



Rosh Hashanah Day Sermon 5770

By Rabbi Jesse Gallop

Honi was a wise man. He had lived many years, and in his old age he decided to plant a carob tree. While planting a Roman soldier walked by and he said to Honi “You sure are a silly old man. You will have passed long before the tree will bear carob fruit.” Wise old Honi replied, “My father and his father before him planted many trees from which I eat. You are correct, I will never eat from this tree, but my children and grandchildren will.” All of us strive to be like Honi with the hope that our actions will build a strong future for our children.

Throughout my 5 years at Beth Chaverim, I have seen how much the adults in this community care about our youth. Especially, how parents would give everything they had for the betterment of their sons and daughters. Today, I want to explore our Torah portion. I believe Abraham’s story is one we can all relate with. How we strive to raise our offspring through sacred parenting.

As you well know, I am not a parent. And I am well aware of the difference between hypothetical ideals that are abstract compared to the realities of daily living.

But I have learned a lot about what children and teens need through years of working at camps, youth groups, advocacy programs, and through my experience as a rabbi. Over the years I have seen what helps to nurture souls and what has diminished the holiness within a child. I have seen children act in ways that are outrageous and out of control, and I have had many wonderful encounters where youth are polite, intelligent, and a true delight.

The story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac teaches us that there are ways in which we can endanger our children, even when we have the best intentions. What do children need? There are three things children require from their parents: To know that they are loved unconditionally, boundaries, and to be treated respectfully.

God said to Abraham, “Take your son, your precious one, Isaac, whom you love.” From this we learn that every parent is to love their child with a whole heart. All of us would agree that we love our children. However, do our actions always match our intentions?! So often we think our sons and daughters know that we love them. We take for granted that they are secure in our relationships.

This summer at Camp Harlam, I went hiking with a group of 8 teenage girls. We went hiking in the Appalachian Mountains. When evening came we said the Shema and talked about what holiness meant personally for them. They each talked about special moments in life when they realized God was present. Following this, the girls decided to sit in a circle and share their struggles with one another. One girl cried as she shared that her parents were facing a divorce, another shed tears because she was having difficulties with the recent death of her grandfather, and others talked about teenage issues. There was one story that I would like to communicate with you today because, unfortunately, I believe her pain is shared by other teenagers. This 13 year-old girl shared, “I hate my parents” with tears streaming down her cheeks. She continued, “I don’t think my parents ever really wanted me. They work long hours, coming home late at night. They

are over-worked and angry. My mom picks at me non-stop. She never tells me about the good things I do. I know a lot of teenagers dislike their parents, but I really do hate being around my parents and it is so painful.”

How many of you get home when your children are already asleep? Is it common to be so over-tired that you snap at family members because you are exhausted? How are you children to know you love them, if you commonly criticize and point out their flaws?! Children need to know that they are loved for who they are. I became a youth worker to reinforce this. So often parents, teachers, and other adults in children’s lives have expectations for the child based on their own wants, hopes, and desires. “Are you going to become a doctor because you are so smart?” Or, “You are so good with children, you should become a teacher.” But when do we ask, “Who do you want to become? What interests you in life? What do you think will be fulfilling?” Our young people just want to be accepted and know that they are loved not because of what they do, but rather to feel they are loved because of who they are. I read a great teaching that sums up the responsibility of parenthood, “Try to see your child as a seed that came in a packet without a label. Your job is to provide the right environment and nutrients and to pull the weeds. You can’t decide what kind of flower you’ll get or in which season it will bloom.”

I know the world is tough and there are lots of challenges for our youth. Competition is higher than ever before. And that is exactly why they need your support and love. Many parents want their children to be the top of the class. Grades and achievements are not everything in life. Should children be expected to be miniature adults: over-worked, over-programmed, and just plain exhausted?! Children should be nourished so that they explore their world, find holiness, and connect with their feelings, especially learning how to love. One of the best ways to foster these hopes is through the act of making life holy. By consecrating time and space we can teach and exemplify what it means to live in this world. Success is not the numbers in a pay-check or the title of a profession. We are meant to find fulfillment in this world. When we are able to slow down we realize that there are many small, but yet important sacred moments. Children are naturally aware of this. Watch a child interact with the world around him. He might be awe struck by the beauty of a butterfly, or the power of an ante. We need to learn from our children how to find God in life through every day encounters. So often a hug or a kiss, hearing a child’s question, and being fully present both emotionally and intellectually will let a child know that she is special.

Another way of showing love is by setting boundaries. In today’s world children too often make decisions for the family, or even worse act blatantly disrespectful to parents. A good parent is not their child’s friend! Every young person needs boundaries no matter how much they rebel. Youth that are raised without healthy authority are often insecure, angry, and abusive. It is sad to say that there are numerous times when I have seen children raise a fist towards or kick their parents. So often adults accept such behavior as justifiable for the times. If your child is abusive towards you, how will they deal with frustration and anger towards their future spouse? Will they learn how to communicate what is bothering them, or are you enabling them to be hurtful towards others?

We are all commanded to honor our mother and father. The rabbis teach that we are not required to like our parents, but we must always treat them with respect, especially in public. When children enter their homes, they should always say hello to a parent. When you ask your son or daughter a question, it is appropriate and correct to

expect that they answer your question. Ignoring the inquiry is not acceptable. It is helpful for young people to know their parent's expectations. Have a talk with your kids and explain to them how they must act.

Boundaries are taught through instilling basic manners in children and teaching them how to treat and interact with others. We, Beth Chaverim, are here to support you as you help to shape your children's future. We love that children feel comfortable at our synagogue. However, we cannot tolerate blatant disrespect towards adults and the synagogue. At times, I've seen students being rude and inappropriate to their Sunday School teachers. We, as a community and as parents, need to set expectations for proper behavior within this temple. Children should enjoy coming and having fun, but there needs to be limits. At no time should children be running through the sanctuary, instead we need to teach them that this is where we sit and pray and that this room is a holy space at all times. We should not shame them, rather kindly and politely explain why we treat this room in such a way.

One of the best ways to teach our children is through giving children responsibility. All too often young people expect to receive things as a right instead of a privilege. The computer, TV, play-station, MP3 player, and cell-phone are gifts that you have given your sons and daughters. What have they done to earn them? You should control their usage and if children and teens are not fulfilling their responsibilities, be it chores, in school, or doing other activities, you have the right to take them away. All children need to share responsibility in family life, this way they will feel as if they are full-members of the family and realize all the duties you, the adults in their lives, are responsible for.

"But rabbi, this is all great. Keep preaching, but you don't have children and these expectations are not realistic. I am not going to fight with my kid over every little thing!" You are correct; you need to pick your battles. But ask yourself in every encounter, "What am I teaching my children by how I am reacting?" Are you training your son to fight about everything so that he can get his way? Are you telling your daughter that her wants are more important than your feelings? Often you can set expectations without a fight by expressing your displeasure without humiliating. Many times our arguments are more about how we communicate than it is about the subject we are discussing.

And lastly, children need to be treated with respect. When disciplining a child, one should always rebuke in private. It is incredibly hurtful for a youth when others, especially peers, see them being reprimanded. All of us, parents and other adults in the community need to remember the esteem of a child when we talk to him or her. Child Psychologist, Wendy Mogel in her book, The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, teaches adults how to effectively discipline a child. She explains,

First, if you are too upset to speak calmly, count to ten, leave the room, or wait until later. When you've regained your composure, tell your child that you need to talk with her and go to a private place. Get down to her eye level and look directly at her. Put your hand gently on her shoulder and describe the specific behavior that is unacceptable to you: 'I saw you and Leila killing ants with my tweezers.' Tell the child how you feel about what she did. Be brief. Use some face-saving comments before you rebuke, such as 'I am sure you didn't meant to,' which implies that the child's stature and past good behavior places her above the negative behavior in question...After delivering your rebuke, be silent for a

moment to evaluate your child's reaction. [And then] offer an opportunity for your child to make amends." P.203

While we want to help children to learn and stop bad actions, we must also remember that children, like all of us are naturally imperfect. Therefore the goal of a punishment should be to help them learn from their mistake and grow becoming a better person. This method is similar to how we treat ourselves during these 10 Days of Awe.

It is never acceptable for intentional bad behavior or testing authority. But most children and teens misbehave because they get overly excited, are frustrated, or are just plain upset. Therefore, we should help them to make *t'shuvah*, repentance through change. We learn from the 13th century rabbi, Jonah Gerondi that we should teach a sinner to do good by using his ability for wrongdoing. He states:

"The repentant sinner should strive to do good with the same faculties with which he sinned... With whatever part of his body he sinned, he should now engage in good deeds. If his feet had run to sin, let them now run to the performance of good. If his mouth had spoken falsehood, let it now be opened to wisdom. Violent hands should now open to charity... The troublemaker should now become a peacemaker."

For this is what we all strive to be. We are all learning and growing from our life experiences. It is important to remember that you will not be a perfect parent. All that is expected of you is to fulfill your obligation of parenthood with good intention. Almost every parent basis their parental methods of interaction with their children based upon how their parents raised them. And we try to improve the method which was modeled to us. We must remember that we don't have a parenting handbook. We will never be able to be perfect. But, life and Torah are our teachers, and we share these experiences together. It is okay to be imperfect; every generation of parents make a whole new set of mistakes. The goal is that we help to raise our youth in a generation that is better than how we were reared.

We, humanity, have made huge gains in parenting. It seems foreign to us that Abraham, a great prophet and father of Judaism, would want to sacrifice his son; but he came from a world in which such actions were common. But we, like Abraham, strive to make the lives of our progeny holy. It is through the mitzvah of parenthood that we are taught about the sacredness of life. On this Rosh Hashanah may we learn from past mistakes, and grow as a supportive community to help us nurture and foster our children. For they are our future, and helping to give them positive self-esteem will better their lives, our futures, and help perfect the world.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon, May this be God's will.

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