

Yom Kippur 5786

10/2/2025

An old but telling Jewish joke:

Wonder of wonder, miracles of miracles, we elect the first Jewish President of the United States. The night before the inauguration he calls his mother. "Mom, I'd love for you to come visit for the inauguration and stay with me for a few days." She demurs: "Oh I don't know, airfare is so expensive it'd be a waste." The Macher-in-Chief pleads, "Mom, I'll fly you out on Air Force One!" The First Bubbe deflects, "Oh, but you know, cab fare is ridiculous." He continues, "Mom, the Presidential motorcade will drive you here." She retorts, "But accommodations, especially during the inau---"

With growing impatience, the presidential-son who will always be her son-the-president cuts her off, "MOM!! I'll put you in the Lincoln bedroom itself!!" She reluctantly agrees, hangs up and starts talking to her friend. "Who was that?" the friend asks. "My son," the mother replied. The friend gasps "The doctor??" To which the mother replies, "No, the other one."

This bit resonates with me as I'm sure it does for so many of us. My grandpa Joe Kriscfeld, alav hashalom, spent much time and effort wheeling and dealing to obtain for the young men in his family an opportunity to go to medical school at a time of quotas on Jewish admission. Many others in that generation of my family became attorneys. In essence, my father and I were the black sheep of the family in pursuing Judaism rather than law or medicine, despite a grudging old world respect for rabbis. And while I'll never be president, I can hear Joe sighing with his Russian brogue, "Ugh, he could've been a doctor."

Aside from the stereotypical pride Jewish parents of prior generations took in their children pursuing the professions, this joke reflects a deeper aspiration that is both shared by other cultures, but particularly core to our people's consciousness: The dreams and desires we have for our children to succeed, to flourish, and to be happy.

Some of this was certainly rooted in the immigrant experience, as the sacrifices endured and opportunities secured by first generations enabled their children and grandchildren to prosper and gain acceptance in ways that were unimaginable to those who came before.

The Jewish experience in America is singularly blessed and unique in all of our tragic history—despite the perils of our current moment. And for many of our fellow citizens more broadly, America has been that *Goldena Medinah*—that Golden Land of possibility in which each successive generation is expected to do better than their parents, and certainly better than their grandparents.

But there are barriers and trials in this current moment that reflect more than simply a concern for the rise in antisemitism. So many of our young adults are burdened by a growing cynicism and sense of hopelessness. The classic

American dreams of previous generations seem beyond their reach. Technological innovation and the changing global market have eliminated the careers they thought they would pursue; buying a home—long the measure of middle class achievement—is increasingly unaffordable; finding a partner who seeks more than a swiped, fleeting connection eludes many; and even when a partner is found, the ability to save for a child's college or one's retirement is more daunting than ever. This is the first generation of young adults who most likely will not do better than their parents.

And all of these challenges are happening against the backdrop of undeterred climate change, unprecedented division and polarization, and a sense that we lack the agency to do anything about it. Is it any wonder that so many young adults either retreat into the consuming distraction of social media or pin their hopes on the empty promises of socialist utopians whose naïve idealism offers rosy delusions for real-world problems.

But perhaps most heartbreaking in this intergenerational exchange of dashed hopes and deepening heartache is what I'm hearing from so many parents of much younger children. They look at the trials and tribulations of our times and wonder if the pillars of stability and security upon which their parents and grandparents relied will exist for their kids, let alone their grandkids.

Most frighteningly, the mutating and seemingly irreconcilable divisions in our nation—amplified and exacerbated by profit-driven tech companies and craven leaders—threaten not only a sense of civic common cause, but the very foundations of our democracy—its rights, privileges, and blessings—that have defined this country for nearly two and a half centuries.

Many are adept at exploiting the litany of ills that ail us—often in pursuit of profit or to consolidate power. Fewer of us are offering a pathway through this wilderness of wantonness toward a Promised Land of possibility. I believe that perhaps one of the last qualities that unite all of us—even in this time of chasm and conflict—is, *indeed, that universal dream* we all possess for our children—and for a future that will provide for them what our forebearers provided for us. We parents and grandparents are desperate to secure it. Our young adults are desperate to obtain it. And the youngest amongst us are eminently deserving of it.

I know this goes against common wisdom regarding parenting and grandparenting: To not interfere or impose or offer unsolicited advice. To practice the mystical Jewish model of *tzimtzum*—to contract ourselves as God did when making room to create the world. But these are not normal times nor are our children possessed of the same resources, opportunities, or foundations that previous generations could assume. And so, I trust that all of us will strive to find that balance between judicious counsel and excessive meddling.

Our people's vision for our children emerges within days of a birth, in the liturgy of the naming ceremony. There, part of our blessing for a child is to invest that moment with our vision for their future, hoping that God will grant them three

core gifts: *Torah, Chuppa, and Ma'asim Tovim*--A life of the mind and study; finding a life partner and building a family; and a dedication to acting for the benefit of others.

While the desire for a Jew to pursue Torah study seems a bit on the nose, it stems from the rabbis' appreciation for Torah's foundational role in our lives. The sages even debated which is more important, study or action, to which they concluded that study was more vital because it leads to action.

There is a reason why the Torah is the ethical blueprint upon which all of Western faith and morality is based. That's because it reflected a revolutionary departure from a world in which mountains and stone and men were embraced as gods--all being limited in their usefulness or fault-ridden in their behavior.

Torah reflected the remedy for the law of the jungle that marked the societies of ancient civilization. Suddenly, loving others as we love ourselves—doing for others as we would want them to do for us—became the ultimate expression of our human potential.

But we as modern Jews can understand Torah—study and learning and critical thinking—more expansively. In a time in which facts are alternative, truth is relative, and even what we see and hear can be deep-faked, a passion for learning, for the accrual of knowledge, and for the cultivation of independent thought and healthy skepticism are far more than mere prudent practice. Study is survival—the survival of our people—the survival of our society—the survival of the liberal democratic order that is the highest evolution of human civilization. If we do not make education a priority—if we do not limit the siren call of social media—if we do not stand up to the manipulation and exploitation of knowledge and truth—then we will bequeath to our children only darkness and despair.

The second pillar of our parental longing is *chuppa*—most narrowly understood as the wedding canopy—but seen more broadly as the hope that our children will find love and have children of their own. If you ask most Jews what's the first commandment in the Torah, they might cite something shared on Sinai. But you actually can find it much earlier in the Creation Story, in which God commands us to *pru urvu umilu et ha-aretz*—to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. The text then gets more specific and social, observing that it is not good for us to be alone in this life. We should find a life partner, leave our parents, and begin our own families.

While many of the couples for whom I officiate for weddings find each other through the selective algorithms of online dating, there is a dark side to this efficiency. Particularly in our post-Covid/cyber-dominated era, we've become more isolated, more detached, and more content to dwell in our networked cocoons. Dating has been increasingly displaced by hook ups, and boys and men in particular have retreated into realms besotted by false prophets of fake masculinity and are seemingly satisfied with virtual pleasures.

For many men, it's no longer about whether one has good "game"—a facility to talk to a prospective love interest in a persuasive way. Many don't know how to relate to another person at all. And many women have all but given up on the hope of finding even a Maybe Mate, some assuming that they should focus exclusively on a career or single parenthood.

But as I've shared from this bima often, it starts at a much younger age, as a generation of kids are increasingly unable to hold a conversation with an adult, let alone look one in the eye as the basis for even the simplest interaction. When the lion's share of social life is mediated by corporate platforms at the expense of developing real world social skills—when the risk and reward of scary but critical encounters with flesh and blood people are replaced by the lazy languishing of phone surfing from bed—we shouldn't be shocked when our young adults reach their mid-thirties alone and apart.

As parents, we need to start early, start committedly, and start courageously to limit the time our kids are on phones in an era when so many studies have linked screen time with mental illness. And we need to create more spaces and opportunities for young people to come together in person—perhaps even in phone-free zones—to begin to see each other again as human beings and potential partners rather than objects of likes and means to a dopamine hit.

Going out on a limb to connect with another can be scary, and no one likes rejection. And I know that many young adults look at the world as it is and wonder if it's worth bringing a child into it. It takes faith to confront both fears—of finding a partner and of bringing new life into an uncertain world. But it was the faith in the promise of connection and change that inspired those who came before us to move forward, to say yes to love and to life, and to rise above the travails of a much more tenuous and terrifying world than our own. The least we can do is to pay their faith forward.

And a final thought on family and relationships relevant to our current moment. Much has been made recently out of the mistaken assumption that only White Christian Nationalist Evangelicals are promoting marriage and family—heterosexual nuclear families being the only ones they define as "kosher." This is as false and misleading a contention as all the other ways in which the Christian Right's responses to society's challenges are perceived as the only answers. Please remember that our people's and our tradition's focus on family and children is the foundation from which all Western concepts grew. And our insistence that love, respect, care, and nurturing can blossom in non-traditional forms of family reflects a needed responsiveness to ever-changing cultures.

The final pillar of parental longing is that our children should devote themselves to a life filled with *ma'asim tovim*—good deeds. I'm not sure how much more we have to say about this. It is one thing to learn to love another as we love ourselves—to see others as created B'tzelem Elohim—in the image of God—and to appreciate the importance of seeking peace and pursuing justice. It's another thing entirely to actually act on that insight. Many of us talk the talk—probably far too much at length and far too performatively on Facebook or Tik

Tok or Truth Social. But it is another thing entirely to act on one's attitudes and aspirations.

In Judaism we are encouraged to deepen our learning and to nurture our faith. But if knowledge and belief ends with us—if we improve ourselves only to pump up our pride or to lord it over others—then we are not only incomplete—we have perverted those sacred virtues.

We Jews are the original walkers of the walk we talk. The whole basis of Jewish practice is called “halacha”—which actually means the way to walk. The instruction cannot be clearer—the obligation of parenting cannot be more definitive—and for our counsel to be credible, we must model acts of goodness and healing and blessing *for* our children and *with* our children—from their most formative years through adulthood in these dusky and difficult times when they need our support, our care, and our love more than ever before.

Perhaps the ultimate distillation of this parental prerogative appears in that bit of Torah that makes its way into our worship through the *Ve’ahavta* prayer. There, we read that a critical way of expressing love for God is to *shinantam levanecha*—to diligently teach our children our faith, our traditions, and the way to be a good and ethical human being.

I often joke that this is the teaching of Rabbis Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young—with a cameo by Jerry Garcia. But I believe its words resonate now more than ever—for us as Jewish parents, and for all who seek to mentor, and to raise, and to foster the next generation who will be our future.

Teach Your Children

Aleinu—it is on us—to bridge the chasms that cleave us—to rise above the hatred and hopelessness and humiliation that sees in another only an enemy—and to bind ourselves as a nation and as a human race—diverse and different, longing and loving, unique and united by our common dreams for our children, our shared vision for the future, and our sacred patrimony as children *ourselves* of a wanting, waiting, and wondrous God.