

Vayechi 5779
Teach Your Children Well
Rabbi Betsy Forester

When I was an undergraduate here at the UW, I took a graduate course about gender in children's literature. The professor, whose name I do not remember, professed, among other intriguing notions, that children do not owe loyalty to their families of origin. We do not choose our parents, and outside of basic respect and human decency, she argued, we do not owe them loyalty, love, or a commitment to gather together once we have become independent. With that as background, it goes without saying that we do not owe fealty to the values and institutions that were important to our parents.

Wow.

That idea was completely foreign to me, and above all else, it shocked me because the professor was Jewish. While I was all for autonomy and certainly was making the most of my life in Madison out of the range of my parents' gaze, it was hard for me to get in the head of a Jewish parent who ardently believed that it is wrong to expect children to carry on values and traditions with which they were raised.

I've thought about it a lot since then.

I've learned a few things in the raising of my own children and decades of work as an educator and educational leader. My interest here is to share a rabbinic perspective--*my* rabbinic perspective--on the notion of parents leaving a Jewish legacy for their children. The question is: *How do we think about the passing down our Jewish heritage?*

Of course, the first step is to review the literature. On this issue, that is quite easy. I don't think I need to tell you that our classical sources point

strongly in the direction of indoctrinating our children so that they will know our practices and beliefs and carry our heritage forward. From “*v’shinantem l’vanecha*” (teach them to your children) in the *Shema* to recounting for our children at Pesach God’s liberating us from bondage and establishing an eternal covenant with our People at Sinai, to verses in our wisdom literature like “Listen, my child, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Proverbs 1:8) and “Teach a child according to his nature so that when he grows older he will not depart from it”(Proverbs 22:6), to various rabbinic texts underscoring the importance of passing on our way of life, it is clear that our tradition longs to be transmitted and that historically there has been little tolerance for “wayward children” who “stray from the *derech* (path),” rather than remaining loyal to the Jewish ways expected of them.

In today’s *parashah* and *haftarah*, we read the words of prominent patriarchs, Yaacov (Jacob) and David, giving deathbed addresses to their children. Such scenes are rare in our Bible. Today we hit the jackpot, and I don’t think I’m the only one in the room who felt a little squirmy about what we read.

Yaacov (Jacob) wants to give a vision--to tell his children how the world works and what their place in it will be. He sets it up:

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל-בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִסְפוּ וְאִגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים:

“Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come” (Gen. 49:1).

And then something gets in the way, and instead of a vision, what emerges from his mouth is a mix of indictment, praise, and prophecy for each son, devoid of advice or words of fatherly love. He tells Reuven: “Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer; For when you mounted your father’s bed, You brought disgrace—my couch he mounted!” (Gen. 49:4). Turning to Shimon and Levi, Yaacov says the words he should have said long before,

“Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel” (Gen. 49:5-7). On a different note, of Dan he says, “Dan shall govern his people, as one of the tribes of Israel, Dan shall be a serpent by the road, a viper by the path, That bites the horse’s heels So that his rider is thrown backward” (Gen. 49:16-17), and upon Yosef (Joseph), the patriarch heaps praise, singling him out yet again for his superiority over his brothers. Oy vey.

Imagine the feeling in the room as each pronouncement is given, cloaked in poetry as it cuts to the bone. I do not know what good can come from those words of legacy, which seem not even to be what Ya’acov himself had intended to utter.

King David’s deathbed address also disappoints, from a parenting perspective. He summons only one son, his beloved Shlomo (Solomon), whom he has chosen as his successor, and what comes from the David’s mouth are not words of love or guidance but, rather, directives for carrying out the dying monarch’s own unfinished business.

The truth is that we do not know enough to evaluate Jacob or David’s deathbed words to their children in their societal context. Our commentators give mixed reviews: Perhaps brutal honesty is a pedagogic decision, or maybe these men are more concerned with how they will be remembered than how their messages will be received. But we can think about the parting words we would want to give to our children, and walk back from there to how our stances and decisions now will connect to those messages.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the great intellectual, mathematician and historian Jacob Bronowski, who famously said, “It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.” From that stance, I have trouble imagining what benefit can come from demanding that our children live a certain way after we are gone. More importantly, it seems immoral to make such demands.

We must be mindful of our intentions when we talk about Jewish continuity and what we expect our children’s Jewish futures to look like once we have raised them.

Anyone who has raised kids lately knows that boldfaced indoctrination will not work in these times, if it ever did. Today people are looking to craft meaningful lives from practices and experiences. But not willy nilly. They--and let’s be honest, WE-- want authentic grounding and accountability. We want to feel inspired, we want to elevate our day-to-day existence in the modern world, and we want to grow. We seek outlets to meet those needs in all kinds of venues, and we show up with dedication. And if that place is a Jewish place, where we can also celebrate our ethnic identity and form strong connections with others, we will keep showing up. These are not my own musings; they are findings of good studies. And I trust this data, because they really on sound methodology and also because my kishkes--and nearly every conversation I have with Jewish people--confirms what they say.

Let me say boldly that I believe we have a way of life and a place and mission in the world that are worth preserving. We have a way of life full of rituals and practices that help us flourish as human beings and build a

better world, a world of compassion and justice, within the framework of an ethnic identity that makes us proud. If we want to pass on our Jewish heritage, *those* should be the reasons. There is nothing inherently moral or good about simply passing along a bloodline, and it is a naive fiction. I want the Jewish People to endure, *not* because of a sense of guilt, *not* because of the Holocaust, and *not* because somewhere it says I should want that. I want the Jewish People to endure because we offer a way of being in the world that is grounded, mindful, deep, smart, and profoundly good, and without which the world would be diminished, in my humble opinion.

Our children *are* Jews, and I suggest that we help them thrive in that core aspect of identity based on the belief that it will help them live out the fullness of their humanity. They will make their own choices about how to “Jew,” as is their God-given right. We can help by showing them what we love about being Jewish. Let them catch us in the act of loving our tradition, studying it, and being moved by it. Let us catch each other in the act of mindful attention when we bless Shabbat candles, and when we recite *Birkat HaMazon* after we eat at the table we share in the home where we nurture our love for each other. Let us love the wisdom built into our tradition when we bury our loved ones and when we welcome new life into the world. If we believe that our ethnicity as Jews is about a distinctive and worthy way of life, let us share that belief by making it a priority, and making sure that our children know why that is so.

In his book *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas*, Rabbi Arthur Green describes 10 great reasons we would like to see the Jewish People flourish into the future. It's a quick read, and I recommend it. I'd like to share just a handful of them.

1. *B'zteleim Elokim* (in the Image of God): We believe in the inherent dignity of every human beings, and we will jump through fire to

restore human dignity, especially for those who might be marginalized. We trust that given the right conditions, the human spirit will strive toward the good. And not only that. We believe that human beings are called to be God's partners in improving our world. We have a crucial role to play in the ongoing Creation.

2. *Halacha* (Jewish laws and practices): We emphasize action. We are intensely mindful about our practices and how we evolve them toward the goal of thriving together and building a just and compassionate world. Doubt is natural, and crises of faith are a fact of life for most people. We choose to focus on how we go about living in this world, with all of its challenges and potential. Part and parcel of that is that we are not ascetics. We value joy and celebration, and we take pleasure in knowing that our Creator is so interested in us that our actions and intentions matter infinitely. That concept is known as "*simcha shel mitzvah*."
3. Torah: We trust our intelligence. We draw on a rich library of texts and to orient and guide our paths. Our library is full of nuance and dialectic, and we are empowered to interpret, to challenge, and to change our minds. We are not expected to rely on blind faith or follow the most charismatic leader. We are expected to think both critically and intuitively. And with that mindset, we welcome *mitzvot* like Shabbat. For 25 hours every week, we get off the treadmill of our dedicated lives and live in the natural world. For those precious ours we reconnect to the core of our existence. We take the time to be mindful and fully present in a state of blessing. The more we keep Shabbat, the more it keeps us whole and well. Trust me.
4. *T'shuva* (return, or repentance): We bank our lives on the human capacity for change. We are life-focused because our lives matter, and our lives matter because we are able to refine ourselves, to learn, to improve ourselves, to make amends, to gently and courageously strive to become better and better versions of ourselves and, as a result, more available to our relationships with others, with

God, and with the world in which we live. And remarkably, our tradition itself is subject to the imperative of *t'shuva*. When our laws no longer sustain life, we are enjoined to change them.

To those gems, I it won't surprise you that I would add love. When we leave the next generation to face the future without us, I believe our tradition wants very much for them to know that we love them, that they are blessed with an eternal, all-encompassing love, and that no matter what happens, they know that they are never alone.

Yaacov actually gets it right, in my opinion, when he blesses Joseph's children, Ephraim and Menashe, earlier in our *parashah*. These are boys who have grown up far from the extended family and homeland, children of a foreign mother. Yaacov must be keenly aware of how little influence he is likely to have over them. And so he gives them the most hopeful and most fitting blessing an elder can offer--that they find their way through the difficulties of life and that they be guided and aided according to their need: **וַיְבָרֶךְ אֶת-הַנְּעָרִים** --"May the angel who redeemed me from all evil bless the lads" (Gen. 48:16). And whatever becomes of them, whatever choices they make, he wants them to know that they are family, they have a heritage, they are included--so he adds **וַיִּקְרָא בָהֶם שְׁמֵי וְשֵׁם אֲבֹתַי** --"in them may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac." And, without much clue as to what their futures will hold, he prays for them to flourish: **וַיְדַגּוּ לָרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ** - "and may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth" (Gen. 48:16).

Let us pray for our children to flourish and let us pray that they will want to make the Jewish way of life they learn in our homes part of their flourishing, and that they will share it with all of the people with whom they will build their lives. And let us pray that they will always, always know how much we love them.

We sang this song together before the D'var Torah:

**Teach Your Children
By Graham Nash**

**You, who are on the road must have a code that you can live by
And so become yourself because the past is just a good bye.
Teach your children well, their father's hell did slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams, the one they picks, the one you'll
know by.**

**Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh and know they love you.**

**And you, of tender years can't know the fears that your elders grew
by,**

**And so please help them with your youth, they seek the truth before
they can die.**

**Teach your parents well, their children's hell will slowly go by,
And feed them on your dreams, the one they picks, the one you'll
know by.**

**Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh and know they love you.**

From Wikipedia (I know...):

Nash, who is also a photographer and collector of photographs, has stated in an interview that the immediate inspiration for the song came from a famous photograph by [Diane Arbus](#), "[Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park](#)." The image, which depicts a child with an angry expression holding the toy weapon, prompted Nash to reflect on the societal implications of messages given to children about war and other issues.^[5]