

Tiger Moms, Helicopter Moms and Jewish Moms: What Judaism Can Teach Parents

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When you buy a TV, a cellphone, a car, or any other major appliance you get a user's manual. But as has often been noted, a baby does not come with any instructions or guidebook. If you are lucky, you might get a few discount coupons for diapers when you leave the hospital with your little bundle of joy, but that's about all you get, which is why, like most baby boomers, I was raised by Dr. Spock.

In truth, of course, I was raised by my parents. But when I was in my formative years, and for many decades, Dr. Benjamin Spock's "Baby and Child Care," was the second best-selling book after the Bible. At a time when there was little competition or other alternatives, it was the Bible my parents and most parents of that generation turned to and relied upon for child-rearing guidance.

Today we proclaim, "*Hayom harat olam*: today the world was created" because on Rosh Hashana we celebrate the creation of the world, the birth of the first person, and thus of humanity. In fact, the one thing all the Scriptural readings for the holiday have in common is that they all have to do with birth, children and parents. In today's Torah reading, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Tomorrow we read about Abraham and Isaac's father-son "road-trip" to Mt. Moriah. Today's haftarah from the Book of Samuel is about the birth of Samuel. Tomorrow's reading from the Prophets includes the famous image of Rachel weeping for her children, all of which compels us to focus on a central theme of the holidays, the gift of life.

It is no coincidence that these are the readings chosen by our rabbis for the New Year. Part of the pull and attraction of the Rosh Hashanah holiday is that it is the story of families, of our family, of your family, of the family of the Jewish people, of the family of humanity.

This being the Washington, D.C. area, where transparency and full disclosure is expected, I suppose I should disclose that I am thinking about the subject of children and childrearing and speak about it this Rosh Hashana not just because the theme of all the Torah and haftarah readings is birth. My interest is also prompted by the fact that just two months ago, my oldest son Ezra and his wife Julie gave birth to their first child, a baby boy.

In contrast to when I was growing up, when the choices were limited, they have many choices. In recent years there has been a plethora of articles, blogposts and books offering parenting advice. As Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young sing, "you must have a code that you can live by."

There no longer is just one code.

One alternative to Dr. Spock's permissive doctrine was first mentioned in an article by psychologist Haim Ginott. Quoting a teenager who spoke about his parents "constantly hovering over him," Ginott coined the term, "helicopter parents." The phenomena entered our lexicon and became more well-known as millennials started coming of age and going off to college in the early 2000's.

It refers to being involved in a child's life in a way that is controlling, overly protective and omnipresent. In elementary school, helicopter parents may try to ensure a child has a certain teacher or coach, or provide inappropriately disproportionate assistance for homework and school projects. These

parents do not hesitate to complain to coaches, teachers or others if they feel their child has been treated unfairly.

In case you are wondering whether or not you are a helicopter parent, here are a few tell-tale signs:

When you put your child on the bus to go to school, you go on the bus with your kid, and before letting the driver move, you check to be sure your child's safety belt is securely fastened.

Another sure indicator is if --

You have your child wear a helmet to bed, in case he should fall out of bed. And the funny thing is, just to be on the safe side, the child's mattress on the floor.

It is no wonder that this style of attention can be so smothering it is sometimes confused with a closely related style, called Velcro parenting. As the name implies, these parents do not let go of their children. While it is generally good to remain involved in a child's life, there are a number of problems with being so attached.

Parents who do tasks for their children, even long after the children are capable of doing things on their own, and who intervene excessively in school and social interactions ultimately do their children a disservice. By trying to avoid and shelter them from failure or disappointment they leave them unprepared for the realities, vicissitudes and exigencies of life.

If the parent is always there to clean up a child's mess--or prevent any problem from ever occurring in the first place, the child will not be prepared to cope when loss, disappointment, or failure occur, as inevitably, they will. Children who are coddled and have always had their social, academic, and athletic lives adjusted and taken care of by their parents can become narcissistic, accustomed to always having their way and may develop a sense of entitlement, accompanied by a lack of compassion or understanding of others.

Although the crises of childhood may seem grave and life-threatening, and you might think they demand your intervention, chances are they do not. Dr. Deborah Gilboa, founder of AskDoctorG.com, writes that, "many of the (very) consequences [parents] are trying to prevent--unhappiness, struggle, not excelling, working too hard, not having guaranteed results--are actually all great teachers for kids" for they build character and resilience.

Psychologist Dr. Ann Dunnewold says that despite the best of intentions to help their children, the technique can backfire, depriving children of learning the skills necessary to succeed in life. "The underlying message it sends to kids, is 'my parent doesn't trust me to do this on my own,' which can lead to a lack of confidence and low self-esteem." One study by the University of Mary Washington confirmed that children raised this way have higher levels of anxiety and depression because they feel less prepared to deal with the stresses of everyday life.

This tendency to be so concerned with a child's feelings and wanting to shelter them from any disappointment is why nowadays every kid on the team gets a trophy. Earlier this summer Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison, returned the trophies given to his children that were not earned because as he said, they were not deserved. He wanted them to learn that in the real world you get rewarded for effort and results, not just for showing up.

Just as these parents had not hesitated to protest and contest a poor grade or report card, as millennials enter the workforce there are reports of parents calling bosses to complain about their child's

performance review or if they feel the salary increase was inadequate. I once saw a cartoon of a staff meeting in a Board room. With graphs and charts all pointing downward, the boss says to everyone sitting around the table, "If we can't find a way to increase profits and cut costs, I'm going to call each of your mommies."

And then there is helicopter parenting on steroids, what is called, "tiger moms." Inspired by a book by Amy Chua called "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom", this strict disciplinarian style places an extreme emphasis on outcome and results. Listen to what Chua wrote about how she handled a daughter's subpar piano performance. "I hauled Lulu's dollhouse to the car and told her I'd donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn't have 'The Little White Donkey' perfect by the next day.

"When Lulu said, 'I thought you were going to the Salvation Army, why are you still here?' I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was purposely working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn't do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic." They then continued working right through dinner without letting her daughter get up for anything, not even for a bathroom break.

When the ordeal was finally over, Chua says her daughter was "beaming" after she finally mastered the piece and "wanted to play [it] over and over."

I don't know about you, but this is so intense my stomach is churning and getting tense just reading this passage.

On the opposite end of the spectrum of helicopter, Velcro and Tiger Moms is a term I used to think referred only to gourmet chickens and eggs. A source of a great deal of controversy in recent months, the style is known as "Free Range Parenting." The antithesis of overly protective parents, it has been in the news a great deal recently because Takoma Park resident Danielle Meitiv has been cited by the Maryland Child Protective Service for letting her children ages 10 and 6, play in the neighborhood playground without any adult supervision and to walk home from the park alone, without either parent present.

Contending that she is not being irresponsible, Meitiv and other proponents justify their approach by saying that free-range parenting encourages independence. Like anything taken to the extreme, there are concerns, in this case for the children's safety and well-being, which is why she has run afoul of the Maryland Child Protective Service. One critic compared turning kids loose to roam unmonitored through unknown (and potentially dangerous) territory to signing your kids up to compete in the *Hunger Games*.

A related style, and also in contrast to the intensity of Tiger Moms and helicopter parents is what Pamela Druckerman an American who lives in Paris advocates in her book, "Bringing up Bebe." She observed that French parents are not as anxious and uptight about their children as Americans. They don't obsess about giving their kids a head start or making their children into prodigies. She noticed that French parents let their children play on their own and ignore many of their requests rather than give immediate gratification and suffocate them with attention. Consequently, the children appear to be much calmer, well-adjusted, less demanding and more laid back than American kids, especially at meal times. A review of *Bringing Up Bebe* in the *Chicago Tribune* summed up the approach by saying: "French women don't have little bags of emergency Cheerios spilling all over their Louis Vuitton handbags."

According to Druckerman the children are not over-programmed and French parents are more relaxed and less anxious. With lower expectations and less demands placed on them, she contends they turn out

less spoiled and impetuous and better prepared to handle the world. But as one product of this style wrote, it can engender feelings of insecurity and of being deprived of love and support. She asks, “what happens to a child who grows up wondering why their parents were never there for them and who was expected to do everything on their own?”

With these and so many other options, what is a parent to do and how to choose?

Whatever you do, I suggest you be careful and exercise caution in the choices you make. In 2011 two children raised in a \$1.5 million suburban Chicago home sued their mother for bad mothering. To bolster their case, the suit, which was filed on their behalf by their father, who happens to be the woman’s former husband, alleged that among the causes for the emotional distress they endured were a birthday card the mom had sent her son which failed to include cash or a check. When they were growing up she had forced them to wear seat belts, refused to take them to car shows, had the audacity to call them at inconvenient times to make sure they were okay and insisted on a midnight curfew for her daughter on the night of her high school homecoming. You’ll be relieved to hear, the kids lost the case.

So which approach is the best? We are not the first generation to grapple with this question. In the Book of Judges, Manoah, the father of Samson asks for instructions from God as to how to act with the child born to him, and what rules to follow.

There are aspects of all of these approaches found in Jewish literature. The much-maligned classic Jewish mother can often encourage confidence and inspire aspirations, for they instinctively understood the need to balance the notion of independence and responsibility, of accountability and autonomy.

Granted, they can go a little overboard, but as my mother would probably have said, “A little guilt never hurt anyone too much.” Here are five things you will never hear a Jewish mother say:

- Mother’s Day, Shmother’s day. Don’t worry about me. Go to the beach with your friends. As long as I know you are having fun and enjoying yourself, I’ll be happy.
- Don’t bother wearing a jacket. If you say it’s not cold outside, I believe you.
- I don’t have a tissue with me. Go ahead, just use your sleeve.
- If your friend Johnny’s mom said it’s okay, then that’s good enough for me.
- You don’t have to call every day. Not even once a week. I know and understand how busy you are in your new job.

While there is no single Jewish approach, and most Jewish sources usually advocate for moderation in most matters, we do have a guide, a manual, a bible, and actually, it is -- the Bible. The root for the word Torah is the same root as the words for “parent”, for “teacher” and “instruction”, symbolizing that the role of the parent is sacred. It is to teach, instruct and guide their children on the proper path.

“The *v’ahavta* commands: “*v’shinamtem levanecha*: you shall teach them diligently to your child.” This is why if parents are present when a child recites the *birkat hamazon* blessing, he blesses *avee moree*, my father, my teacher and *imee moratee*, my mother, my teacher. A parent deserves and earns a child’s respect by virtue of being a teacher and for imparting wisdom to their child, not by being the child’s friend.

I fully recognize that many of the parenting models in the Genesis stories are problematic, for most are examples of how not to raise a child. In the household of Abraham’s son, Isaac, he and Rebekah each

has a favorite child. Isaac loves Esau and Rebekah favors Jacob. Jacob perpetuates the mistake his parents made by showing favoritism towards one of his children, his son Joseph. In each instance the result is disastrous for the family and the individuals, reminding us that we all are imperfect.

Fortunately there are other more positive models elsewhere in the Bible and Talmudic literature.

The famous passage in the Haggadah about the Four Sons, or the Four Children presents four different answers for each of the four children, offering one of the most obvious and basic, but often overlooked insights Judaism has to offer. Just as the same answer is not given to each of the four children, one style of parenting does not fit all and will not work for all of your children. We must realize that each child is different, and unique. I remember when our four children were younger we had to tell one of them to do more homework, and one to do less. One we never had to tell anything, and the other one didn't care what we said.

Nevertheless, whatever approach you decide to take, and you may and probably should take different ones with different children, the rabbinic commentary on the troubling passage about the *ben sorer*, the rebellious child enjoins parents to speak with one voice when disciplining their child. Remarkably, 2,000 years ago the rabbis recognized the importance of consistency and of parents supporting and not contradicting each other.

But perhaps the most significant contribution Judaism can make to the subject is to understand what should be important in life. One of the problems with most of the parenting advice given today is that the emphasis is on achievement and results. Success is judged primarily by the accomplishments of the child.

One of the worst things a teacher can say about a child is that they are average. That is why Garrison Keillor's program on Public Radio opens, "Welcome to Lake Wobegone, where all the children are above average." If a child is not doing well in school, teachers will say a child is not reaching or working to his full potential. I remember I used to love when my teachers said I wasn't working up to my full potential. There may have been a little bit of Bart Simpson in me, because I always felt it meant the only way I could go is up.

As Jews we believe that the things we are supposed to teach our children about life include our obligation to work for *tikun olam*, to make the world a better place, and to have the tools and moral and ethical compass to know to do the right thing.

Whatever we do, our love should not be conditional or dependent upon performance. We learn from the example shown by God. When the children of Israel strayed from the path, as they often did, God who was likened by the prophets to a loving parent still loved them. A Chasidic story is told about a woman who approached her rabbi troubled because her son did not profess belief in God. The rabbi asked her if she loved her son. She said she did. He then said to her, "So go and love him even more."

We parents should show our love by being more concerned about what we want our children to become, not in terms of their career paths, but in terms of the kind of people we want them to be, the values we wish to impart and for them to live by, and how they will treat and care for others. We should be as afraid of the dangers of emptiness, meaninglessness and excessive materialism as we are of strangers.

Live your life in a way so that your children will know that you care about them and that you care about more than just their intellectual achievements and whether or not they made the soccer or cheerleading

team. Show you care about their spiritual development and want children who don't just feel good about themselves, but who want to do good. This is one of the reasons why parents need to fight that battle and insist that their children continue their religious education after their bar or bat mitzvah.

We should want our children to have the tools to be decent, honest, considerate people, individuals of integrity who treat others kindly. We need to raise people who have a commitment to community, a sense of responsibility, and who will care about their obligation to perpetuate the Jewish people. Judaism and the *Yamim HaNoraim*, help us understand this is how we will be judged.

Parenthood is an endless series of small events, periodic conflicts and sudden crises and challenges, all of which call for a response. Our response should be guided by Jewish teachings and about more than just helping them get into a good college so they can get a good job so they can drive a nice car.

Judaism teaches that we are called upon to be God's partners, partners in perfecting the world. What an amazing, noble gift!

Our role should be to help develop a sense of purpose and meaning; to cultivate caring human beings, thereby fulfilling our purpose and creating a better world.

How do we do that?

The verse in the *v'ahavta* commands us to teach our children and goes on to say, "*vedebartem bam*: you shall speak of them", which I take to mean that Jewish teachings should permeate your discourse. It continues, "*bashivtecha bevetecha uvelechetecha baderech* – when you are at home, and when you are away." Being Jewish can and should be a constant part of your life, at all times, wherever you may be.

When you show kindness to others, and act with patience and generosity, you are displaying Jewish virtues. When you do not gossip or speak ill of others, you are modeling Jewish ethics. When you perform Jewish rituals, such as observing Shabbat, you are passing on to your children a precious legacy. When you come to shul with them you are teaching them that being a part of the Jewish community matters to you, as does gratitude, and being connected to our traditions and to a Divine Being.

When you take an adult education class, you show that learning about Judaism is richly rewarding, never ends, and is a lifelong process.

When you observe kashrut, you show that you have a sense of discipline, that not all is permitted and that you value and respect the traditions of your ancestors.

When you go to a minyan and services to say kaddish for a parent on their *yahrzeit* and regularly the year after they died, you show that you respect and honor your parents, as you expect them to do for you.

When you take a stand and insist that they continue to do something Jewish, whatever it may be, after their bar or bat mitzvah you show that you cherish and value being Jewish, and that it really wasn't just about the party.

When you put them to bed at night and say the *shema* or pray with them, you are instilling a sense of wonder and appreciation for the magnificent world God has created.

When choosing a college, you can insist that it have a Jewish population. And, unless they are paying for their education, you have the right to insist that they go to Hillel, and take at least one course in Jewish studies.

And finally, you can let them know it is important to you that they marry someone who will be committed to living a life that will ensure Jewish continuity, with whom they will be able to share the beauty of our traditions so that Judaism and the Jewish people will live on in them and through them.

Whatever you do Jewishly, you are teaching that Judaism is important to you, that your heritage plays a role in your life and is relevant to you and can be to them.

A story is told about the Zhitomer rabbi who once was walking with his son when they noticed a drunken father and his drunken son in the road. The rabbi said to his son, "I envy that father. At least he has accomplished his goal of having a son like himself. I can only hope that the drunkard is not more successful in training his son than I am with you."

The story of the Jewish family begins when Abraham is instructed by God to leave his native land and his father's house "*beit avecha*." He is told to go to a land that God will show him. Our sages ask: why the redundancy? If he is leaving his native land, by definition he was leaving his father's house. I have heard many commentaries and read many explanations on this passage. But my favorite one was the one I heard from a nine year old child who pointed out that the text says Abraham left his father's house, but not his father. Meaning that although he physically left his father's house, he never left his father, for he carried with him what he had learned from his father, who he always loved.

Perhaps the reason I love and cherish this interpretation so much is because the child who taught me this *chiddush*, (this insight) was my son Ezra when he was nine years old. And so that is my prayer for you dear son, now that you are a father, and for all of us as well.

May your child, and may all our children carry the messages they learn from us with them, wherever life will carry them. May we be good teachers and teach the children well. And may we be worthy of their love and respect.

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