive and crude. Hannah Montana was permanently laid to rest at the MTV Video Music Awards, which was deeply disturbing to many who watched it. By the way, I was not one of those millions viewers watching the show...I was writing High Holiday sermons at the time. But a couple of days later one of my almost teenage daughters came to me with a lap top in hand, YouTube all cued up, and said, "Abba, you've got to see this." "How did *you* see this," I asked my innocent, sheltered, Jewish day school educated daughter? She said, "Oh, everybody's seen it." Thank you social media! Of course they have...That was their tween idol on the stage. That was kid actress they grew up with. Two weeks ago I never heard of the word "twerk," now it's everywhere. It was not only Hannah Montana who expired that day, but some of my children's innocence as well.

This past year was a uniquely difficult one for kids growing up in this world. Whether it was the death of Corey Monteith, the very talented singing and dancing star of the show Glee, who succumbed to a life long battle with drug abuse...Or it was Lee Thomson Young, another promising Disney star with enormous potential who took his own life...or it is the constant misery of the civil war in Syria where 2 million kids have had their childhood viciously snatched away from them; Where children have daily been victims of violence, malnutrition, severe trauma, and displacement. UNICEF reported that 1 out of every 5 schools in Syria have been

destroyed and only 6% of the kids in that country are in school. And speaking of schools, the words “Sandy Hook Elementary School” are forever emblazoned on our collective consciousness. And then of course there was the tragic death of our very own Evan Rosenstock...

Being a parent is the most wonderful, remarkable, rewarding, and downright frightening experience I could ever imagine. I believe it was just as true for our ancestors as for us. Isn't it remarkable that each of the central Torah narratives that we encounter on the High Holidays have a core connection to the relationships between parents and children? Tomorrow our Torah reading begins just as Aaron is picking up the pieces of his life after the shocking, unexpected deaths of both of his sons, Nadav and Avihu. He is stupefied, silenced, shocked by these events, and now has to resume his duties as the High Priest of the Israelite nation. On Rosh Hashanah—if you can remember that far back—we encountered the story of Sarah, and her long awaited son Isaac, and Hagar, and her son Ishmael. Abraham is caught between his allegiances as a spouse, a father to both boys; the story is complicated by love, loyalty, and the intense rivalry of these two mothers. On the second day we read the terrifying account of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah. At the end of the story it seems to me that if there is any message that God sends by staying Abraham's hand and saving Isaac it is this: Don't sacrifice your children! In this new faith you are about to establish, Abraham, children are the most precious, most sacred, most important gifts we have. Never place them on the altars of this world; never consider them expendable or marginal or anything but your highest priority. They are at the heart of this community; children are our future, our destiny as a people. That's why we say twice a day *veshinantam levanecha ve'dibarta bam*:² Teach your children every day, through your words, your deeds, your values.

While I'm teaching my kids, I wish I could pack my children in bubble wrap so that they would be protected from all the dangers of the world around them. I wish I could plug their ears and blindfold their eyes so that they wouldn't be assaulted by the crassness and violence that is absolutely everywhere. I wish I could put blinders on my kids every time we go to the grocery store so that they are shielded from the images of nearly naked women on the cover of Glamour and Cosmopolitan and Seventeen and Us and Star which not so subtly suggest that beauty and

² Deuteronomy 6:7 (which appears in the first paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, which is recited twice daily)

self-worth equals being super thin, and the more risqué the better. You know even the synagogue isn't sacred anymore. I witness so many kids come in here with the shortest, tightest, mini-skirts skirts imaginable! I don't know how it's even physically possible to bend at the waist in order to sit down in those teeny skirts. And let me tell you, as a parent of daughters, it isn't all that easy to find formal wear for kids that are not ridiculously short or tight fitting. But doesn't this society realize how fashion trends like these contribute to the sexual saturation of our culture, the objectification of the body, the confusion that teens are already coping with as their bodies are changing and developing. Half of all teenage girls are already on diets, and 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls already say they want to be thinner!³ You know how old first, second and third graders are? They are 7, 8, and 9 year olds! And it's not only girls, by the way: 41% of teenage boys say they are unhappy with their body image too.⁴ And, I know this is going to really surprise you, but the more time adolescents spend watching TV and music videos, the higher their degree of body dissatisfaction and their desire to be thin.⁵ I often wonder about parents who tell their kids not to be sexually active until they're married or until they are in a long term, loving, monogamous, mature relationships, but then they allow their adolescent, pre-teen kids to walk out the door scantily dressed and barely covered. Please, the next time you see this at a bar or bat mitzvah, please don't blame the kids for over-emphasizing their appearance or for walking out of the house this way...they learn and mirror what adults do, and what the adults in their lives approve of.

The truth is, I think many parents these days are scared of their own children. Parents are often more interested in being their kids' best friends, and playmates; their shopping companions and confidants than in being their teachers and role models and moral compasses. Researchers found that one in four parents won't discipline their children for fear of upsetting them, or because they're afraid that discipline will result in their kids not confiding in them.⁶ We're afraid of their moodiness or their defiance. I admit that I am sometimes guilty of this as well. Especially after

³ PBS Parents: Understanding and Raising Girls; Girls and Their Bodies

⁴ Naomi Weinschenker, M.D., Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, NYU School of Medicine. NYU Child Study Center, December 8, 2010

⁵ Teen Health and the Media: "Body Image and Nutrition"

⁶ Daily Mail Online, "Quarter of parents avoid disciplining their children for fear of upsetting them," February 17, 2010

being away from them at work for long hours I don't want to come home and start disciplining them...I want to have fun with them and be their buddy. This is my own mishegas, and Sari sometimes has to pull me aside and remind me, "You're the parent!" And she's absolutely right-If children don't learn to respect you and your rules, how can we ever expect them to respect other adults or society's rules. I have sat with parents and children in pre-b'nai mitzvah meetings in my office and witnessed levels of disrespect and ingratitude that have floored me. You know there's an *al heit* for that: *Al heit she-hatanu lifanekha be'zilzul horim u'morim*: for the sin we committed against You by disrespecting parents and teachers. Note that the disrespect of parents and teachers is not only a sin against the offended party, but a sin against God as well. But these parents, who by the way are spending 10's of thousands of dollars for these b'nai mitzvah events, too often just sit tight and take it. I still remember the taste of soap in my mouth the ONE time I had the misfortune of cursing my mother and I'll tell you I never did it again. But those days seem long gone. Sadly, many parents have abdicated their role as standard bearers for respect and boundaries.

We tell our kids that they can grow up to be whatever they want...whatever makes them happy. But how does over-programing them and expecting nothing less than stellar performances in everything from school to soccer give them the time or energy to even think about their own dreams for their lives. Did you hear about this mother who brought her son to a soccer try-out right here in Potomac, and when she got to the field, another parent told her that she was at the wrong location. Turns out she was actually at the right location, and the other parent tried to steer her off course to keep that woman's son out of competition her own son!⁷ This is our community. In fast-paced Potomac, it sometimes seems like everything is about preparing for high school, which is about preparing to ace the SATs, which is preparation for getting into the best college, and getting the best scholarships, and getting the best internships, and getting into the best graduate schools, and having best, highest paying job which will of course secure a lifetime of champaign wishes and caviar dreams, and of course certain happiness. Except that it doesn't; because if we don't give our kids the most important gift of all, we have committed parental malpractice. The most important thing we can teach our children is not how to get a perfect score on standardized tests, it's how to be a good person; how to be a person of character

⁷ "Is Youth Soccer Too Competitive? Tryout, travel teams can be major commitments. Finding right fit is key." Gazette, Monday, June 20, 2005

and moral integrity. You know parenting is not a particularly long-term proposition. My seventh grader likes to remind me, only 5 more years till I'm off to college! And I just know those next five years will fly by. So we have a short time to get it as right as we can...and that, I believe is where faith, and religion, and values come in to play. Just as important—*just as important*—as clothing and feeding and providing shelter and vaccinations and teeth cleaning for our kids is shaping their character. It's not just their skin and bones we have to be concerned with but also their souls.

Think about this...One of the most repeated phrases of this holiday season is *Avinu Malkeinu*...we say a litany of verses that begin with these two words throughout Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and throughout the ten days in between. *Avinu Malkeinu* means Our Father Our King, or if you prefer, Our Parent Our Ruler. Of all the possible images and metaphors and symbols our tradition could have mustered to speak about our relationship with God, the one chosen to be placed on our lips time and again at this holiest time of year is a reference to God as our parent! It's as if to say there is no holier, no more sacred, no more transformative relationship in the world than the one that exists between parents and children. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England once wrote "...Not one in a thousand people who fill the news has the power that a parent has over his or her children—the power to change a life."⁸ That is to say, you don't have to be too worried about Miley Cyrus if you are the kind of parent who is involved in your child's *inner* life: If you are actively raising and training your child not only to do well in school or on the soccer field, but also to be a mensch.

I want to tell you, I experienced one of the proudest moments of my entire life just a few months ago. Many of you were here with me! On June 8th, my eldest child Mia became a bat mitzvah right here at Har Shalom. My goal that day was to be as much of a regular dad as I could be...not the rabbi, but the abba. So Sari and I sat over there in the penalty box on the side of the Burke Sanctuary, where all the b'nai mitzvah families sit, and I watched in awe of my child. So many thoughts raced through my mind as she stood there in the center of a packed sanctuary, chanting and reading, and speaking beautiful words of Torah, and standing with confidence and radiance, wearing her bubbie's tallis, and surrounded by so many loving family members and

⁸ Sacks, Jonathan. From Optimism to Hope; A Collection of BBC Thoughts for the Day. "Parenthood as Privilege," 13 December 2002, p. 43.

friends. Her voice was strong. She was funny and witty and articulate. And I was jolted into the realization that she had become much more of a woman and was much less of a little kid right before my very eyes. I have officiated at hundreds and hundreds of *b'nai mitzvah*. I have blessed so many kids, and spent countless hours helping them prepare for this occasion. But for the first time in 11 years I was witnessing it all as a parent. And I understood better than ever before that a bat mitzvah is not an event, not an occasion, not a ceremony, not a ritual...but a person. You don't *have* a bat mitzvah you *are* a bat mitzvah. That is the goal of Jewish parenting. To transform our kids into sons and daughters of this covenantal community...sons and daughters of the mitzvot...young men and women who celebrate Judaism as a way of life; as a value system; as the basis for knowing that they are invaluable precious because they have been created in the image of God and nurtured by a holy community, an extended family called the Jewish people.

Because in the Jewish world view, it doesn't matter how skinny you are, or if you have the latest version of the i-Phone, or if you made the travel team for the sport you play. It doesn't matter how many trophies you have on your shelf or what scholarships you earned. That's not to say that those things don't have their place—of course they do—but far above all of that are questions like: Are you a person who exudes *hesed*, loving kindness and compassion for others. Are you a *rodef shalom*, a peacemaker when others are fighting or in conflict. Are you a *mekhabeid et ha'beriyot*, do you show honor and respect to everyone you meet, regardless of their popularity or looks? Do honor the elderly, your teachers, your parents, and other adults? Are you *dan le'khaf zechut*, one who gives the benefit of the doubt to another person before judging them or assuming the worst about their motivations? Do you speak *lashon ha'ra* or *lashon ha'tov*...Do you strive to use your words positively rather than gossip about other people—either in front of them or behind their back? Do you subscribe to the slogan one of my kids' camp counselors taught them this past summer, that “modest is hottest?” That is to say, do you feel comfortable enough in who you are—no matter your physical shape or size, that you don't have to attract attention or construe your own self-worth by exposing even more of your body? Do you know that you are a *tzelem Elohim*...that you are an embodiment of the image of God, which means that you are holy, you are special, you are *needed* for something that only you can do in this world? Do you know that your very presence—without even saying a word—can bring healing to the sick or comfort to a mourner? Do you approach the world with a vision of

tzedakah, seeking opportunities to give instead of get; to be generous rather than greedy? Do you aspire to a life of material gain and acquisition, or do you aspire to a life of service to others? Do you have a relationship with God, a sense of the sacred, of something greater than you in your life? Study after study that concludes with wide margins that religious people have lower blood pressure, greater impulse control, longer marriages, better communication with parents, less apprehension about death, more generosity, and consistently, in study after study after study, religious people report being happier than secular people. This is not about sayings or catchphrases...these and so many other deep, profound, beautiful ideas are Judaism's very relevance, our 3,500 years of honed in on finely tuned strategy for living meaningfully in very complicated, often times morally ambiguous world.

But friends, it doesn't happen by osmosis. And it's not even enough for our kids to learn it at religious school or day school. It has to be taught and role modeled by you, the adults in their lives. Joseph Telushkin, the bestselling author and rabbi teaches that parents and adults should reserve their highest praise for children for when they commit an act of kindness or goodness. He says that the things we usually praise kids for: intellectual accomplishments, athletic or artistic prowess, or good looks only matter if being a good person is at the top of the list.⁹ You have to be the kind of human being you want your kids to emulate. You have to live the kind of Judaism you want them to embrace and love and perpetuate. By the way this includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other special adults in the lives of our children. That being said though, there are no more important, no more effective teachers than their parents...that's why the Hebrew word for parents HORIM is from the same root as the Hebrew word for teachers MORIM. HORIM and MORIM, two sides of the same coin, dear friends. We have such a precious short time to accomplish such a monumental task. The good news is that you don't have to do it alone. That's why we're here. We, your synagogue, your rabbis and Hazzan, the many people who inhabit this Jewish community: *we are your village*. We are here to help role model, teach, and celebrate these ideals. This is what we stand for here...so please, don't be strangers. Make Jewish life and synagogue life a family commitment. Make Shabbes a time when you join us to learn, to celebrate, and to be exposed to all the values this community stands for. Let your shul partner with you and help you to raise not only good students, but *gutte*

⁹ Prager University, "How to Praise Your Child," Rabbi Joseph Telushkin.
<http://www.prageruniversity.com/Life-Studies/How-to-Praise-Your-Child.html#.UiNUcT-f7Sg>

neshamas...Good souls, good human beings, good Jews. As a parent of young kids and adolescents I know I can use all the help I can get. Thank God our tradition is just brimming with wisdom!

One final story...

During the Second World War, as I'm sure you know, many Jewish children were given up by their parents so they could be hidden and protected behind the cloistered walls of monasteries across Europe. Many of those parents never came back to retrieve their children, and those children became known as war orphans. When the war finally ended, emissaries were sent by the Jewish community to those monasteries to find and reclaim the Jewish children who had been hidden in those places. Only to further compound the tragedy, since so many of the children were taken to these Catholic sanctuaries at very young ages, very few of them remembered whether they were Jewish or not. So these emissaries would walk up and down the lines of children in monastery after monastery and they would just sing, "*Shema Yisrael...*" and the children who were able to finish, "*Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*" those were the ones they knew were Jewish children. What a legacy those parents gave their children simply by reciting the *Shema* with them every night. No child forgets a parent who puts them to bed with the words of the *Shema*. And no child will forget the precious teachings and values of Jewish tradition if it is their parents who are their teachers. Give your kids the legacy of a lifetime. This year and every year, teach them to be conscientious Jews and noble human beings. Be both their *horim* and their *morim*, their parents and their teachers. For there is no holier, more important job in the entire world.