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Yom Kippur 5782

Perfectly Imperfect

Over these last eighteen months, my wife and I have spent many more hours than we ever thought we would be spending parenting. This has led us down the rabbit hole of Instagram influencers - who always seem to know the answers; to scrolling through countless parenting blogs, to commiserating with friends, and even at some point - asking our own parents for help. Full-time parenting during a full-time pandemic is, quite literally, no joke.

As a rabbi, I have often found comfort and advice in our ancient texts. So, like any good student of Judaism, I went to the sources for parenting advice - and what better source could there be than the Torah. Unfortunately, what I found left much to be desired. At nearly every turn and in nearly every chapter, there are countless episodes of parenting gone wrong. One only needs to remember what we read just ten days ago on Rosh Hashana. In the midst of Genesis, Abraham casts one child away to almost certain death and nearly sacrifices the other. Isaac and Rebecca played favorites with their beloved son Jacob only to have him repeat the same mistake with his own children. This of course led the brothers to make the ill-fated decision to sell Joseph into slavery. And let's not forget about Moses, considered the greatest Jew of all time, who could not even bring himself to circumcise his own children - and who name his son named Gershom - a name which actually means "a stranger to me". Torah is NOT exactly the place one should go to when looking for parenting advice to follow.

In her book, "The Gifts of Imperfect Parenting; Raising Children with Courage, Compassion, & Connection" Dr. Brene Brown, like the Torah, gives us a foundation that enables us to understand that perfect parenting does not exist...Yet, we - each of us still struggles with the social expectations that teach us from the time we are young that being imperfect is synonymous with being inadequate. These messages that penetrate our psyches are so powerful that we end up spending precious time and energy managing the perceptions and the carefully edited versions of our family that we show to the world".

This statement has never felt truer than in this past year. How many of us were forced to put our lives in the outside world on hold, to bring them inside, only to try to create the perception to the outside world that we are doing okay? There was a moment, and I'm not sure how many of you also had this moment, where I just needed to shut my phone off. I needed to remove Facebook, Instagram, television talk shows, anything - that was going to stir up that sense that I'm just not doing whatever I'm doing,

correctly. There were those who projected the message that everything in their world was perfect, and there were others who made it appear that they could juggle and handle it all - so much so that sometimes it made me want to scream inside because I knew I was neither of those things. I constantly looked for perfection in myself and knew that I would never be that person. I also knew that I had it better than most, so I would strive to be grateful for my blessings and seek out gratitude for what I did have. When it got too much to handle, when my sense of control was slipping away, when I felt the most vulnerable and the most frustrated, I - like I'm sure some of you - would occasionally lose my patience with members of my family.

Individuals sometimes miss the mark. They make mistakes, they yell, get frustrated, lash out, or cause hurt and pain. As the saying goes, "we are, after all, human." To all of the children out there - and frankly we're all children - regardless of our age - here is a little secret - parents are people too - and OCCASIONALLY they make mistakes. One of the lessons that Judaism teaches is that, even though we strive for perfection, we are not perfect beings. When the very first human beings were created - they were created perfect. Adam and Eve sat in the garden alone, without a future and even a glimpse of what they could become. When they ate from the Tree of Knowledge a whole new world was opened to them. They became aware, and judgmental, and people who are both aware and able to make decisions can make mistakes.

However, the instinct to want to be perfect just like back in the Garden of Eden has never gone away. Each of us is a descendant of those first two humans, and so we have within us a strong sense and want for perfection - we demand it of others and we often demand it of ourselves. Perfection is rarely possible, and when it comes to parenting - ooh - being a perfect parent is DEFINITELY not possible.

Reb Nachman of Bratzlav once wrote: A certain king sent his son far away to study. The son eventually returned to the king's palace fully versed in all the arts and sciences. One day the king told his son to take a large stone and bring it up to the top floor of the palace. But the stone was so heavy that the prince could not even lift it up. Eventually the king said to his son, "Did you really imagine that I meant you to do the impossible and carry the stone just as it is up there? Even with all your wisdom, how were you supposed to do such a thing? That was not what I meant. I wanted you to take a big hammer and smash the stone into little pieces. This is how you will be able to bring it up to the top floor." The hard work of the High Holy Days, is figuring out which stones need lifting, which need smashing, and which need rebuilding. It isn't easy to smash our hearts, but we must do it to truly and honestly begin to change.

During these last ten days we asked ourselves: "Have I done enough or have I been good enough?" In the *Vidui*, the confessional prayer, we stand together

implored God to hear our prayers, not only to say thanks or in gratitude for what we have, but also to offer prayers that say we will strive to be better - asking God to trust us and give us another chance to be better. Let's be honest - that is certainly one of the many reasons we are all standing here together today. We all want to ask God for just another day, another week, another month, another year - in the hope that perhaps this time we can get it right.

After the hard work we have all done, we have the need to show our vulnerability because sometimes, we need to understand - and we need to realize - that we are broken - in order to become whole; we might be scared of what is inside and it takes incredible bravery and strength to open it up. In fact, there is tremendous power in showing others our vulnerability.

During the New Year we pray be written into the Book of Life. But this doesn't mean to just be living physically. It means to be truly alive - in every aspect of our life. To be there when the magic happens. To be the author - and perhaps - as is pointed out in the Broadway musical *Big Fish* - the hero of our own story. To understand there will be peaks and there will be valleys and to fully comprehend we need to be willing to be broken in order to be rebuilt.

Brene Brown writes that, "we don't forsake our journey" for our children's journey "because by doing so we're not handing them anything of value." I believe that God functions the same way in our lives today. Throughout the month of Elul and the High Holy Days we have been on a journey. A journey towards forgiveness, towards a new path, towards a new future. The truth is that none of us knows what lies ahead on this journey; let us take comfort in the fact that God supports us and holds us up when we stray or fall down. We may not know what it is that God has in store for us in this life, or what challenges lie ahead, but that should not get in the way of living our lives and striving to be the best that we can be - for ourselves, for our children, and for our future.

I have not given up on the goal of becoming the perfect parent - or the perfect person or the perfect Jew. However, I have come to grips with the reality that imperfection in life is not only what makes it fun, but also what makes it life. Making mistakes is a large part of what it is to be human. Just as we expect our children to make mistakes, God also expects us to make mistakes, because that is the only way for us to learn to become the person we are destined to become.

In a year that saw so many of us challenged, personally, professionally, spiritually and beyond may we find comfort knowing that those little mistakes and big mistakes have brought us to where we are today. They have made us who we are. Without them, we wouldn't be as perfectly imperfect as we are - just as God intended us to be.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah - May You be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year.

