

Giving Advice to Your Children
Rosh HaShana Morning 2009
Jeffrey A. Summit

Earlier in the summer, Gail and I were visiting our friends Rabbi Larry and Karin Kushner in their home in San Francisco. The topic of discussion was: How much advice could we, should we, do we, give to our children? Now, all of our children are somewhat grown up, though none of ours are out of their twenties, and all kinds of decisions are in the process of being made, from what kinds of work they might chose to pursue, is graduate school an option in their lives, where might they chose to live (measured in hundreds, and in some cases thousands of miles from Boston) and might they ever consider getting married and having children of their own, while Gail and I are residing in this world, as opposed to, say, the world to come? Might we, could we, offer advice on any of these topics?

Larry was unequivocal and said that in dealing with his children, he gives no advice: nada, zip, ziltch, nothing. And he doesn't believe in giving any advice at all: not on whom to marry, on what kind of work to pursue, on what movies to see or what to have for dinner. There were those of us at the table who disagreed, and besides, how often do children follow parents' advice anyway?

I have always been struck by the fact that the rabbis, who could have chosen any Torah readings they wanted for Rosh HaShanah, chose a series of Torah readings that have to do with the tensions in the relationships between children and parents. Hagar is sent into the wilderness by her mistress Sarah and almost abandons her son Ishmael. Abraham is commanded to kill Isaac. It feels like a new year can't begin without confronting that primal relationship, the bond of sons and daughters and fathers and mothers. Parents sometimes want so much from our children. As children, we deal with those pressures, and we have high expectations of our parents as well. Even in good situations, there is conflict to be resolved and a lot to be negotiated. This morning, I want to talk about the topic of parents giving advice to children, and, because we're in a community where more people are children than parents, I want to talk about how to hear and process the advice that parents are motivated to share with children.

A number of weeks ago, we read a section of the Torah that is pretty clear on how to deal with a child who does not follow a parent's advice, and how to address the problem of a child who might be defiant or rebellious, a "ben sorer u'moreh," a kid who is abusing substances, who is out of control. You kill him. I'm not making this up. You take him to a public place -- I imagine that would be in front of Ballou Hall, or maybe the plaza outside the Campus Center -- and say, "This child of mine is rebellious and doesn't listen to my thoughtful, sage advice!" And then you kill him.

The rabbis in the mishna, in the eighth chapter of Sanhedrin, thought it would be a good idea to look a little more deeply into this *heter* on killing your kids. They proceed to make sure we know the parameters for proceeding on this course of action.

First, the rabbis deal with a child's age and ask, "Me-aymatai na'aseh ben sorer u'moreh?" How old does a child have to be before being considered in this category? And they answer that you certainly can't kill a rebellious child when the child is still a little kid and not responsible for her actions. So before she reaches the beginnings of sexual maturity, infanticide is not an option because "sh'lo ba l'clal mitzvot," she is not yet obligated to observe the commandments. So too, after a child has achieved sexual maturity, (the material in Sanhedrin is somewhat graphic and I decided to cut some of these parts of my drash), then the child is no longer a child and his or her misdeeds are the purview of the courts, not the parents. So, the rabbis teach that the category of the rebellious child, who will not listen to parents' wise advice, only applies to that liminal period of puberty, when a child is entering sexual maturity but has not achieved that stage of adulthood where they have their lives fully figured out, which in our society is the period from 12 to 27 for girls and 13 to 31 for boys.

The mishna then proceeds to limit this definition even further, quoting the Torah, "ki yehiyeh l'eish ben" when a man has a son, stipulating that the law then must only refer to "ben v'lo bat," to a son and not a daughter. Which is interesting because elsewhere in rabbinic writing, "ben" is taken to be inclusive of both genders -- but not here. Then the rabbis go further in refining the definition of what it means to be rebellious, a drunkard and a glutton. They tell us that that category certainly can't apply to one who eats or drinks too much on a holiday, when feasting is the rule, not the exception. Since the Torah says a rebellious son is both a drunkard and a glutton, if he was just a drunk, or just a compulsive overeater, we're really sorry but you can't stone him to death because the Torah specifies "zolel v'soveh," a glutton and a drunkard.

Then the mishna starts to get even more interesting. The rabbis say that if his father wanted to kill him, but his mother didn't, or amazingly enough, if his mother wanted to kill him, but his father objected, the child can't be seen as a *ben sorer u'moreh* because the Torah clearly says that his father and his mother should take hold of him. And for that matter, mishna 8:4 states that if either the father or mother had a maimed hand, they couldn't enact this law, because the text says they both must actually "take hold of him." And if either the father or the mother were lame, it was a no-go, because the Torah says, both parents must "bring him out." And anyway, mishna 8:4 concludes, this all has to go before the courts, first for a warning and then for a full trial before a capital court of 23 judges before any verdict can be rendered on a child's life.

Could the rabbis in the mishna actually be trying to change this very clear law in the Torah? It would seem the rabbinic tradition doesn't want parents killing our children, even when a child doesn't follow a parent's thoughtful direction. Or, maybe the rabbis aren't trying to change the Torah at all. Perhaps they take this law so seriously that if a parent chooses to apply this law, the rabbis want to make absolutely sure that every letter of the law is fulfilled before a parent would declare a child to be so outside the bounds of family and the community that you would cut off your child so irreversibly. In truth, the horrifying thought of a parent killing a child is so far from our tradition. That's affirmed in the Torah reading for Rosh HaShanah: Abraham might have been commanded to bind and kill Isaac but it was never actually meant to happen. That kind

of control over a child's life is simply outside our tradition. But while Abraham doesn't kill Isaac, he does bind his son. To move this into our discussion, many parents throw so much advice and direction at their children that the children feel bound and constrained.

It's instructive to remember that when we think of the two most essential commandments that outline a child's obligation to parents, found in the two versions of the Ten Commandments, a child is obligated to honor and respect his parents. The Torah is clear: honor and respect, not love and obey. Our tradition seems to be far too wise to obligate children to love their parents (how do you mandate love?) or to obey them (as much as one might sometimes wish that were so). So, as a child, how do you deal with, how do you listen to, advice from your parents? I think the essence of the commandment to "honor and respect" our parents means we have to take our parents seriously. We can't blow them off, we have to carefully consider what they have to say. As we move forward to make thoughtful decisions about our lives, our parents may not get a veto, but they certainly should have a vote.

Parents are sometimes afraid or concerned that their son or daughter simply doesn't hear their advice, so they repeat it again and again and again. So now it's time for a story, and as you know, all of my stories are true stories. This one has to do with a mother who was so upset because she wanted her daughter to go straight to law school after college. The mother was absolutely positive this was the best course for her daughter. Her daughter was looking at a job in London and thought the time right after college would be perfect to travel and live abroad before focusing on grad school. Every conversation was about, "Julie (not her real name), I really think this is the right time to go to law school." Then she would send articles from the New York Times to back up her points. This mother called me up to ask what she should do. "Does she really know how I feel?" she asked me. I answered, "I assure you: your daughter knows how you feel. But she is not going to be happy, or successful, if you push her to graduate school before she is ready to make that commitment." My wife's mom has some advice about parents giving advice. She says, "If you have to give advice, think very carefully about what you want to say, find the right time to say it, and then say it clearly and say it once."

When I was in the middle of writing this drash, I got a call from our son Zack, who is 23. He wanted to talk about some things going on in his life. So after I listened to him, and reflected on some of the issues, I asked his opinion: What should I say about parents giving advice to children? Zack thought for a moment and said, "It's good to wait to give advice until a child asks for it."

As a child, you can help your parent a lot by responding thoughtfully when a parent is repeating and repeating advice. Let me get personal again. Our aforementioned son Zack is an excellent rock climber and into winter mountaineering. While I'm an enthusiastic hiker, I'm not a climber. Every time Zack would leave to go climbing, my wife and I would basically freak out, and say "Please be careful. Are you sure this is safe? Will you promise us you're going to be careful?" After about a year of this, he finally sat us down and said two things: "I know you love me and worry about me. But

my motto is 'live to climb another day' and I take my safety extremely seriously. In fact, I know more people who died in car accidents on Comm Ave than rock climbing. Dad, how would you feel if every time you went out for a run on Comm Ave, I went crazy and said, "Dad, please be careful. It's really dangerous out there. Promise me you're looking both ways when you get to cross streets." "Mmm..." I said. "Yes, I would find that annoying." And here's the second thing Zack said: "Come rock climbing with me so you can see how much safety is a part of this activity." I did, a bunch of times, and what I learned was that my son was careful and accomplished. While loving parents will always worry about their children's safety, ultimately in a life well-lived, a parent needs to realize that safety has to be the child's responsibility, not the parent's obsession.

Sometimes parents can be overwhelming when they set out all the things they want for, and from, their children. My friend and teacher Rabbi Dick Israel, alav hashalom, used to tell a story about a father who was so concerned about his son's direction in life and finally told him, "Son, all I want is for you to marry a nice Jewish girl!" The son replies, "Dad, I'm in the middle of making all kinds of decisions in my life. You're giving me tons of advice about what to do. I'll tell you what. You're sure you know what's best for me? I'll let you pick one: 'marry, 'nice, 'Jewish,' or 'girl.'"

In the midrash, the rabbis quote the verse, "Blessed is the person who does deeds of loving kindness at every moment." And then they proceed to ask, "Wait, how is that possible, that a person can do deeds of loving kindness at every moment?" And they find an answer, "Ah, this must refer to parents!" But how much love is too much love? We want so much for our children and there are times when it really feels like we know best and so wish that our hard-won experience, our sage advice, could save them from doing the wrong thing, could protect them from the pain of making mistakes. But that's not how it works. It seems to work gradually, incrementally. Every new year, if we are fortunate, we learn something more. It's not accident that the word in our tradition for change and growth, "teshuvah," means "return." It would be great if we could get it right the first time, but very, very few of us do. We return every year, as parents, as children. If we work hard, each year, we learn a little more from our mistakes, and commit to taking this precious opportunity, this new year, to create our lives anew. Shanah Tovah. Best wishes for a sweet, healthy and fulfilling new year.