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But As For the Children

“Are we there yet?”

I am dreading that question. By this time tomorrow, I will be packed up and about to embark on a trip to Israel with our two youngest children. Sara and their older brothers have been there for almost two weeks and at last it will be our turn to join them. I lived for three years and I am beyond thrilled for the privilege of showing my children around Jerusalem for the first time.

But, before we get to Jerusalem, before we can land at Ben Gurion Airport, I need to chaperon a two year old and a seven year old on their first transatlantic flight. And so I am dreading the inevitable question of “are we there yet” or, even worse, “All done!” “All done” is not a question; it’s a demand.

Imagine being on a journey that you will never live to see completed. How would you motivate yourself to continue on the journey? How would you motivate yourself to get up in the morning? What would you say to a child who asked “are we there yet?”

Traveling with children is central to this parashah. After the spies deliver their slanderous report on the dangers waiting in Eretz Yisrael, the Israelite men panic. They are terrified, but they are not necessarily forthright in acknowledging the source of their terror:

וְלָמָּה ה' מְבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפְלֵי בְחָרָב נְשִׁינוּ וְנִטְפְּנוּ יְהִי לָנוּ הַלּוּא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִם׃
“Why is the LORD taking us to that land to fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be carried off! It would be better for us to go back to Egypt!”

See what happened? The fear and panic is expressed as a concern for their wives and their children. Is this sincere? It could be. There are brave people who are willing to face danger and pain and difficult situations but cannot tolerate the thought of children suffering. Or, maybe it is not fully sincere and the women and children are being used as an excuse. As if to claim, “I could handle this if it were just me alone, but I cannot condone women and children being placed in harm's way.”

Interestingly, the women, who seem to participate in this sin only rhetorically through the words of their husbands, are not mentioned again, but the children are mentioned again.

When God explains the severe punishment that will befall the generation of the desert, the fate of their children is prominent:

וְטַפְּכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם לָבוֹ יְהִי וְהִבִּיאֲתִי אֹתָם וְנִדְעוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מֵאֲסַתֶּם בָּהּ׃
וּפְגָרֵיכֶם אֲתֶם יִפְּלוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה׃

“Your children who, you said, would be carried off—these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected. But your carcasses shall fall in this desert.”

How to understand this rhetorical deployment of children? Is it ironic? As if to say, “you claimed to be worried about your children; when in fact your children will be the ones to enter Eretz Yisrael and not you.”

Perhaps not. It could be a sort of consolation. Children represent innocence. The threat of suffering children is intolerable - think of the magnificent scene in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* where Alyosha concedes that he would reject a world of total human happiness and eternal peace if building such a world required harming even one innocent child.

And children represent the future. The Israelite’s panicked at the thought that their own children might suffer and they are consoled when they find out that their children will, eventually, after 40 years, make it to Eretz Yisrael.

There is a song that is popular among religious communities in Israel, based loosely on a passage in the writings of Rav Kook, that expresses this idea:

עם הנצח לא מפחד מדרך ארוכה

“The eternal people will not be frightened by a long journey.”

A long journey can be frightening because we may not ever reach the destination. But if we are an eternal people, if we have faith that we are linked from generation to generation, then we are encouraged and strengthened by the knowledge that our children, or their children, will reach our goal.

The power of children to represent innocence on the one hand, and limitless potential for the future on the other, was on display across the United States this week. Immigration policy has become, for over a decade, among the hardest and most divisive political topics in the United States. I see no realistic path towards resolving that debate in the near future. But suffering children still have the capacity to pierce through the complexity and partisanship of right vs. left and remind us of the difference between right and wrong. Children should not suffer. Not, the Torah explicitly states, for the sins of their parents, and not, as Dostoyevsky writes, to pave the way to a supposed world of peace and happiness, and not to advance the policy dreams of any politician.

For all that is wrong in America, the enduring capacity of some core moral truths to awaken the consciousness of a diverse coalition of decent people is encouraging. How often do liberal activists share and celebrate the thundering moral condemnation of Russell Moore, the Evangelical religious leader? When was the last time that the ACLU endorsed the same policy as one of the most prominent anti-abortion activists in the country? When it happens, it’s a sign of moral clarity. It happens because we cannot reconcile images of suffering children with our conviction that children are innocent, and because a child’s life diverted to a place of tragedy and trauma is a diversion of the very future itself.

Just days ago, we encountered an extremely curious Talmudic passage in *Daf Yomi*. The Talmudic tractate *Arachin* (11b) tells of an encounter between two Levi’im, two Levites who were both serving in the Temple on the same day:

מעשה בר' יהושע בר חנניה שהלך לסייע בהגפת דלתות אצל ר' יוחנן בן גודגדא אמר לו בני חזור לאחוריך שאתה מן המשוררים ולא מן המשוערים

There was an incident involving Rabbi Yehoshua bar Ḥananya, a Levite, who went to Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Gudgeda, also a Levite, in order to assist in closing the doors of the Temple. Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Gudgeda said to him: My son, go back, as you are among the singers and not among the gatekeepers.

Apparently, there were two different roles that the Levites could play and those roles could not be filled by the same people. There were the **משוערים** the gatekeepers who made sure that gates were locked and secured when they needed to be and that nobody entered the wrong place at the wrong time and that decorum was preserved. And there were other Levites who were the **משוררים** the musicians and singers whose music was an indispensable part of the service in the Beit HaMikdash. A Levite who was among the **משוררים** could not go and serve among the **משוערים** even once, even for a day, because the enforcement of boundaries and decorum, and creating an environment of inspiration are two irreconcilable goals that must both be pursued, if they both must be pursued, by two different groups of people each focusing on promoting these values that are inherently in conflict.

Inspiration and decorum are both valuable but we cannot, it seems, promote both at the same time. Rabbi Brovender once “damned with faint praise” a certain shul that he visited by saying that “the great ma’aleh of this community was that there was no talking in shul.” Indeed, there were few extraneous conversations there. But there also was not a lot of heartfelt prayer or deep and profound Torah study. That community had **משוערים** but too few **משוררים**.

There are clear, black and white, halakhic prohibitions against extraneous conversations in shul, between Barchu and the end of Kadish Shalem, including the repetition of the amidah, during Torah reading, and at other times too. In addition, it is cruel, obtuse, and insensitive to engage in extraneous conversation during the Misheberakh for the sick or during mourners kaddish.

But the worst thing about extraneous conversations in shul are that they prevent prayer from happening in shul.

We can be **משוערים** or we can be **משוררים**. We can double down on decorum or we can invest in more singing, more sincere prayer, a stronger ethos of spirituality in our shul. I suggest that we focus most of our efforts on being **משוררים**.

Our children, thankfully, are not in immediate danger and we are, for the most part, empowered to expend every effort to keep them from suffering. We also do not face the prospect of wandering the wilderness for decades to come. But our children, the children in our households and the children of this congregation, are still the repository of all of our hopes for the future and the course of their lives will determine whether or not we were successful in propagating Judaism from one generation to the next.

For a decade or more, the shul has focused on creating positive and productive programs for children outside of shul while their parents pray and study Torah with other adults. We see the fruits of these efforts in the growing numbers of children each month who attend Tot Shabbat, Shabbat morning groups, or who are supervised by the babysitter in the playroom. In recent months, our shul has begun to pivot towards finding ways and age-appropriate times for bringing our children back into shul so they can participate in shul activities alongside their parents.

When we think of children in shul, let’s be **משוררים** and not **משוערים**. Let’s worry a little bit less about the inevitable noise that children make, and try to show them how much prayer means to us. Even the three or five or ten minutes between the moment when children come back to shul and when our tefilot end can mean so much to them if we seize those minutes as precious opportunities to sing Aleinu loudly and proudly with a child standing beside us, or to model how we show respect during mourner’s kaddish.

Wish me luck for tomorrow when I'm asked "are we there yet." But let's also think about whether, as a community, we have reached our destination. No. We aren't there yet. We have a ways to go. But I think our children will get there. And I hope and pray that we'll get there with them.