

**Erev Rosh HaShanah 5777**  
**The Art of Being a Jewish Mother**

When Jewish standup comedian Joel Chasnoff performed at Temple Sinai a few years ago, he shared with us the story of telling his grandmother about his exhilarating road trip along California's Pacific Coast Highway, one of the most scenic roads in the United States. He described the Highway's twisting, cliff hugging turns along mountains that plunge precipitously into the ocean. He painted striking images of its lazy stretches of shimmering asphalt along broad, sandy beaches and its leisurely meanderings through dense forests of oak, sycamore and redwood trees. He aroused the wafting aroma of the eucalyptus trees and the soft, misty fog of sea spray. Interrupting him abruptly before he could continue his travelogue, his grandmother asked frantically, "Joel, were you driving from Monterrey to Morro Bay, or from Morro Bay to Monterrey?" And here, with a feigned look of exasperation at having been cut off mid-story, the comedian asked the audience, "What's the matter with Grandma?" OOOH! I raised my hand to answer. I knew exactly what was going on in Grandma's mind. Driving north on the Pacific Coast Highway from Morro Bay to Monterrey is

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fine; but driving south is so dangerous! For a good stretch you're on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's white knuckle driving and there's no margin for error. One wrong move along that twisting, winding road and you'll fly right off, straight down into the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

I've never met Joel Chasnoff's grandmother, but we speak the same language: *mamaloshen*. Once upon a time *mamaloshen* referred to Yiddish; it probably still does. But I don't speak Yiddish or Jewish, as my grandparents called it. I know the difference between *knadl* and *kichel* and between *luckshen* and *latke*, but my knowledge of Yiddish is limited to food and a few body parts; not a *bisel* more. The *mamaloshen* I speak is the language of Jewish mother. There's an art to being a Jewish mother. My mother was Jewish, but she wasn't a stereotypical Jewish mother. I speculate that one doesn't have to be Jewish, or a mother, or even a female to be that kind of a Jewish mother.

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What kind am I referring to? The stereotypical Jewish mother is brassy and overbearing, she's smothering and tenacious. The stereotypical Jewish won't let her teenager out of the house on a sweltering 90-degree day without a hat, a full tube of sunscreen, and a 40-ounce water bottle. Why risk sun stroke or dehydration? She sends her child to college with enough *nosherie* to feed the entire dorm. What if there's a blizzard and the cafeteria is closed? The stereotypical Jewish mother packs her child off to a foreign country with a suitcase full of over-the-counter medicines. Try looking for Imodium when you need it! The stereotypical Jewish mother *pu-pu-pus* when something good happens: *Kenahorah pu-pu-pu*. Don't tempt the evil eye to spoil your good fortune! The stereotypical Jewish mother *pu-pu-pus* when something bad happens: *Kenahorah pu-pu-pu*. May the evil eye go away and stay away!

According to Marjorie Ingall, author of the recent bestseller Mamaleh Knows Best: What Jewish Mothers Do to Raise Successful, Creative, Empathetic, Independent Children, the Jewish mother portrayed in books,

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movies and on TV is a caricature. She was created in the 1950s and '60s by American authors and screenwriters as a comic foil. She makes us laugh. She makes us cringe. Does the stereotypical Jewish mother really exist? Most certainly, but despite how annoying she -- or he -- can be, we know that her or his intentions are for the best. *Kenahorah pu-pu-pu.*

Some pundits contend that the inspiration for the stereotypical Jewish mother is Sarah, the Biblical matriarch, wife of Avraham and mother of Isaac. Sarah isn't mentioned by name in the *Akedah*, which we'll read tomorrow. I'm not surprised she's not mentioned, and I'll tell you why in a moment. In the chapters of Genesis preceding the *Akedah* we see that perceived or real threats to Isaac's welfare trigger the Jewish mother in Sarah to emerge in full force. For example, when Hagar lords it over Sarah that she conceived and bore Avraham a child first, Sarah lets her know in no uncertain terms that that means *bupkis*, that Hagar is a *pisher*, and that she, Sarah, is the one and only wife in Avraham's tent. When Sarah observes Ishmael playing inappropriately with Isaac, she takes matters into

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her own hands and commands Avraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave will not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Gen 21:9-10). Sarah isn’t shy about using colorful language and derogatory names, especially when it comes to Hagar. It’s obvious from reading the texts that Sarah wore the pants in her family, which she probably did. No one messed with “The Sarah!” Had Sarah known what Avraham was up to regarding the binding of Isaac, you can be sure that she would have figured out a way to transform the goat-skin tent under which Isaac slept into an iron curtain separating Avraham from his son. The text of the *Akedah* anticipates Sarah’s reaction. We’ll read tomorrow how Avraham arose in the morning to prepare for his “outing” with Isaac. Some translators add the word “early” to this verse, suggesting that Avraham got up well before the break of dawn in order to sneak Isaac away before Sarah awoke, asked what all the futzing was about, and put her foot down, hard! Sarah was extremely protective of Isaac and for good reason. He was born to her late in life, and she felt responsible for his welfare, knowing that

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the fate of an entire nation rested on his shoulders. Did Sarah have just cause to be an overbearing and brassy Jewish mother when it came to Isaac's well-being? Absolutely, as should we all when the welfare of our loved ones or friends, and especially our children, is in jeopardy. If we don't act or advocate on their behalf, who will?

Despite the stereotype of the Jewish mother as an assertive, meddling, guilt-inducing *kvetch*, Jewish mothers -- and fathers -- throughout the centuries have done a pretty good job of parenting. Tractate Kiddushin (29a) of the Babylonian Talmud specifies three requirements for Jewish parents, and by parents our sages meant the entire community, as in "it takes a village." Jewish parents must teach their children Torah. Jewish parents must teach their children how to make a living. Jewish parents must teach their children how to swim. What do these three instructions have in common? They're all survival skills.

On Sunday mornings when our religious school students gather for *t'filah*, they recite a blessing thanking God for the opportunity to engage in

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Jewish learning. They join in the refrain, “Sweet as honey, sweet as honey, sweet as honey on our tongue.” Perhaps some of you recall beginning your own Jewish learning. Perhaps it was accompanied by a dollop of honey on your finger or a sugar cookie in the shape of a Hebrew letter. And from there it probably went downhill. Many of us grew up in a time when Jewish education tasted not like a Bit-O-Honey candy bar, but like the waxy paper in which it was wrapped. At Temple Sinai, our goal is to make Jewish learning fun and engaging. We don’t lob information at our students hoping that something will stick. Instead, we invite students of all ages, backgrounds, and cognitive and physical abilities to explore and to question, to experiment and to try out different ways of engaging in Jewish life. The Jewish mother in me wants more than this, however. I want everyone to love being Jewish. But how do I, how do you, teach others to love? By example. When we demonstrate our own passions for things Jewish, our kids and our community pick up on that. When we engage in *Torah lishma*, study for the sake of broadening our knowledge because we

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want to learn, they'll comprehend that education is a lifelong Jewish value.

When we volunteer with an organization whose cause we care about,

they'll understand that *tikkun olam*, doing what we can to make the world a better place, is a tangible way to make a hands-on difference in society.

When we celebrate the Jewish holy days and Festivals in our houses and in the synagogue, they'll appreciate that special times spent with family and friends are sacred. When we do Jewish things together, we form positive emotional attachments and enduring memories. Love for Judaism stems from these attachments and memories. These, in turn, provide a solid and enduring foundation for deeper learning, deeper spiritual commitment, and deeper historic connection to our heritage, to God, to Torah, to Israel, and to the Jewish people.

When my children were young I teased them that they couldn't get married until two criteria were met: they had to be able to tie their own shoes and they had to have a paying job. All three of my sons have accomplished the first task. The second is a work in progress. All in good

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time. I'm sure you've heard of parents going on job interviews with their adult children to tout their kids' expertise to potential bosses. My kids would *plotz!* I would *plotz!* So how does a Jewish mother teach her children to make a living? First, by nurturing their natural curiosity and second, by training them to be independent. As Miss Frizzle of the *Magic School Bus* series would say, "Take chances, make mistakes, get messy!" That's what life is all about. Being a Jewish mother means acknowledging that there are risks in life, but there also are wonderful opportunities! Our task is to be realistic about both the risks and the opportunities and instill in our children the courage to try new things and take chances. It's akin to letting them solo down the playground slide for the first time. With a little pep talk, a gentle nudge, and a whole lot of praying that they won't get hurt we let them go. Sometimes they'll land on their feet. Sometimes they won't, and when they don't, what does a Jewish mother do? Kiss the booboos, wipe away the tears, and plop the kid back atop the slide. That's the essence of teaching our adult kids how to make a living. It has so little to do with

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helping them find jobs in order to earn an income. It's about giving them the skills and experiences to navigate the intricacies of the real world and training them to have the stamina to persevere. The same goes for nurturing their Jewish selves. When our children are young, it's crucial that we role model Jewish behaviors and practices that we think are essential to one's Jewish identity. As our children mature, we need to allow them the space and opportunity to figure out what being Jewish means to them. Their model may be vastly different than ours, but if it emboldens in them a Jewish sense of self and a meaningful connection to God, Torah and Israel, then *Kenahorah pu-pu-pu*, we've succeeded as Jewish mothers.

Let's dive right into the third obligation of Jewish parents: teaching our kids to swim. Unlike modern media, the Talmud doesn't get into the bikini versus burkini debate, Speedos versus board shorts. The Talmud's dictate about swimming is literal. No one can argue that knowing how to swim can save your life, but the obligation also is a metaphor for teaching our children basic skills necessary to survive. As Marjorie Ingall wrote in

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Mamaleh Knows Best, the ultimate goal of being a Jewish parent is to raise creative, empathetic, independent children who understand the importance Jewish moral values. In *mamaloshen*, the goal of a community of Jewish mothers is to raise *mensch*s.

Driving along the Pacific Coast Highway is a thrilling afternoon outing. Being a Jewish mother – male or female, with or without children – is a lifetime adventure. As we begin this New Year, may we be blessed with the strength, the inspiration and the *chutzpah* to roll up our sleeves, dig in our heels, and raise our voices and get busy mentoring the next generation of Jewish mothers! *Kenahorah pu-pu-pu*.