

שְׁמַע בְּנִי מִוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאַל-תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ:

My child, heed the values and self-discipline taught by your father, And do not forsake the Torah of your mother.

This morning, we are ending the book of Genesis. Genesis in and of itself, is an origin story. It is throughout this first book of the Torah, we learn about the creation of the world, early mistakes, and the members of the first Jewish family.

I don't need to tell you that family dynamics - whether ancient or modern - can be quite complicated. As a parent of five young children, I come across new parenting challenges on a regular basis. I often say to myself "They never covered this in all the parenting magazines I read while I was pregnant, and my children were babies..." Where was the advice I needed on massive ear infections? Where was the advice I needed in choosing the best school for each child - accepting that each child has their own personality and learning needs? Where was the advice about how to discipline, how to teach morals, how to talk about puberty and sex? I read many parenting magazines during five pregnancies, and none of these details which I encounter on a daily basis were covered in any of them.

So how do we learn to parent? Partially, from our own parents - and I will come back to that in a few minutes. But as an observant Jew, who has spent most of my adult life studying sacred texts, often I find myself turning to the Torah and the advice of our sages, as I try to figure out ethics, and morals, how to be loving, and perhaps most importantly, what not to do, as a parent.

I had a professor in Rabbinical School - who subtitled the book of Genesis, as "Who puts the most fun in dysfunction?" As we read about the origins of the Jewish people, we see parents who are far from perfect, and generation after generation that make the same mistakes.

Let's do a quick review leading up to today's Torah portion:

You have Abraham and Hagar -- and Yishmael -- who is banished

Abraham and Sarah -- and Isaac, who is almost sacrificed

Isaac and Rebecca -- who have Esav and Jacob who start fighting in the womb and continue to mistrust and trick each other as they get older...ending with Isaac giving the oldest son's blessing to the younger son..

And finally Jacob, whose story we have been reading now for a number of weeks. Jacob is blessed with 13 children, and he does not have access to any parenting magazines.

Jacob's parenting challenges begin with his many wives - who are competing for his attention, and competing to give to him as many children as possible. His favorite wife Rachel spends many years unable to conceive, (not only did they not have parenting magazines, but fertility assistance was pretty limited to mandrakes as suggested in the text itself.) When Rachel finally has a son - he becomes immediately the favorite, we all know who he is -- Joseph.

Beautiful clothes, his father's attention, showing off to his brothers, and the early death of his mother while giving birth to his only full sibling, all lead to the situation where his brothers grow to hate him. Jacob is blind to see what is going on in his own family. His father Isaac, grew old and blind, and made a serious mistake in blessing the "wrong child." At this point in our Torah narrative Jacob is still a young man, in good health, not with failing vision - at least literally. But Jacob is blind to the dynamic that he is fostering amongst his children; jealousy, hatred, and finally violence.

Jacob's blindness, his inability to learn from his own father, and from his grandfather about how to treat children with equal amounts of love and respect lead to the story and the ending that we read this morning.

Joseph had been sold into slavery to Egypt. He worked for Potifar, a high ranking official, gets thrown into jail for years after a false accusation from his boss's wife, and is finally freed when Pharaoh himself needs help understanding his unusual dreams.

Joseph becomes the number two official in the entire Egyptian government, and has his potential moment of vengeance when his brothers travel to Egypt in search of food during a famine. I for one, can not imagine what is going on in Joseph's head, as he sees his brothers and knows that he can at the drop of a hat have them all killed, or he can see past their wrong doings to him, and reconcile his family once more.

We knew the choice he made ... And in our Torah portion today, Jacob has joined his favorite son in the land of Egypt and lived out his old age there. Joseph's brothers and their families make their homes in Goshen, and live under the protection of the brother they hated so much as a child.

If we just stop here ... we see how Genesis can be a study in family dynamics and dysfunction. It is actually an amazing model, and for me, one of the most compelling reasons to learn from sacred texts, is that our models are far from perfect and their mistakes are recorded often in great detail. If we had only perfect parents and families in the book of Genesis, how would we feel today, knowing that there was absolutely know way that we could live up to that model?

Jacob is on his deathbed in this Torah portion. There is a tradition established with Abraham, and Isaac and passed to Jacob, that before dying they have the chance ... the privilege ... the obligation to bless their children. From the onset, we see that perhaps Jacob has not learned from his previous mistakes. He calls Joseph to his side before any of his

brothers, and he insists that Joseph brings his own two sons who were born and raised in Egypt. Jacob, again blinded (maybe by old age or maybe because he has not learned from past mistakes) blesses Joseph's children, elevating them to the status of his own, and telling each one that they will become their own tribe, and have an inheritance of land, once the Jewish people resettle in Israel. How must Judah have felt? Levi? Gad? Even Benjamin - also a son of his favorite wife?

And the moment becomes even more intense, when Joseph places his father's right hand on the head of his elder child, and left hand on the head of the younger, the way a traditional blessing was offered. Joseph, who experienced the jealousy and hatred of his siblings, watched as Jacob switched hands intentionally before blessing his sons with these beautiful words...

And he blessed Joseph, saying, "The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day —

הַמַּלְאָךְ הַגָּאֵל אֹתִי מִכָּל-רָע יְבָרֶךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים וְיִקְרָא בְּהֵם שְׁמִי וְשֵׁם אָבֹתַי אַבְרָהָם וְיִצְחָק  
וְיִדְגּוּ לְרֹב בְּקִרְבַּי הָאָרֶץ:

The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm— Bless the lads. In them may my name be recalled, And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth."

Jacob blesses Joseph, by blessing his sons. And the blessing that Jacob gives to these two young boys, is that they remain members of the first Jewish family, and that they consider themselves as children of Jacob, Isaac and Abraham.

It is quite a powerful blessing. In fact, there is a tradition today to say this blessings with your children, when you put them to bed at night, before reciting the bedtime Sh'ma...

And it is with this blessing, I want to transition into the ways we bless our children today, and in the ways in which we can learn from the mistakes made by our ancestors in how they grew their own families.

There are some obvious lessons to be learned ... overt favoritism is not going to create a strong sibling bond. I remember after my mom died, having a conversation with my brother about who was her favorite child. I laid out my entire case - that I was the favorite, it was obvious. And he laid out his case - that he was favorite and it was obvious. What was funny, is much of what we complained about as children towards each other, were the very same things that were on our lists of who was the favorite child. It was recently pointed out to me that my mom must have done a pretty good job, avoiding overt favoritism because my brother and I were both convinced (with proof) that each one of us - was the favorite.

Some sibling jealousy is normal. My five kids can fight like cats and dogs over trivial and silly things stemming from jealousy. And they can also fight about much bigger things -- who gets one on one time, who gets the help they need with homework first, who gets the first snuggle in the morning and the last one at night. -- These jealousies are normal, the challenge is for us as parents how to manage them.

Another lesson to be learned by the first Jewish family in Genesis, is to be careful as to who has access to be a role model for your child. Nobody can blame Yishmael's anger and being cast out. His father abandoned him. It

turned out ok, he is the father of his own nation - but his own father was not his teacher or provider.

Nobody can be mad at Esav, who is cheated by his own twin, first for his birthright and second for his rightful blessing. When Jacob and Esav reconcile earlier in Genesis and fall into each other's arms and kiss each other, is perhaps one of the most powerful moments for me throughout the Torah. Somehow they manage to set aside the pain of the previous 22 years, and reconnect again as siblings. They both go their own ways - they have lived their own lives for too long, but they leave each other whole - as brothers, twins, family....

And as I mentioned earlier -- therapists could write entire libraries based on the dysfunction of Jacob's family -- Jacob, who should have learned from his father and grandfather, makes mistake after mistake. Where were his role models? Who influenced him? The text is somewhat silent, except that we knew he spent many years living with his Uncle who was not an honest or kind man. Did Jacob learn to parent from Lavan?

Proverbs gives us the start of an answer ... Listen my child, heed the values and discipline of your father, and do not ever forget the Torah of your mother. Proverbs makes it clear -- we as parents have obligations to teach our children. We do not just have to educate them in the ways of the world, but according to our values system, according to our self-discipline system, and finally according to the Torah.

Here is the most interesting part of this verse in Proverbs. It is the father's job to teach values and discipline. According to one modern commentary, "A father, through his instruction and through his example, is especially suited to guide his child in moral discipline and self-control." Why these life lessons are given to the father, I am not totally sure. Some people suggest that a father is the firmer parent, the one who evokes more awe and fear.

So it must be up to the father to teach morality and discipline. Yet in the same sentence, it is up to the mother to teach the Torah.... Why? What is the character of the mother that makes them better transmitters of Torah stories... of how to live a Jewish life.... How to model Jewish parenting for their children? Again, I don't have the answer. I just have an anecdote that I want to share.

I grew up in Jewish day school. In fact it was a Lubavitch day school which put an extreme emphasis on not just bible and Jewish law, but on prayer, values, and Jewish history. For many years, people, family friends, and peers suggested that my day school is what ignited my passion for Jewish learning that led me on the path to the rabbinate. (BTW, I am not so sure my Lubavitch day school has my name on a plaque of graduates who were ordained...) But one day, when I was in college, my mother found a series of old tapes ... And she played them for me. It seems as though, when I was very little -- a toddler, she would record tapes of me talking or singing and send them to my grandparents. She pulled out a tape, and when she played it, it was her singing L'cha dodi, and me singing it after her. My mom grew up in the generation where women did not receive formal Jewish education. She never attended religious school nor did she celebrate becoming Bat Mitzvah. Everything she knew about how to "do Jewish" she learned from her parents, and I am going to render a guess, much of that came from my grandmother. My earliest Jewish learning came from my mom. In retrospect, it was not my day school, but my mother who ignited the Jewish passion that set me on my path today.

I certainly don't have all the answers. Why should a father teach one set of skills and a mother a different set? How does this play out in modern families today, who do not follow the model of one dad and one mom? Have gender roles changed so much that this proverb simply does not "hold up" any more?

What I do know is that I learned a lot of Torah, ethics and values from both of my parents, and for that I am grateful. I know that when I sing the Sh'ma to my children at night, I sing to them the verse from the parasha - the verse that connected Joseph's sons to his grandfather, and great grandfathers. I know that when I sing the same verse to my children, I hope that they will remember the Torah that both their father and I do our best to transmit, and I hope that they have a sense, of their grandparents - who are not here to be their role models, or to give the parenting guidance sometimes I am so desperate for, and that is not covered in the parenting magazine, and they know they still share a sacred connection.