

Dads are No Joke

Parshat Noach - 5780

I'd like to begin with a joke. Here goes:

Q: Why do people in Athens sleep late?

A: Because dawn is tough on Greece!

Believe me, it was more painful for me to *tell* those jokes than for you to *hear* them. In the extended Rackovsky family, telling these kinds of jokes is guarantees a sentence of what we call “joke probation.” Further offenses warrant “joke prison” and even “Joke solitary confinement.” The kind of joke I’m describing is what is known as a “dad joke.” I don’t have to explain the features of a dad joke- you know that they usually involve a bad pun. Jewish dad jokes involve bilingual puns, like suggesting that mabul cake ought to be served on Parshat Noach. They are typically clean, and cause abiding embarrassment to children and other family members. The association of corny humor with Dads seems to be a more recent phenomenon, a manifestation of a newer Dad archetype. Modern dads are silly, kind of goofy, non-offensive, innocuous and inept, in the mold of

Homer Simpson, or desperately trying to be friends with their children, like Phil Dunphy of Modern Family. They are ciphers in their own home, people of no consequence whose opinions and actions are entirely irrelevant. Not only are fathers dimwitted and feckless, but their physique has also become a cultural trope; perhaps you've heard of the term "dad bod"- a term publicized by college student Mackenzie Pearson in 2015¹. It refers to a man who, while not overweight, carries a few extra pounds on his frame, may have poor posture and is generally unthreatening. And dads who are not portrayed this way are portrayed as emotionally volatile, manipulative and unavailable villains who play their children off one another, and view them as nothing more than a pawn in the chess match that is their life. These extremes are, of course, gross generalizations, but this is how fatherhood is typically portrayed in popular culture.

One of the puzzling aspects of Noach's long and storied career was his dramatic downfall. There is no other biblical figure who can be said to have saved the entire world. And yet, at the end of the parsha, we find him in a drunken stupor, thoroughly debased in the presence of his family. This is the final memory of the person once described as a *tzaddik*- a man who has now become the *ish ha'adamah*, a man of the soil, because that was where he wallowed. This dichotomy generated divergent views within *chazal* as to the

¹ <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/04/what-is-the-dad-bod-america-s-leading-expert-explains.html>

degree of Noah's righteousness. The midrash parses the words "צדיק תמים" - was he objectively righteous, or merely relatively so?

This question plagued Noah's children to an even greater extent.

They were eyewitnesses to his humiliation. How did they relate? How did they view their dad? The Torah tells us what they did- Cham having compromised his father's dignity in some way, while Shem and Yefet covered him with a blanket while looking elsewhere. The Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer expands upon Cham's actions:

פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק כג

וּנְכַנְס פְּנֵעַן וְרָאָה אֶת עֲרוֹת אָבִיו וְקָשַׁר חוּט בְּבִרְיָתוֹ וְסָרְסוּ וַיֵּצֵא וְהִגִּיד לְאָחָיו. נְכַנְס חָם וּמָצָא עֲרוֹת אָבִיו, וְלֹא שָׁם עַל לְבוֹ מִצֹּת כְּבוֹד אָבִי, יֵצֵא וְהִגִּיד לְשֵׁנֵי אָחָיו בְּשׂוֹק כְּמִשְׁחָק בְּאָבִיו. גָּעְרוּ בּוֹ אָחָיו, וְלָקְחוּ אֶת הַפְּסוֹת עִמָּהֶם, וְהִלְכוּ לָהֶם אַחֲרָנִית וְכָסוּ אֶת אָבִיהֶן

Cham looked at his father, and saw nothing more than a pathetic joke, perhaps even taunting and bullying his father. Shem and Yefet acted in stark contrast, seeing their father as a person still worthy of respect and reverence.

To be sure, Noah's conduct was hardly admirable, and he did not age well. Shem and Yefet decided that when confronted with their compromised, flawed father, they would not turn him into a punchline, dismiss him as an anachronism whose every movement was an exercise in bumbling stupidity. This was once the man who saved the world, and they were in his debt- as are we.

To a certain extent this is the very same dialectic that exists after every great watershed moment. Consider the Holocaust survivors, who were often emotionally fractured as a result of the trauma they suffered, and whose children had to bear the burden and the legacy of their parents' brokenness- but who built the institutions and families that are the backbones of our communities. Or consider the WWII veteran, someone who saw the horrors of German tyranny, who boldly risked it all, and who emerged with a gruff exterior, perhaps a drinking habit or somewhat antiquated views on race and gender- but who preserved our nation's survival. Each of these heroes of old entered the "Ark" and played their part during the "greatest generation". There are the single parents raising children on their own, often exhausted and perhaps a bit short-fused with their children and others because it is taking every ounce of their energy to hold a family together. When we take a snapshot of them in our mind's eye, what is it that we see? Which features do we emphasize or exaggerate, what is it that we ignore? If we find ourselves judging them by their lowest moments or current unpleasantness, it means we have lost track of the *tzaddik* in the *ish ha'adamah*.

How does a new generation relate to the ones who came before? We ask ourselves- why are these people worthy of our respect? They harbor

backward and antiquated views, they have rough edges. It is also the refrain of the energized “woke culture”, who boldly call out the misdeeds of the old and to display a deep sense of moral superiority in the process. In so doing, they are quick to forget that younger generations have the ability to make political, social and even religious strides only because of the efforts of those who came before us. R’ Yeshaya D’Trani in his responsa², written in the 12th Century, grappled with this very dilemma. Could he retain fealty to the chain of transmission of our tradition while preserving his intellectual integrity? What if he disagreed with the halachic views of someone who lived several generations before he did? Quoting from the philosophical teachings of his day, he provided the following parable (translation rendered by Rabbi Dr. Shnayer Leiman):

*“Who sees further: a dwarf or a giant? Surely a giant, for his eyes are situated at a higher level than those of the dwarf. But if the dwarf is placed on the shoulders of the giant, who sees further? ... So too we are dwarves astride the shoulders of giants. **We master their wisdom and move beyond it.** Due to their wisdom we grow wise and are able to say all that we say, but not because we are greater than they.*

The previous generation did much of the foundational work, the heavy lifting. Worrying about the dangers of alcohol, or his public persona, was not a luxury Noach could allow himself. Noach saved the world, so that the

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children can work on refining the human character; no doubt Shem, Cham and Yafet presented themselves much better in public, and took better care of their mental and physical health. Our difficulty in getting a minyan during the winter months is only because people who came before us struggled to get an Orthodox shul off the ground at all. Our struggles with the cleanliness of our building, and with inculcating in our children the values of *derech eretz* as they relate to our *mikdash me'at* and the people in it, are important; we need to do everything we can, *together*, to treat the physical building of our spiritual home with reverence and responsibility and to behave in it and towards it with *mentschlichkeit*. But these are struggles that we can only have because we are blessed to have children in shul, and a beautiful facility in which they can grow. For that, too, we have to thank the people who came before us- not just in Dallas, but across the country. I remember hearing stories about when my grandfather, Rabbi Dr. Isaiah Rackovsky z"l, was an Orthodox Rabbi from the 1930s through the 1970s. During his tenure, Orthodoxy was on the descent, its shuls typically the domain of the geriatric with children seldom found on the premises. My grandfather and his colleagues, and a host of lay leaders, worked tirelessly to reverse that trend, and to make sure Orthodoxy saw another generation- and they succeeded. Holocaust survivors who never thought they would see another Jewish child now watch their *frum* great grandchildren, *kein yirbu*, play without a care in the world; this is so extraordinary, yet it begets

another struggle. The American Jewish community as a whole grapples constantly with the dilemma of the “tuition crisis,” a problem cynically described as “Jewish birth control,” and people who make aliyah with larger families are labelled “tuition refugees.” The cost of Jewish education is a serious issue we need to address, but we also need to take a step back. Remember that three generations ago, there was no tuition crisis in America, because there were few Jewish schools, and virtually none outside New York. Thank God, we have schools- in many communities, like our own, we even have a choice in where to send our exorbitant tuition dollars. There are so many struggles we face that are luxuries compared to the ones fought by our forebears, and indeed, we can only face them because we stand on the shoulders of the struggles that preceded our own. In truth, every shul and family goes through this type of generational dissonance. Younger generations, as they seek new and meaningful opportunities for growth, must acknowledge the defining movements of their predecessors, imperfections and all. Failure to do so, to recognize those achievements, to preserve their dignity, will lead to the old-guard becoming just another dopey but innocuous, “Dad Joke”.

What is missing is a common language - a means whereby all people can communicate, and recognize each other’s merits and contributions. That common language can be a culture or a shared experience, but it is most

potent in the form of Torah study. Torah study can serve as the bridge between generations, and can provide a common denominator between politically divided, economically diverse and chronologically disparate people and communities. In a recent issue of the OU's Jewish Action, an article on Torah study after retirement highlighted the story of Mollie Fisch³. This Teaneck native has made Torah study a full time obsession. Each morning and evening she has found a shiur or chavrusa in which to immerse herself. From visiting lecturers to phone calls with Partners in Torah, there is not a moment in which she isn't engaged in Talmud Torah. That being said, to Mollie's greatest passion is the time that she has set aside to study with her grandchildren. To quote her "It's a way to look into a child's neshamah, and it results in a very lovely relationship." We don't have to look that far, though. Last night at dinner, Lilly Yalovsky shared a beautiful Dvar Torah she prepared based on the material she has studied together with her study partner for the past year- none other than her grandfather, Professor Morty Yalovsky. What other discipline in the world can bring the *souls* of a teenager and a grandparent together? Through studying Torah together, age melts away into irrelevance - wisdom coupled with enthusiasm, sacrifice with creativity, experience with energy. Maybe this is the way in which we can appreciate the opening verse of our parsha:

³ <https://jewishaction.com/religion/inspiration/after-retirement-a-new-stage-a-new-chapter-a-new-life/>

צִדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדוֹרָתוֹ

Noach's righteousness is only realized fully when it spans generations, and when his descendants are able to take the torch from his hand.