

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Evening
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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In 2011, psychologists Richard Eibach and Steven Mock from the University of Waterloo published an odd study in the journal of the Association for Psychological Science. They gathered eighty fathers and mothers with at least one child under the age of 18 and studied whether parents honestly derive real satisfaction and joy from the process of parenting.

What did they find? When presented with the economic costs of raising children and the inherent sacrifices that come from parenting, they discovered something extraordinary – that the claim of parental happiness is actually a psychological defense. “In other words,” they wrote, “we parents have collectively created the myth of parental joy because otherwise we would have a hard time justifying the huge investment that kids require.”¹

It was just as fascinating to read the comments from readers at the end of the article. I was shocked by how many people resonated with the researchers. Many said they chose not to have children and were glad they didn’t become parents. Others talked about how incredibly difficult parenting was – some even expressing regret for having children at all.

At the same time, there were others who talked about how parenthood was the most meaningful thing they ever did. Sure it was “the hardest job you will ever do,” but the satisfaction and joy that came from sharing love with children brought a fulfillment they could never replace.

Can we be real for a moment? Parenting is hard. Really hard. It’s incredibly demanding to be a parent. From the moment of conception the physical demands of motherhood are literally and figuratively gut-wrenching. Then they give you this amazing, holy, and precious child – and it immediately begins vomiting on you. They shriek at all hours of the day and night. They poop in the tub. You offer them healthy food – they won’t eat it. You ask them to go to sleep, they run around and scream. You ask them to do their homework, to help with the dishes, to pick up their clothes or their toys – they ignore you. You bring them on vacation, they whine that they’re tired or they want ice-cream.

I remember when my kids were very small I was talking with the father of a bat mitzvah girl. “Dan,” he said. “You know how your kids are so cute and delicious you feel like you could just eat them? And then they get to be my kid’s age and you wish you had.”

It can be so frustrating sometimes as a parent. We’ve been around the block a few times and we’ve seen a few things. We know the mistakes we made, and we remember the mistakes our parents made too. If they would just do what we tell them, if they would just heed our advice, we know they would be so much happier. Why won’t they just listen?!?

¹ <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/were-only-human/the-myth-of-joyful-parenthood.html>

Our celebration of Rosh HaShanah asks us to think about parenthood, but in a very different way. Among the most familiar features of the liturgy is the litany we just recited - *Avinu Malkeinu*. It begins with a story in the Talmud, where the people were suffering a terrible drought. Rabbi Eliezer stood before the open ark on a fast day and recited twenty-four blessings, but he was not answered. Rabbi Akiva then came before the ark after him and said: *Avinu Malkeinu, Ayn Lanu Melech Ela Ata* - Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You. *Avinu Malkeinu, L'Ma-ancha Rachem Aleinu* - Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us. And rain immediately fell.”²

Why refer to God as *Avinu Malkeinu* – a father and a ruler? The land of Israel was not like Egypt, the rabbis teach, where water flowed easily from the Nile. Instead, the Israelites were like children, completely dependent on their parent for sustenance. Thus Akiva called out to God as a child calls out to a parent – “Hey I’m thirsty. I need you to get me something to drink.”

For some, *Avinu Malkeinu* can be an alienating construct. Some of us grew up without fathers, or had relationships with our fathers that were traumatic and abusive. For many, the image of God expressed in the masculine amplifies the sense of marginalization for women. Today we live in a modern democracy, far removed from the experience of a monarch – tyrannical or benevolent.

Imagine, however, what it must be like to be the Holy One. Imagine what it must be like to parent us.

The mystic Isaac Luria taught that at the beginning of time, God’s presence spread from one end of the universe to the other. But then God was overwhelmed with love and decided to create a world. In order for the world to come into being, God had to perform a cosmic act of self-contraction – *Tzimtzum* – in order to make space for the world. Into the darkness of the vacuum created by God’s receding presence was born the world. But then God was overwhelmed with love a second time and God decided to restore God’s light to the darkened world. The light returned through a ladder of holy vessels filled with God’s essence – first through wisdom, then through understanding, then through compassion, then through strict justice, and further down into the world. The lower vessels could not contain the power of God’s light, and in a massive cataclysm, the vessels shattered, sending shards of broken holiness into the world.

And then God was overwhelmed with love again, and God said: “Let us create humanity in our image after our likeness...” And in creating us, God asked us to be God’s partners in lifting up the broken shards and doing the work of *Tikkun* – repair of the broken world.

We who are blessed to have become parents know something of the Divine Joy the Holy One experienced in bringing the world into being. Like Hannah, whose story we tell tomorrow, we know what it is to be completely consumed with love and desire to bring a child into the world. Many know the agony and frustration from having that dream thwarted. We know what it is to perform *Tzimtzum* – sacrificing our own wants and needs to make room for a child. We know the sublime, transcendent, exultant ecstasy that comes

² Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 25b

from the spiritual bonds we share with our children, and in helping them discover the holiness in our world and the holiness in themselves.

We want to ensure our children have everything – to protect them from pain, to keep them on the right path, to plant them in a Garden of Eden in which they know no want but only tranquility and peace.

But we can't. And that's the most difficult part. Our children will wander off. They will know disappointment. They will suffer injuries and pain. They will push us away, reject what we offer, come crying back for reassurance, and drift away again. The world we give our children is shattered and broken. It is filled with opportunity for untold blessing, but also replete with potential for disaster.

How can we teach them to protect themselves from harm, how can we teach them to build a moral core and the spiritual strength to lift up those broken shards and do the work of repair?

So it was that in another extraordinary act of love, God gave us the gift of Torah – the blueprints for the creation of the world.

Our very existence is a product of Divine love. We have been given so many extraordinary gifts – life is an embarrassment of blessings. We are each given the gift of life, the astonishing opportunity to simply live and experience the wonder of being. We are given intellects that can consider and reason, that can invent and innovate – we are given souls that can wonder and adore, that can remember and can dream. And we were given the gift of Torah, a Divine gift of wisdom that can lead us to experience the profound depths of holy experience, to resolve the inequities and injustices of human life, and to channel the holy gift of love to restore and heal this shattered world.

And like petulant children – we take it all for granted. We say to the Holy One – “What do you know anyways? You think you can tell me what to do? I don't need you. We live in the 21st century. Fifty years ago we landed a man on the moon. We mapped the human genome. We created artificial intelligence. We have air conditioning and impact glass. We have thousands of channels, cellular phones, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. We are modern autonomous, liberated, independent, sovereign selves – completely in control of our lives and our destinies. *Avinu Malkeinu?* – Feh.

The Holy One tells us, “Do not bow down to idols or worship the work of your hands.” Then we spend our lives in pursuit of material gain and wonder why we still feel empty no matter how much we buy.

The Holy One tells us, “keep Shabbat and make it holy.” Then we spend our lives on the run with our heads in our screens seven days a week and wonder why we feel burned out and why we seem disconnected from the people that matter most to us and why we never seem to have a moment just to stop and think.

The Holy One tells us, “do not steal or deal deceitfully or falsely with one another.” And American businesses lose \$652 billion in fraud each and every year, causing enormous suffering for individuals and families.

The Holy One tells us “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” And then we tolerate systems that trap the poor in poverty, that insulate glass ceilings and institutionalize

inequality, and then exude surprise when oppressed groups cry out in resentment over the injustices they suffer.

And then, on the flipside, there are other times when we ask God to be a helicopter parent. We ask God to ensure our prosperity, we entreat God to protect us from sickness, from violence, and hunger, and we beseech God to come down and fix it for us when things go wrong. How often have you closed your eyes in prayer and said: “Oh God, let it be okay...”? And when we don’t get the outcome we wanted, we blame God for all our anguish and misfortune.

Can we imagine what it must be like for the Holy One, *Avinu Malkeinu* – our Divine parent and ruler – to parent us?

Sure we can – because we know what it is to be overwhelmed with love. We see our children make mistakes and poor decisions, behave in ways that self-sabotage and appear self-destructive, and languish in confusion, alienation, and dissatisfaction. And our hearts break for them.

Our hearts break for them not because their behavior is a reflection on us as parents. Our hearts break for them not because they may not achieve whatever society and we have imagined to qualify as success. Our hearts break for them because there is nothing we can do to alleviate their suffering. We hold our arms open wide, waiting to embrace them, to comfort them, to reassure them and support them. We wait and we wonder ... will they come?

A friend of mine has a daughter who became addicted to drugs. While she was in high school he sent her to program after program to help her find recovery. Still she could not become clean. In college, her addiction grew worse, and she eventually dropped out of school. Each successive effort at detox and rehab would eventually result in relapse. Finally, he realized he could not love her out of her addiction. He could not want recovery for her. It had to be her choice. He accepted that the best way to love her was to let her go – to let her figure it out on her own. “I never knew there could be pain like this,” he said. “But my love alone is not enough.”

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches that when we sin, we don’t just do injury to ourselves - we do injury to God. Just as when our children harm themselves they inflict injury to our souls, so too do we harm the Holy One when we fail to live up to our potential.

But it is when our children find themselves that we realize our mission as parents.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote: “The primary role of penitence ... is for the person to return to himself, to the root of his soul. Then he will at once return to God, to the Soul of all souls ... It is only through the great truth of returning to oneself that the person and the people, the world and all the worlds, the whole of existence, will return to their Creator, to be illumined by the light of life.”

There is no greater joy for a parent than when our children embrace that sense of their own worth, when they realize the best version of themselves, when they find a path in life that gives them meaning and purpose and a sense of fulfillment and peace.

Recently my friend shared with me an amazing call he received from his daughter. After her last stint in rehab she moved up north and started a new life. She got a job, attends her recovery meeting every day, and was living in a halfway house. He hadn't spoken to her in several months, when the phone rang with a number he didn't recognize. It was his daughter. "Daddy," she said. "I'm calling you from my own phone which I just bought this week. I bought it with my own money that I earned from my job. It's mine. I'm so proud of myself."

In tears, he told me he had never been more proud of his daughter in her life. After all the years of pain and anguish, the tears this time were tears of sheer joy and happiness.

Tradition teaches throughout the centuries that God too is waiting for us to find ourselves. God too is waiting for us to call. And when we return, we will find love, only love.

So in this New Year, we ought each of us to do what we can to provide that sense of joy to God as our parent.

Avinu Malkeinu, let this be the year when we finally decided to listen to the Divine guidance your Torah and tradition have to offer.

Avinu Malkeinu, let this be the when we cultivate in ourselves a sense of humility and realize that maybe we don't have all the answers.

Avinu Malkeinu, let this be the year when we turn away from our own selfish cares and concerns and instead embrace the mission to live with gratitude and in service to others.

Avinu Malkeinu, let this be the year when we finally decided to honor our parents, mortal and Divine.

As the legendary prophet of children Fred Rogers once said: "Parents are like shuttles on a loom. They join the threads of the past with threads of the future and weave their own bright patterns as they go."

Avinu Malkeinu, our holy, nurturing, loving parent, we give thanks for the tapestry of Torah and tradition you have helped our parents and our parents' parents to weave for us. May we, in this New Year 5780, gather the threads of the future and weave them into a fabric that expresses our gratitude for the gift of life we are given, that represents the very best version of ourselves, and that helps us return to You, embraced by your love for us, our love for each other, and an honest love for ourselves. Inscribe us for blessing in the Book of Life – and give us peace.