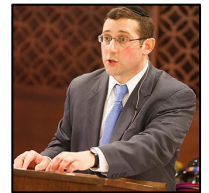


Parenting Lessons from the Parashah

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Parashat Vayehi, the final parashah in the book of Genesis, presents the Israelites on the cusp of a major transition. While Genesis highlights family relations, Exodus introduces the idea of peoplehood. Genesis closes with a family gathering and, by next week, the Israelites will be described as a nation. What lessons does Genesis, and Vayehi in particular, offer about effective parenting? And what can the Torah teach us about the relationship between family and nation?

A look at the relationships between fathers and sons in Genesis as a whole reveals a progression: with each subsequent patriarch, the relations between fathers and sons improve. Abraham did not bless his sons at all; Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, but separately. Only with Jacob are sons gathered and blessed together (and not only sons, but even the grandsons, Ephraim and Menashe, too!). This progression is the perfect prelude to the unification required to be called a nation. The sequence from Genesis to Exodus reminds us that strong families are the backbone of a strong people.

The description of Jacob's sons in Vayehi highlights their diversity. But the differences between Joseph and Judah in particular sealed for each one a place and purpose in the greater narrative of Israel's peoplehood. Joseph, irrefutably Jacob's favorite son, is exemplary on the moral front and pious in every way. As a young man alone in a strange land, he resists temptation and rejects his sexual urges brought on by the advances of Potiphar's wife. His moral compass is too strong. Judah, on the other hand, is a moral failure. He readily hires a harlot whom he later discovers to be his daughter-in-law! He is out of control, directed by instinct and not by the right intuition.

Joseph, when finally meeting up with his brothers after years of suffering from their original treacherous deed to abandon him, forgives, forgets, and lovingly embraces his brothers. When we think back to that original act against Joseph, how did Judah behave? True, he opposed murdering Joseph; however, he did not suggest freeing him. His words were telling: "*Mah betza ki naharog et ahinu?*"—"what profit will we gain by killing our brother?" (Gen. 37:26). Let's sell him instead [!], he offers, his words ringing vulgarly of materialism.

For Joseph, piety and the righteous path were seemingly a part of his genetic make-up. Judah, to put it bluntly, had problems. Like so many of us observe from our own parenting experience, some kids just always make the mark and others—as hard as it is to admit—disappoint. We should never overlook, however, when our children strive and improve. Judah puts forth great effort to overcome his character deficiencies. In both instances—after hiring the harlot and selling his brother—Judah admits guilt, repents, and strives to transcend the limits of his inclinations.

As we know, the Israelite kings are descended from Judah. On his deathbed, despite all of the difficulties with Judah, Jacob saw the leadership potential in Judah and blessed him with the line of kingship. And this, even though without a shadow of a doubt Joseph was his favorite. I would like to suggest that the potential for leadership Jacob saw was based on Judah's humanity. The best leaders are the people who not only conceptually grasp the frailties of the human experience, but who also experience them. Jacob's calculus was that a personality such as his son Judah, who had sunk to the depths of immoral and uncompassionate behavior, who had wrestled and now repented and returned—was better equipped to lead. As Maimonides reminds us in the Laws of Repentance: "those who repent stand on a higher

level than those who are completely righteous. For, those who repent have applied a higher degree of control.” To Jacob, Judah the son and the sinner had now surpassed his initial limitations and was fit for leadership. Joseph, the primordial *tzaddik*, by virtue of his moral perfection, was not.

Ironically, the same traits of purity and righteousness, trust and humility, that encouraged Pharaoh to appoint Joseph to be his right-hand man, struck Jacob as weaknesses when considering the future kingship of Israel. Indeed, Jacob insightfully observed that the qualities required of the assistant are never the same as those demanded of the manager.

Jacob’s wisdom is telling. The end of the book of Genesis is about the beginnings of how we learn to live together. The family provides the unit in which we strive and struggle, grow and grieve. The biblical family dynamics, presenting constant challenges, can still speak to us when we step back and take a close look at our own families. Jacob’s lessons for parents remain important. Encourage and embrace the diversity amongst your children. Learn to appreciate the inherent differences in each of them. Respect the decisions children make that may not entirely square with your own values. As a parent, learn to be flexible and capitalize on the important qualities that each child has and can help them contribute to the world. Joseph certainly played a crucial role in the developing narrative of the family and the people Israel. Jacob, in his eternal wisdom, however, also saw the potential in Judah, a son he could have written off because of real concerns about his character and ability. Jacob teaches us to look deeper and be more open—to nurture, encourage, and trust. By blessing Judah with the line of kingship, Jacob reminds us what parenting can really be.