

Saving the Children

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Rosh Hashanah Morning 2018

One of my very first experiences as a rabbi was with a young woman, a teenager, who was being raised by her grandparents. Her mother, a kind of hippie, had left the area and had gone off to the west coast. Her grandparents were raising this young girl, but they were not having an easy time of it. The truth is, she was not unusually difficult for a teenager, but she was just too hard for them to handle. They made the difficult choice to place her in a residential treatment center for psychological help.

It fell to me, as her rabbi, to make a pastoral call. When I walked into the hospital ward, her psychologist greeted me, and he accompanied me to a conference room to meet with her. I knew the girl well, but he wanted to be there as well. He introduced the session by saying: “Well I’m glad Rabbi Gordon is here; he can talk about Jewish Values! He can tell you about the value of honoring your father and mother.”

I felt sandbagged. I didn’t know how to react so I responded intuitively—I asked, “Well, where do we get that rule?” The psychologist said “Well, from the Ten Commandments.” I asked “Well where did we get the Ten Commandments?” and he responded “From God.” And I asked “Well, who brought us those Ten Commandments from God?” and he answered “Moses.” Finally I asked “What is Moses’ life story?”

The psychologist answered, “Well I don’t know what you mean,” so I said “Moses was an abandoned child.” I have to tell you that I really had never thought of Moses in this way It just came to me. And then the psychologist said, “Well, his mother just did that to save his life!” And I said, “Why else would a mother abandon her child?”

That was perhaps the first time I had ever seen how the biblical text could inform everyday life. This summer I gave a lot of thought to the issue of abandoned children. And in thinking about what I would say this Rosh Hashanah, I went back to the Biblical text and realized that if you study the Book of Genesis there is a continuing motif, a leitmotif, of abandoned children. The Jewish story starts with Abraham being told by God: “*Lech lecha me-artz’cha umi’moladet’cha, umibeit avicha*—Go forth from your land, from your parent’s home, and go to a place that I will show you.”

Abraham has to leave his father’s house, his birthplace, his parents. He’s uprooted. He is self-orphaned, and he goes to a new land, one that he knew nothing of. We just read the story of the Akedah, and you can read that in a different way too. Abraham forcibly separated Isaac from his mother, from Sarah. And the story continues in the next generation, as Rebecca is brought across the lines of tribal territories, leaving her family, coming to marry Isaac. And then she, when she feels her son Jacob is in danger, sends him across the vast desert to Haran, to Abraham’s original home, to the home of her brother Laban. Eventually Jacob returns and brings with him his wives and his children, leaving the home that they always knew. And then we have the story of Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph. It is not too radical to say that Joseph was trafficked by his brothers to the Midianite traders and smugglers.

It is a recurring, central theme and motif. Family separations, globe-trotting refugees, tribal territories crossed by immigrants, orphaned or self-orphaned. So this year, it is not surprising that many of us had visceral reactions and responses not only to this ancient story of the Akedah, but to what has happened in our own nation. I promised you that this would be a non-partisan High Holy Days, and this is not political in any specific way because this is not about Republicans or Democrats. I think all of us had the same kind of emotional response. The Obama administration was not perfect in terms of mass deportations that took place as well—so I don’t mean this in a partisan or political way. One can offer valid arguments on both sides of the immigration issue, on what to do about undocumented immigrants arriving at our borders. But forced separation of children from their parents tears at our hearts and our values. When you think about nearly 2600 children who were separated from their parents—there is something about our basic humanity, our basic sense of justice that objects to that.

There are still approximately 400 children not yet reunited with their parents, and that includes two dozen or so who are under the age of four or just turned two. I have a grandson who is four, and one who is two. I can't begin to imagine it, and I don't think you can either. Children placed in custody in New York, Chicago, or Minneapolis, and then whose parents are placed in custody and deported and can't be located—we know the long-term psychological impact of the trauma of separation. And so why do we have this kind of reaction? What is it that makes us feel something is morally wrong when that happens?

It is our basic empathy. Not all of us are parents or grandparents, but all of us were children. And you can see that with the three-year-old Syrian Kurdish boy, Alain Kurdi, lying on a Turkish beach, dressed like any child on the way to preschool. That's part of our humanity. We are supposed to protect children—that's our job. And that means Sandy Hook or Parkland, or children abused by the Catholic Church, which is being torn apart by the grand jury report from Pennsylvania—or in other institutions where this happens. We feel the trauma of children. And our own history has taught us about that as well. The immigrant experience did not just end with Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Rachel. My own grandparents—and I'm sure this is true for many of you as well—had come to America, but they had left their parents behind. It's a very typical immigration story, that orphaning that happens when you move from place to place, whether they were people escaping Eastern Europe and coming to America, or the teenagers who were the founders of the State of Israel. Mere teenagers. And we know through the Holocaust of the Kindertransport—children who were sent away by their parents so that they could attempt to survive. Think back to what the psychologist said to me long ago—“Why else would a mother abandon her children, other than to save them?”

So it's a question of what we stand for. What are our ultimate values of right and wrong, good and evil? That's the lesson of the Akedah. At the very end an angel calls out “*Al tishlach yadecha el ha'naar, ve al ta'as lo me'umah.*” —“Do not raise your hand against the boy, and do not do him even the slightest harm, not even a nick of the knife.”

In every generation, we have to hear the voice of that angel. Do not harm your children, or any children. Do not raise your hand against the most vulnerable. Protect these young lives, for those lives are sacred.

How many of you saw the little movie this summer “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Make sure you see it if you haven’t. It’s the story of Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers. A few of you may know that I worked for Fred Rogers—briefly, it was an internship during my senior year of college. I was looking around for what I wanted to do with my life, and one of those possibilities was potentially in education, whether in middle school or high school. As it turned out, I ended up teaching high school for two years before I entered Rabbinical school. At the University of Pittsburgh, where I went to school, about a block beyond the eastern edge of campus, is the headquarters of WQED—America’s first public television station. I went in, and I asked for an internship in education and media with Fred Rogers. My very first assignment for the job was to read the book “The Magic Years” by Selma Freiberg. Fred Rogers took child development seriously. He had studied with Benjamin Spock and Eric Ericson. He was deeply grounded in research in child development. He continued his own education by going to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and becoming a Protestant minister. For him, his show was an alternative to the Three Stooges, or Soupy Sales, or Roadrunner; but it also wasn’t Sesame Street. Fred Rogers thought it was fine for children to learn about numbers or letters, but that was not his interest. What he cared about was the well-being of children, that they felt loved and valued and safe. For Fred Rogers, children mattered. For those of us who went to that movie, you were probably surprised that you were crying—some of you may have even sobbed. What were the instincts that made people react to that movie in that way?

I think they were those same instincts that drove us to react to children separated from parents at the Mexico border. There is something in us that truly is goodness and caring and decency and humanity. We are people with empathy—we care. That’s what it means to be a human being. It might be tempting to dismiss Fred Rogers as a somewhat odd host of an inoffensive children’s show, but if you saw the movie, you also know that he was an activist. When there were issues of racial integration, he sat in a wading pool with Officer Clemens, who was the African-American policeman on his TV show. With Jeff Urlanger, a quadriplegic, he treated him as a whole human being, with deep respect. And then he sat before Senator John Pastore, in Congress, arguing for PBS funding. You saw that he was

a person who understood power as well. And this was his ministry—it was sacred, holy work. It was all about children.

If you're here and you join us for N'ilah at the end of Yom Kippur next week, after the final shofar blast we observe Havdallah—the separation of the holy and the profane, the sacred and the ordinary. The Havdallah ceremony concludes with the singing of the song that we also sing at Passover, and other times as well—Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the prophet. Elijah is the messiah's advanceman—Elijah comes first and then the Messiah follows. In Judaism and in Christianity, the concluding sentence of the book of Prophets that foretells the coming of the Messiah is a line from the prophet Malachi— “Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you, before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord.” Here is how the Messianic age is described: “He shall turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents.”

As a Reform Rabbi I use the term Messiah guardedly—I do not wait for a divine personal Messiah. But the Messianic age is a metaphor for a more perfect world, and we are the ones in partnership with God, engaged in a sacred task to repair the brokenness of our world. That is the Messianic vision. And how will we know when the Messiah comes, even if it's us? What's the description of a world that has become perfected? What will be the proof that we have repaired the brokenness and the imperfections? It is when our hearts turn to the children, and the eyes of the children are turned to us. Not abandoned, not separated from the ones who love them. Our hearts open to the cry of children and our strength committed to protect, nurture, and love them. That's the promise of the New Year. Our hearts turn to the children in our midst, and in the rest of the world—loving the world's children, no matter their color, religion, nationality, or refugee status. Only then will we bring Eliyahu Hanavi, Elijah the Prophet, into our world and into the New Year. So may it be for all of us and all the world a year of blessing.

Amen.