



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Rabbi Soloveitchik on Parenting

Jewish Parenting: Cultivating and Teaching

What is the essential role of a parent? What advice can be gleaned from the Torah regarding this most serious and challenging task?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that an answer to this question can be found by comparing the parenting roles of Adam and Chava to Avraham and Sara. They responded to this calling quite differently.

The Rav draws our attention to the significance of the names of these individuals. As is well known, names found in the Torah often convey particular ideas and messages.

The name Adam relates to the word *adama* (earth). Adam's name is not identified with fatherhood. Adam's role, within the family, "is of such minimal significance that it is not worth being demonstrated by the name." (Family Redeemed, p. 106). In contrast we take note of the name of Avraham. The Torah explicitly states that his name contains *av*, fatherhood. Avraham, in his role of founding a people, teaches that unlike the "sinful-egotistic, pleasure- and power-oriented community," this new

community differs by being an "ethical, love-oriented and humble community." Therefore it deserves emphasis. Avraham, says the Rav, "redeemed and elevated" the role of fatherhood. (ibid.)

Chava, the name of the first woman is also telling. The Torah tells us that "The man called his wife's name Eve (*Chava*) because she was the mother of all living things (*chai*)" (*Bereshit* 3:20). Apparently the woman is naturally concerned with motherhood more so than the man with fatherhood. A woman is more inclined to desire having a child. Without question the nine months of pregnancy, with all its attendant biological and psychological changes, the birth of the child with pain and suffering, the nursing of the baby and, later, the caretaking of and attending to the child - all form a part of the motherhood experience.

Not only did the role of the male undergo a change when Avraham came on the scene, but the female did as well. "Avraham personified fatherhood as a great commitment. Sarah became the first mother in which her motherhood stemmed not from instinctual involvement due to biological pressure but from free commitment as well. What was Sara's commitment? The same as Avraham's: an educational *masorah* commitment to hand down and teach the covenant (*Brit*), God's word, the way of a covenantal life of *chesed u-tzedakah*, of kindness and charity." (Ibid., p. 108) The

Rav powerfully summed up this idea: “Sara replaced Eve...Eve’s motherhood consisted in giving life (in a natural sense) to her child...Sara’s was due to a great vision, to a new mission she took on.” (Ibid., p. 109)

When the Torah first introduces us to Avraham and Sara we immediately learn that they serve as teachers and are fully engaged in educating others, “...all the persons they had acquired in Charan” (Bereshit 12:5). The Torah expresses God’s love for the house of Avraham in the following way: “For I have known him that he shall command his children and his household after him that they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice...” (Bereshit 18:19).

Two Complementary Roles

Father and mother play distinct roles in imparting Jewish values to the child. These are complementary roles. The father is responsible for the *intellectual* tradition. Talmud Torah, imparting law and directives and a skill to study is this sphere in particular. A mother provides for the child in the *experiential* domain. “It is impossible to provide one with formal training in the experiential realm. Experiences are communicated not through the word but through steady contact, through association, through osmosis, through a tear or smile, through dreamy eyes and soft melody, through the silence at twilight and the recital of *Shema*. All this is to be found in the maternal domain. The mother creates

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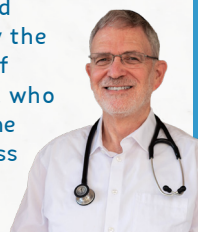
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the mood; she is the artist who is responsible for the magnificence, solemnity and beauty. She tells the child of the great romance of Judaism. She somehow communicates to him the tremor, the heartbeat of Judaism, while playing, singing, laughing and crying.” (Ibid., p. 115)

The Rav accentuated the parents’ dual role: “We have two *massorot*, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* - the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers. “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob (= the women) and tell the children of Israel (= the men)” (*Shemot* 19:3), “Hear my son the instruction of thy father (*mussar avicha*) and forsake not the teaching of thy mother (*torat imecha*)” (Proverbs 1:8). (Tradition, Special Issue, 1978, p. 76)

The Rav went on to describe what he learned from his mother: “Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She (i.e. my mother) taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and a warmth to mitzvot. I learned from her the most important thing in life - to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting on my frail shoulders.” (Ibid, p.77)

Eshet Chayil: The Women’s Crisis Leadership

“Were it not for the mother, the Jews would not have been able to defy and survive so many crises which threatened to annihilate our people” (Ibid., p. 115). The

mother in times of crises acts heroically. The Torah, often, portrays the woman as the determining influencer, actually saving the male from committing grave errors (Ibid., p.116). God rejects Abraham’s plea to retain Yishmael in the covental home: “..in all that Sarah has said unto you, hearken unto her voice, for in Isaac shall your seed be called” (*Bereshit* 21:12).

A second example is Rivka taking responsibility for the covenant being transmitted to Yaakov instead of Esav (*Bereshit* 27). A third: Miriam is responsible for the emergence of Moshe as a leader and redeemer of his people. If not for her, Moshe may not have survived. She suggested to the princess that a Hebrew wet-nurse be employed for the infant, preventing Moshe from disappearing in anonymity (*Shemot* 2:2,7, 8). And the Aggadah relates that the women refused to contribute to the Golden Calf (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 45) while they gave generously to the Mishkan (*Shemot* 35).

The Book of Proverbs dedicated its last section (31:11-31) to the woman of valor. Valor in this context is suggestive of her heroic stances and courage in time of need. In general, the valor attests to the woman playing her vital role as both tender guardian, teacher, and courageous leader.

In this context the Rav offered a homiletic insight as to the reason why the woman determines the Jewish status of a child. The covenant long-lasting quality ultimately is influenced more significantly by the mother. “The Halacha was cognizant of the greatness of the covenantal mother when it formulated the rule that *Kedushat Yisrael*, one’s status as a Jew, can be transmitted only through the woman.” (Family Redeemed, p. 120).

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The Hebrew Term for Parent

The Hebrew word for parents - *horim* - is indicative of the educational role that is required. Hora is similar to the word *morah*, teacher, which is also similar to the word *Torah*, which means lessons and guidance. In contrast the English word 'parent,' is based on the Latin "pere", which means to bring forth or to give birth to. Here the emphasis is apparently on bringing the child into the world. The Jewish stress is on rearing, cultivating and educating the child.

The Ultimate Blessing

A final thought. When Yaakov offers a blessing to his beloved son Yosef, strangely, he seems to veer away and offer a blessing to Yosef's children. "He blessed Yosef and said, "The God before whom my father walked...". This blessing addresses Ephraim and Menashe. The Zohar (Vayechi, 1:227b) asked, "Why do we not find here that Yosef is blessed?" The following beautiful answer is given: "When his sons were blessed he was blessed." In other words, the most meaningful and joyful blessing that a parent receives is when they witness their own children walking in the path of Torah, carrying on the tradition, and living a committed Jewish life. May all of us, who are blessed to be parents, merit this exalted delight. Amen. ■

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