

Families are Complicated: Embrace the Messy  
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This week's parsha is the lovely story of Noach. One of everyone's favorites. Noah is told by God to build an ark. The animals arrive two by two. There is a flood where it rains for 40 days and 40 nights. At the end of the flood, Noah sends out a dove who returns with an olive branch. God promises never to bring about another such flood, sealing the deal with the creation of the rainbow. Lovely story. You can just hear the singing in the background.

And, then, at the end of this story the strangest things happen. Noah decides to become a vintner. Where, you might ask, does Noah get the sapling grape vine? Don't know, but he has one. At any rate, before too long, Noah gets a little shickered. Why? Again, I don't know. Maybe he is enjoying his new hobby. Or, maybe he has a little PTSD from the recent events, being the patriarch of the last surviving human family, watching all of creation be destroyed, uncertain what would happen, or carrying the burden of single-handed responsibility of saving every single species of the planet. This all might be a little too much pressure. Noah drinks his wine, passes out in his tent in the buff and has a good long snooze.

Noah has 3 sons. His youngest son Ham sees his father and thinks that Noah lying there in his birthday suit and three sheets to the wind is hysterical. He runs out to tell his two other brothers. However, the brothers do not find this at all comical. With the greatest of humility, walking backwards and averting their eyes, they cover their father. They show their father honor whereas Ham wanted to bring shame. When Noah awakens, he knows what has taken place and curses Ham. As I said, an odd way to end this story.

This, however, is not the first of strange family sagas within the Torah and it is far from the last. Our whole history is riddled with sequences that befit the best latin novella. There are lies, schemes, plots, deceptions, jilted wives, brothers pitted against brothers, and far, far worse. Generally speaking, when we look at these stories we tend to gloss over them. We say things like, "Well, that act was reproachable but it was for a good reason, right?" or "Yeh, ok, that person did that awful thing, but, on the whole, they were a mensch!" I ask you, why do we whitewash them? Why don't we accept our forebears, foibles and all?

We, from our vantage point, pretend that life isn't messy and if it is, well, then, that's not the norm. We go around saying that families look like X and have Y kids and live in Z houses, etc. But, what if one of the messages our Torah is teaching is that a schmutzy life is actually the norm. Families are complicated and messy and sometimes terrible things happen. Maybe it is time we stop pushing the untidy bits under the rug, hiding them in our closets and begin to embrace our not-so-pretty parts.

My childhood did not look like that of many in our community. I knew from an early age that my life story was not the same as my friends. I knew that life was messy. And I knew fairly quickly that this was not something people spoke freely about. It was whispered behind closed doors, around corners or not talked about at all.

But, I also knew that my life was not bad. It wasn't typical, true, but I had a safe space to live in, food to eat and people to look out for me.

I knew the difference between looks of pity and embraces of love and acceptance. It wasn't difficult to choose where I felt most comfortable.

If you've gotten to know me at all, you know that I am pretty much an open book. I will share my stories if you ask, but I don't usually go around blurting them out all the time.

Except now.

I would like to introduce you to my parents and one of my sisters who have come here from Florida to visit. Wave "hi". Now, those of you who are keen in the audience are going to catch on and say, "Wait, didn't her mother just die?" Rather than explaining this 50 times during kiddush, I thought I would bring it up now. It isn't something that usually comes up so quickly in a new community, but here we are. The short story; families are complicated. The slightly longer version; in my teens when I needed help, this amazing couple stepped in, took me into their family, and over the last few decades, with dedicated effort we have forged a strong family bond.

My story, though complicated, turned out alright. I was lucky. I had grit. I had determination and wits. AND I had a lot of people looking out for me.

Not everyone is as lucky.

October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. JCADA the "Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse" asked clergy across the Greater Washington DC area to talk about their organization and to speak out against domestic violence this Shabbat, the Purple

Shabbat. Being new to the area, I did a little research and from what I have learned, JCADA is doing some wonderful work. In addition to the bathroom signs that hopefully you have seen discreetly offering help and assistance to those in need, there are educational opportunities for a diversity of age groups. For an organization that has been around for just over 20 years, they are having a significant community impact.

From their website:

In just the last year, JCADA...

- Provided direct services to 1335 clients, an increase of 70%
- Engaged in 50% more victim and survivor advocacy efforts
- Experienced a 63% increase in clinical services for victims & survivors
- Provided healthy relationship education to 5,600 teens & adults, an increase of 24%

JCADA is succeeding because people are willing to step up and speak out. Domestic violence is one of the many areas of our lives that need to be brought out of the shadows. There are so many who are afraid to talk about what is not clean and pretty in their lives. Mental health, non-binary relationships, reproductive struggles are just some of the other topics that we can do a better job of creating comfortability within the Jewish community as a whole. We don't need to just create safe spaces, we need to be a safe space. The messy and complicated, those things that are regulated to the dark corners or swept under the rug are the very things that by not speaking about them bring shame and fear. In contrast, we can create a community that lifts us up, that holds and comforts us. By bringing it out into the light, we can begin the process of healing.

I can stand here now and tell you that I am very proud of my complicated background. It has made me who I am, schmutz and all. The Mishneh Torah based on a passage in the Talmud (Berachot 58b) says: One who sees...people whose physical nature is distinct recites the blessing, "Blessed are you, God, Sovereign of all worlds who creates variety in life." (...*mishaneh et ha-briot*) What if we take it one step further? We know we are made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Now, I would like to add that each of us is distinct, different and messy. In fact, God is both perfect and, quite honestly, another message that we can learn from this week's parsha, God is a little messy. When we look at each other, we can see that we are indeed made in the image of God, perfect in our messiness.

My pledge is to be there for whoever needs it, to create a space that is welcoming and embracing. Families are complicated! Life is schmutzy! Let's embrace the messy!