

Caring For Our Parents As The Children Of Isaac

There is a story told of a frail old man who went to live with his son and daughter in-law as it became increasingly difficult for him to take care of himself. Every night, the family would sit down to dinner together, the grandfather, his children, and their four year old son. And every night, the grandfather's shaking hands and failing eyesight would make eating rather difficult. Food would fall off of his plate, his drink would often spill on the table cloth, silverware would fall to the floor and over the course of a week, the grandfather would usually break something.

One night the old man's son, irritated with the mess, declared to his wife that he had had enough of this mess. The next day, he set aside a separate table in the corner complete with a wooden bowl and wooden utensils so that the grandfather would no longer break anything. That night at dinner, the four year old boy looked curiously at his grandfather who had tears in his eyes as he ate in silence. His parents, in the meantime, continued to chastise the old man whenever he dropped something on the floor- though they were relieved that nothing else had broken.

This went on for a few days until one evening, the parents noticed that the boy sat down on the floor with a huge pile of sticks and wooden scraps that

he had collected. "What are you doing with those wooden sticks?" his father and mother gently inquired. "Oh." the boy said sweetly. "I am making a bowl for you and mommy to eat your food from when I am a grown up." The four year old smiled and went back to work.

The parents were speechless. That night, the husband took the grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table. From that moment on, there was no longer any yelling at dinner. The grandfather ate in peace, supported and cared for by his loving children who learned to be more patient, caring, and understanding thanks to the wisdom of their young son (Schram, [Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another](#)).

In recent decades, as medical advances have increased and we have become more attuned to living a healthy lifestyle, a new classification of people has entered into the American Lexicon- the Sandwich generation, referring to people who spend time caring for both their own children and their aging parents at the same time. The Pew Research center has found that just over 1 of every 8 Americans ages 40-60 are a part of this group raising children and caring for a parent. In addition, between 7 to 10 million adults care for their parents from a long distance.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandwich_generation)

How many of you are a part of the "sandwich generation?" As you can see, you are not alone.

The dynamic between adult children and elderly parents is often physically and emotionally taxing. In Rabbi Dayle Friedman's important book entitled Jewish Visions For Aging, she describes the following scene:

We are pacing in the family waiting room. Each of us has our eyes on the door to the intensive care unit and our ear affixed to a cell phone. My siblings and I are trying to be in two places at once. We are in the hospital attending to my stepfather, who has just had a serious heart attack. And we are trying, by long-distance phone, to care for our young children, thousands of miles away. We are talking to toddlers, cheering overwhelmed spouses, cancelling appointments, juggling work commitments, and feeling generally awful as we wrestle with our decisions about leaving.

My brother decides to go home after two days so that he can be with his son on the first day of kindergarten. I choose to forget accompanying my two-year old twins to their first day of daycare. My step-brother decides to miss yet another day of income from private practice so that he can be with the folks for Shabbat. We know that whenever we leave it will be too soon for my parents and one local sibling, who are grateful for every moment of presence, encouragement and advocacy. And however long we stay, is too long for our children, who are too young to understand, and for our partners, who are heroically doing the work of two parents.

For many of us, this story is all too familiar. Being a member of the Sandwich generation is complicated business. And not just because of the logistic challenges. Rabbi Friedman continues:

Caring for parents is emotionally complex, since it challenges the order of the relationship we've known. We are used to our parents being "in charge" and taking care of us. Turning the tables in these regards can be provocative at best. In relationships where there has been conflict,

strain, or estrangement, the new situation might create an opening for healing, but it can also dredge up old wounds. Painful past experiences may limit the ways which an adult child is willing to care for a parent (85).

Fortunately, our Jewish tradition has something to contribute to the conversation. As many have no doubt heard before, there are numerous Jewish texts discussing the importance of honoring our elders more generally and our parents in particular. The text at the core of this discussion is found in the fifth commandment, when we are taught:

כְּבֹד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ, *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long on the land that the Eternal your God is giving you (Ex. 20: 12)*. This value is expressed again in Leviticus where we read:

אִישׁ אָמְרוּ וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ וְאֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ אֲנִי ה', אֶל־לְהִיכֶם:

"You shall each revere your mother and your father, and keep my Sabbaths: I, the Eternal am your God." (Leviticus 19:3) Exactly what it means to "honor" versus "revere" is a large part of this discussion which we will come back to in a moment.

But there is another text, a much more complicated one, that we read this morning which also teaches us about interplay and responsibilities between parents and children. And that is the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac.

We are all familiar with the story of Abraham taking his son Isaac to the mountaintop on God's command. This year I read for the first time a fascinating, and surprising interpretation of this oft-explored story. Rabbi Bradley Artson posits that Isaac knew exactly what was going on and was a willing participant in his father's test. The midrash teaches that Isaac was not a young child, but actually thirty-seven years old, when he was bound on the altar. As the two of them are walking up the mountain, we read of the only conversation that they have with one another:

"My father!" says Isaac.

"Here I am, my son." responds Abraham.

"Here is the flame and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

And Abraham said: "It is God who will see to the sheep for this burnt offering my son. And the two of them walked on together (Genesis 22:7-8).

As Rabbi Artson point out, it is Isaac who breaks the silence and asks about the sheep. It is as if Isaac was looking for confirmation about what he already knew. That it was he, the child, who had to make the ultimate sacrifice for his father.

As the Zohar teaches:

Here we must reflect that the Torah says, 'God tested Abraham.' The verse should have read, "God tested Isaac," for Isaac was already thirty-seven years old and his father was no longer accountable for him. If Isaac had said "I refuse," his father would not have been punished (119b)....

The Zohar implies that Isaac knew what was going on and if he had refused, Abraham would not have been punished. Another midrash is even more explicit about Isaac's willingness to make this sacrifice for his father when it pictures Isaac talking to his brother Ishmael and stating *"I am now thirty seven years old, yet if God desired of me that I be slaughtered, I would not refuse. Said the Holy One Blessed be God, "This is the moment!" Straightaway, "God tested Abraham." (Bereshit Rabbah 54:4)*

Why is all of this important? What does Isaac's apparent willingness to go along with Abraham's plan come to teach us? Rabbi Artson writes:

The reason Isaac's willingness to go with his father matters is because we, too, are called upon to make sacrifices for our parents. All of us are summoned to play the part of supporting actor or actress in the drama of our parent's lives. We are all called to be willing to sacrifices so that they might pass the texts that they encounter in life (108).

Our parents' tests come at every stage of our lives; the little child who must occasionally sacrifice her parents' attention for the sake of a younger sibling; the teenager who must sacrifice some independence and control for the sake of a parent's concern and standards; the young adult who must spend time away from friends or preferred activities in order to attend to his parents' needs to stay in touch; and the middle-aged (and sometimes elderly) adult who must sacrifice time, worry, and finances, for parents who might be ill, lonely, or declining....

At each step of the way parents and children engage in a dynamic minuet, a give-and-take of giving and needing, insisting, and

relinquishing. For children, finding the balance between living their lives in accordance with their own integrity while also giving up some independence to please their parents reflects a real struggle and sacrifice. Allowing older parents to have their own integrity and to live their own lives requires a sacrifice no less difficult. Above all else, being willing to act as a support and ally in the parents ongoing journey through life takes devotion, discipline, and a willingness on the part of the children to sublimate their own needs for the well-being of their parents.

But don't our parents deserve that? Having given of themselves throughout our childhood and our adolescence, don't they deserve some measure of sacrifice from their children? (Artson, Passing Life's Tests, 108-109)

This, then, becomes the message that we are to learn from the Akiedah- that children must sometimes be willing to make sacrifices for their parents.

But what exactly does it mean to sacrifice for our parents. Just what exactly are the responsibilities of a child, in particular an adult child, to his or her parents? For this we must turn back to the verses which I mentioned earlier about treating our parents with *kavod*, honor, and with *mora*, reverence and awe.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman teaches that reverence is about preserving our parents dignity. Whatever issues and challenges we face with our parents, we are to avoid behaviors that might compromise their dignity. She writes:

Even if our roles have shifted and we are now caring for our parents, we are called to allow them to keep their place. We must not usurp their position of respect or authority. We must not take advantage of them. And we must not make decisions that fail to respect their wishes (Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 87).

Kavod, respect, on the other hand, revolves around providing for our parents' material and concrete needs.

This mitzvah obligates us to ensure that our parents have adequate shelter, food, clothing, and transportation. It is our responsibility to see that they are well cared for. There is a debate in the sources about financial responsibility. Some authorities hold that a child must pay for a parent's needs, while others argue that the child is obliged to make sure the needs are met but can use the parents money to pay for this (Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 88).

Beyond minimally ensuring that our parents basic needs are fulfilled, we are also taught to care for our parents' needs in a way that is kind, genuine, caring, and thoughtful. In other words, respecting our parents begrudgingly does not cut it.

Okay- so we must sacrifice for our parents. We must treat them with a sense of dignity and ensure that their basic needs are met in a gracious manner. But are there limits to the sacrifices that we must make? Are there limits to the obligations that we have towards our parents?

According to the sources the answer is yes. And in particular, if our relationship with our partners comes into play. According to the rabbis, honoring our parents must not endanger our marital harmony. We are encouraged to strike a balance between our responsibilities towards our partners and our children, and our responsibilities towards our parents. *Yes, we must sacrifice for our parents, but we must not allow that sacrifice to ruin our relationships with our partners and children. In other words, our marriage actually comes first.*

Parents, for their part, are also encouraged when possible to avoid making things hard on the child, and must work hard not to be overbearing. As Maimonides teaches:

a person is forbidden to add to the burden upon his child, and to be particular regarding his (the parents') honor...rather he should be forgiving (towards his child). (Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 91, Mishneh Torah, Mamrim 6:8-9)

We are also taught that when it comes to sacrificing for our parents, we cannot put ourselves in a position that would endanger our physical or mental well-being. Again, to quote Maimonides:

If one's father or mother should become mentally disordered, he should try to treat them as their mental state demands, until they are pitied by God [they die]. But if he finds he cannot endure the situation, because of their extreme madness, let him leave and go away, deputing others to care for them properly (Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 93, Mishne Torah, Mamrim, 6: 10)

In other words, getting help, and ensuring that you are able to care for yourself as you attempt to care for your parents is also a Jewish obligation. No one should feel guilty for the self-care that is often needed for this type of sacrifice.

It is also important to note that Judaism understands that not every parent-child relationship is deserving of sacrifice, honor, and reverence. There are abusive, neglectful and hurtful relationships between parents and children that alter what is expected of a child to his or her parent. In these cases, there is a debate as to one's obligations to his or her parents if they (the parent) have not repented from their abusive behavior. Minimally, in her chapter on our obligations to aging parents, Rabbi Dayle Friedman suggests that in those circumstances, the child at least avoid doing anything active to hurt or dishonor a parent, even if they are not obligated to care and make sacrifices for them in the traditional manner.

While we may not all be parents, everyone in this room is someone's child. Some of us have adult parents for whom we are caring, others of us have adult children who are caring for us; and some of us have it both ways. Some of us have children who are local and others of us have parents who live on the other side of the country. As we begin this New Year together, and think about the sacrifice that Isaac made for Abraham, let us take some

time to think about our own relationships with our parents. In what ways do we choose to honor our parents and in what ways do we revere them? How do we ensure that our parents dignity is maintained as they age and how are we helping to provide for their basic needs? What sacrifices have we made for those who have sacrificed so much for us to be the adults who we are today, and what sacrifices should we be making? What are the limits to the sacrifices that we can make, and are we taking the appropriate steps to ensure that we are nurturing our relationships with our spouses, our children, and ourselves as we journey through this difficult phase in life? What about those in our community who do not have children close by? And what of those who are elderly in our community who never had children to care for them? What are we doing to ensure that these individuals are being cared for? What more could we, as a synagogue, do for the collective parents and elderly in our midst who might need a little extra help? And how might we organize our community to ensure that these people live out the remainder of their lives with the dignity, reverence, and honor that they deserve.

Each of us will become older and all of us will need assistance from our children or those who have come to fill the role of children in our lives. Our parents have expectations of us, God has expectations of us, and our children are always watching and will learn from our example. As the Talmud

says, *Maaseh Avot, Siman L'vanim* - the deeds of the parents are a sign to their children (Sotah 34a). As we begin this New Year together let us think carefully not only about what we are doing for our parents, but also about the messages that we are passing on to our children. Let us dedicate ourselves to caring for our parents and those who are like our parents, with care, forethought, love, and balance.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu- may all of us be written into the Book of Life as we begin this New Year together.