

November 15, 2008, Parashat Vayera, To Raise A Jewish Child

There are stories that rabbis like to talk about more, and stories that rabbis like to talk about less the Akedah, the story of the sacrifice, really the binding of Isaac, is both. That is, on the one hand, it's a little uncomfortable to talk about a story where a father takes his son up the mountain to sacrifice him to God. On the other hand, fascinating that at the center of our tradition should be a story where a father takes his son up the mountain to sacrifice him to God.

And so a story that you might think people wouldn't want to talk about is filled in the literature with commentary. And I bring this up because I'm only going to talk about one small piece of it, and it's really not because I intend to ignore all the other questions that such a story raises, but you only have so long this morning, and we all know that there is nothing that is quite so torturous as an endless sermon. And so I'm just going to attack one small bit of this story, but it's a powerful bit, and that is what parents do to their children.

Because Freud, as you may know, tells the story of what children want to do to their parents. It's called the Oedipal complex. And Eric Wellisch, a psychiatrist many years ago, wrote a book called *Isaac and Oedipus*, in which he said that had Freud spent more time with the Bible and less time with Greek myth, he would've written about the Isaac complex, about the way in which parents sometimes destroy their children as opposed to the way in which children destroy their parents.

I want to talk about both because both are true. Let's take out the word destroy for a minute because there we're talking about epic stories and let's just talk about our lives. There is all along with the love and the dreams and the hope and the closeness and all the nice feelings that parents and children have for each other. There's a lot of anger.

First of all, for those of you who are children, let me explain to you that when you come along, you place severe restrictions on your parents' life. There are lots of things we can't do anymore, and we used to like to do those things like go out when we want and come back when we want, and spend time with friends. We can't do that. We can't spend on ourselves because one day you're going to go to college, and suck our savings dry. We know that about you.

Now, if we were perfect people, we would react to all this with equanimity, with kindness, with goodness. We'd be pleased that we'll have no money left to spend on anything we want. But the truth of the matter is sometimes it ticks us off a bit and parents remember how hard it is to live in someone else's house who's always telling you what to do, even when they don't mean to tell you what to do. Their face tells you what they really want to tell you to do, and that's enough of a pressure.

And the day you leave your parents' house has affinities with another biblical story about Moses and the Exodus. It's like a freeing and that tension between parent and child, even in the most wonderful loving relationship, it is constant and it's real. And part of the function of stories is to bring out tensions that we don't bring out for ourselves.

I mean, granted, every parent and every child knows these things are true. That's why parents say things to their children that they don't really mean at times, like you will never be allowed out of this house again, right? As long as you live, not another dollar will I give you. Why do parents say that? Because at the moment, you're in the grip of the Isaac complex.

But what I want to talk about this morning in particular is one thing that children may not realize that parents have to do that makes the life of a parent particularly difficult, and parents sometimes neglect it too, which is why I bring it up. That is, every parent says to their child, I want you to be whatever kind of person you want to be. But we don't mean it. What we mean is we want you to be whatever kind of person you want to be within the limits of what we think is a really good person. That's what we really mean.

I've said this before, but I remember when my father used to say to me, when I used to say to him, what do you want me to be when I grow up? And he would say, "whatever you want." He was lying, because had I come home one day and said, I looked at all the possible professions out there, and I really think collecting garbage is the one that will give me satisfaction. I know how my parents would've reacted and they would not have said, how wonderful that you have found your life's work. Because as a parent, you do have dreams for your child and you do have ideas of what you want them to be and things that you think they should be. You can't help it.

But here's the kick. In order to get a child who has certain values and ideals, you as a parent have to model them. And that's what's really hard. One day your child comes home and says something foul, and you say, where did you get that? And they look at you and say, from you. And you realize that if you want something from the person whom you are raising, you have to be that yourself. And that's one of the things that makes the parent-child relationship both beautiful and difficult because all of a sudden, as a parent, when you have a child, you have to be what you always claim you want to be.

And this brings us to Judaism. That is, you want your child to have a Jewish life, but you don't come to synagogue and they know that you want your child to care about his or her people, to be charitable, but they never see you give charity. They never see you express communal solidarity. They never see you go down to a soup kitchen and feed hungry people, but you think it's good if they do.

This is one of the things that makes being apparent so difficult is that all of a sudden you can't just say, you should be this way. Because children have very keen hypocrisy detectors. And when you tell them, you should be this way, they think to themselves, you're not that way. I've lived in this house.

And that's why parenting should make us better, because if we express values to other people and we realize that we ourselves are the model, then we must change our lives. That's part, not just of the challenge, but also of the advantage of having a child is it should make you better. And if it makes you better, then it's good not only for you, but for your child. Because children

are mirrors. They're like funhouse mirrors. They don't reflect you perfectly, but they reflect you enough that when you look at them, you know that's you, that's what you taught, that's what you said, that's what you neglected to do. And that's part, to be perfectly honest, not only of the joy, but also of the hostility that parents sometimes feel to children. We want to do this, but we are afraid if we do this one day, our children will do it. And that's not good.

That's why Judaism plays such a tremendous emphasis on the way you educate your child. The Shema, the central declaration of Judaism says, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might, and these words, which I command you this day, shall be on your heart. And then immediately after telling you what is central to your life, the next phrase is, *ve-shinantem levanecha*, you shall teach them to your children. Now, why? Partly because if you teach them to your children, your children will know them. And partly because if you teach them to your children, you'll have to model them yourself. It works both ways. It is synergistic. That which we teach, sometimes we become.

Every teacher knows this. I studied philosophy for many years. You want to know when I learned it, when I became a professor, when I was teaching my students, all of a sudden I really had to know the material because it wasn't good enough to pass the test and forget it. They were going to ask me questions. If you raise a Jewish child, you have to live a Jewish life. If you don't believe me, it won't work.

Now there is no guarantee if you do, it will work. One of the remarkable, wonderful, amazing, and infuriating things about children as they grow up to be their own people, and you can tell them the same thing every day of your life, but one day they turn around and say, you know what? I don't believe that. However, your only chance, your only real chance of bringing somebody in the wonderful, caring, communal loving world of our tradition and our people is if you are a part of it.

And that same tension that Abraham expresses with Isaac, remarkably enough, even though the story is so disturbing and so powerful and so painful, it does turn out that Isaac, at least in one of his children, in Jacob, produces somebody who creates the nation of Israel. So something about his home, about Abraham, about Sarah, something implanted in him, the recognition that this message, this people, this tradition was important, that his parents lived it, that they transmitted it, and that it would become his own.

I want to tell you a story that sums this up in an extraordinary way. It's a story that some of you may know, but really every Jewish parent should know this story. During the Second World War, a lot of children were given up by their parents, lost to their parents, and many of them were raised in monasteries all across Europe. In fact, you may know that Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, was raised in a Catholic monastery during the Second World War.

But Jews weren't the only children raised in monasteries. Catholic monasteries took in war orphans from countries all across Europe. And so Jews and Christians were raised in the

monastery together, and they were subject, obviously, to the same teachings, the same religious teachings, the same food, the same classes, the same everything. Which meant that after the war, nobody knew who was a Jewish child and who was a Christian child, because if they came in young enough and then four, five, six years of living in the monastery, they no longer remembered their religious tradition. You came in at three and then you were nine or 10, who knew that at three you were a Jewish child?

And the Jewish people was facing an additional tragedy on top of all the other tragedies that these children would never not only be restored to their parents, but would never know that they were born to Jews.

And someone came up with a brainstorm about how to identify the Jewish children. They sent *shlichim*, they sent messengers, emissaries, throughout the monasteries of Europe and asked them to gather together all the children whom they'd taken in during the war. And then the messengers would walk up and down the lines of all the children and start saying the Shema. They would go *Shema Yisrael*, and the children who finished it because they had grown up listening to their parents sing it to them, night after night after night from the day they were born, the children who finished the Shema they knew were Jewish children.

Every Jewish parent should pray at their child's bed at night. Not only because the power of that story reminds us that certain bonds are unbreakable, but you have to forge them, but also because you give your child a legacy forever. What child in old age, and God willing, all of our children will reach old age, will forget that their mother, their father, prayed with them every night of their life? That means that you have to do it. That means a restriction on the freedom of the parent. But after all, that's part of what love is. Love is a freedom and a restriction. Love is doing certain things and not doing other things.

But I have no doubt, no doubt, that those children and the parents, wherever they were, were grateful that night after night they prayed, that they managed to overcome whatever was inside them that made them want to do whatever they wanted to do because they knew that you can't raise a Jewish child, you can't raise a faithful child, you can't raise a caring and a loving child unless you are yourself a Jewish, a caring, a loving, a faithful, and a good parent. So our children are there for themselves, but a little bit, they're there for us. And I hope that they hear our prayers, that they see our goodness, and that one day they're blessed with children as we are. And they carry on our tradition as Abraham's child did, and Isaac's did, and Jacob's did, which is why we are here today. Shabbat shalom.