

ROSH HASHANA AM SERMON 5774: HAPPY FAMILIES
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

I'm sure many of us can relate to the following story:

"I hit the breaking point as a parent a few years ago.

It was the week of my extended family's annual gathering in August,

and we were struggling with assorted crises. My parents were aging;

my wife and I were straining under the chaos of young children;

my sister was bracing to prepare her preteens for bullying, sex and cyberstalking.

Sure enough, one night all the tensions boiled over. At dinner,

I noticed my nephew texting under the table. I knew I shouldn't say anything,

but I couldn't help myself and asked him to stop. Ka-boom!

My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child.

My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses.

My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes,

everyone had fled to separate corners. Later, my dad called me to his bedside.

There was a palpable sense of fear I couldn't remember hearing before.

"Our family's falling apart," he said. "No it's not," I said instinctively. "It's stronger than ever."

But lying in bed afterward, I began to wonder: Was he right?"

The problem of dysfunctional families is nothing new. Our Tanakh is filled with tales

of sibling rivalry, of parental favoritism, of familial discord. Take the scene

in this morning's Torah portion. Abraham gets a message from God:

Take your son and sacrifice him. Now remember, this is a son he and Sarah have been awaiting for many years. To their great distress, Sarah is initially barren. But God finally “opens her womb,” and she and Abraham become the parents of Isaac, the heir to the covenant. So Isaac is a very precious gift. Nonetheless, Abraham is so eager to obey God, he rises early in the morning, saddles up his donkey, and leaves immediately with his son Isaac. He does not even advise, much less consult, with his wife Sarah who is, presumably, still asleep. He places the wood for the burnt offering on his son’s shoulders as they make their way up the mountain, then ties Isaac onto the wood pile, lifting his knife over his body. Only at the very last minute does an angel tell him to stop. Indeed, the angel has to call him twice, so intent is Abraham on following God’s command. Of course, on a purely literal level this story is horrifying, and is not one that resonates for us today. We don’t sacrifice animals, much less children, on fiery altars. But this story is still a cautionary tale. Indeed, don’t we know plenty of parents who DO sacrifice their children in other ways? By prioritizing work over family, by insisting that a child live out a parent’s own fantasies, by placing the parents’ own needs above those of their children? So why is this in the Torah, and why did the rabbis choose it for our reading on Rosh Hashana? I think the Torah is very realistic, and presents people, even our heroes, the way they are, not the way we want them to be. Abraham and Sarah are models to emulate in terms of their hospitality and their faith in God. But the Akedah – the binding of Isaac -- is the Torah’s way of telling us how NOT to run a family.

As we begin the new year, we read this tale as a reminder that we need to pay attention to our actions on a number of scores, in particular our actions towards those who are closest and dearest to us.

Now our Torah offers more than just warnings about bad behavior. In fact, our tradition has very sound advice about good parenting too. The Talmud¹ tells us that, on the most basic level, a father must give his son a ritual circumcision, must teach his child Torah, must marry him off, and must teach him a trade by which he can earn a living. According to some opinions, a parent must also teach a child how to swim. A parent must balance discipline with caring and compassion, as the Talmud says, "pushing away with the left hand while drawing closer with the right..."² A good parent should be flexible, or in the words of the Talmud, a person should never be as inflexible as a cedar tree but pliable as a reed.³ A Jewish parent should also bring up each child according to his or her unique personality, character traits and talents.⁴ This kind of advice, though written over 1,500 years ago, is surprisingly modern.

Bruce Feiler, whose family story I related a moment ago, did extensive research on the subject of how families could work better. The key question he tried to answer was:

"What is the secret sauce that holds a family together?" Feiler interviewed

"families, scholars and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game designers to Warren Buffett's bankers." The result is his recently published book,

The Secret of Happy Families. Many of his findings parallel the wisdom of the Jewish tradition.

Feiler divides the book into three sections: 1) *Adapt all the time*. 2) *Talk. A lot.* and 3) *Get out there and do*.

¹ BT Kiddushin 29a

² BT Sanhedrin 107b

³ BT Ta'anit 20a

⁴ Proverbs 22:6. These Jewish parenting sources are from My Jewish Learning.

Research about the state of the American family will come as no surprise: today's family is highly stressed. A third of all children live in homes led by single parents who often have to work two or more jobs to put food on the table and a roof over their children's head. In the majority of two-parent families, both parents work. Most of us are working harder and longer, ending the day exhausted and overwhelmed. When parents are stressed, their children are too. A survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute, came to an unexpected conclusion when they asked children, "If you were granted one wish about your parents, what would it be?" Children did not respond by saying they wanted to spend more time with their parents. Rather, their "number one wish was that their parents were less tired and less stressed."⁵ In order to lessen family stress, author Feiler offers the following suggestions. First of all, he attributes a great deal of stress to change. For example, just when the kids "start putting themselves to bed, they begin having homework and needing their parents' help."⁶ Families need to become more adaptive to change – change inside and outside the family, he says -- just the way businesses have had to adapt to the global marketplace. Remember the Talmud's advice about being as flexible as a reed? Feiler calls this "agile development," which, in a family context, involves "a weekly review session built on the principle of 'inspect and adapt.'"⁷ During the session, family members ask each other the following three questions: "1) What have you done this week? 2) What are you going to do next week? and, 3) Are there any impediments in your way we can help you with?"⁸ The meeting should be conducted on democratic principles, not on the old fashioned hierarchical model so many of us grew up with.

⁵ Feiler, *The Secret of Happy Families*, p. 16.

⁶ P. 16.

⁷ P. 22.

⁸⁸ P. 22.

Feiler suggests that parents acknowledge their children's rights and responsibilities as autonomous individuals, and then devise meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways for their kids to contribute as responsible members of the family team.⁹

For example, children might choose their own reward and punishment.

These sessions accomplish several goals: One, they show that solutions do exist.

Two, most importantly perhaps, they empower children because they participate with their parents in solving problems. Research shows "that kids who plan their own time, set weekly goals, and evaluate their own work build up their prefrontal cortex and other parts of the brain that help them exert greater cognitive control over their lives."¹⁰

The Talmud also advised parents to prepare their child for adulthood though its recommendations – to teach the child a trade and to swim – were more appropriate for its own time. Feiler says that the third benefit of these weekly sessions is that they create a "safe zone" where differences can be overcome. This is the model of the traditional *beit midrash*, the house of study, where Jewish scholars engage in discussions, honoring and respecting diverse opinions.

The family meeting also gives parents and children an opportunity to speak and interact with each other, a benefit that shared meals provide as well. Unfortunately, in the frantic lives we all lead, "fewer and fewer families are actually eating dinner together."¹¹

This is particularly alarming when you take into account the fact that, according to one survey, "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."¹²

⁹ Julie Stevens review, <http://www.csee.org/products/299>.

¹⁰ P. 29.

¹¹ P. 35

Of course, realistically speaking, we can't always manage to share meals with our families.

That doesn't mean we should jettison the whole idea. Laurie David, who wrote

The Family Dinner, suggests some alternatives to having dinner together every night:

- Aim for once a week.
- Aren't home from work early enough? Gather everyone at 8:00 PM for dessert, a bedtime snack, or just a chat about the day
- Weekdays too busy? Aim for weekends.
- Don't have time to cook? Try Leftover Mondays, Chinese Takeout Tuesdays, or breakfast for dinner.¹³

I have another suggestion, one that is hiding in plain sight. Judaism already has the perfect solution. It's called Shabbat. Shabbat, that day for reflection, renewal and repast. Time to stop the noise and distraction of our everyday lives, to call a halt to electronics and media, to errands and consumerism, to just BE with each other, offering gratitude for what we have been given. Shabbat is a time to focus on what is really important – that is, our relationships with one another. It is a time to really listen to and hear one another, to share the joys and the travails of the week. On Shabbat, it is actually a mitzvah to eat three meals, so there is ample opportunity for family and friends to dine together. Now I realize that it may be a tall order to devote a full 24 hours to the Sabbath, especially if you haven't ever been able to do so. So try half a day, or even just a couple of hours – or try out Laurie David's suggestion and do a dessert Shabbat. It will undoubtedly make a very big difference in how you approach the rest of the week – as well as how you interact with the members of your family.

So, once you sit down together, what should you talk about? Feiler suggests that you "aim for 10 minutes of quality talk per meal," that you "Let your kids speak at least half the time," that you play word games to expand your children's vocabulary, and that you share with each other the stories of your lives.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, he says,

¹² P. 35.

¹³ P. 38

“The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.” Feiler was introduced to this idea by two psychologists at Emory University, who discovered that, “The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.” In other words, they were better able to cope with stress and the challenges they faced. This conclusion is based on a study in which children were asked questions such as:

“Do you know where your grandparents grew up?

Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school?

Do you know where your parents met?

Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?

Do you know the story of your birth?”

The children who were best able to answer these questions were better able to cope with life’s vicissitudes. Why would that be? “The answers have to do with a child’s sense of being part of a larger family...children who have the most self-confidence...know they belong to something bigger than themselves.”¹⁵

I would like to suggest that, in addition to sharing the story of your family’s history with your children, sharing the master narrative of the Jewish people will also provide them with a solid foundation with which to face life’s challenges. After all, our survival as a people

¹⁴ Pp. 45-49.

¹⁵ The New York Times, The Stories That Bind Us, by BRUCE FEILER

owes a lot to the stories we have recorded in the Torah and the many interpretations our sages have offered over hundreds of years. Indeed, stories are a particularly Jewish way of understanding our world and of coping with our trials and tribulations. Telling the story of our people has kept us going from generation to generation.

As Rabbi Ed Feinstein tells us, “Jewish faith is built of memories...Even the Torah reading today...[is] about Abraham and Sarah, about family memories. The most important ritual in Jewish life is the Passover Seder.” And what happens at a Seder? “When your child asks, what does all this mean? ...you will tell your child...[the story of what] God did for me when I went out of Egypt...” Your children will be strengthened by their connection to this sacred past and to their place in this chain of tradition.

Finally, author Feiler suggests that families write a mission statement, creating family rituals and traditions to support them. Some examples: annual ski trips or family reunions, and praying together.¹⁶ In fact, according to scientific studies, there is a direct “correlation between religiosity and happy families. The more committed families are to a religious or spiritual tradition, the happier they are.”¹⁷ There are several reasons for this.

First is the connection to community. Second is that “Religion cultivates a sense of generosity.”¹⁸ Third is that religion promotes forgiveness which “deepen[s] empathy.”¹⁹

And fourth is “resilience” because “the language of faith continually reminds people they can recover from suffering.”²⁰

¹⁶ Pp. 59-61.

¹⁷ P. 155.

¹⁸ P. 156

¹⁹ P. 157.

²⁰ P. 157.

So today, as we listen to the Shofar, let us think of its blasts as a call to come together, to remember who we are as a people, as a family and as a community.

Let us recall the stories in our tradition and in our own lives that have made us and kept us strong. And let us commit to spending more quality time and to breaking bread, with those we love the most.