

## **Bound Together: Parents, Children, & The Sacrifices We Make For One Another**

Our tradition tells a story of a father and a son who had a complicated relationship. One day, the father needed the son's help with something very important. The son, an adult at the time, may not have felt like helping out, but decided to go along with the request for the sake of his father. After all, he felt like he owed his father something after all these years, didn't he? The father, not sure that he was making a reasonable request, nevertheless felt like this sacrifice was something that he could ask of his son. After all, he and his wife had raised him for all of these years, provided and cared for him, loved him- certainly that was worth something. And so it was decided, the son would sacrifice for the father and the father would ask the son for what he needed.

Early the next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him two of his servants, and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then he said to his servants, "You stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and gave it to his son Isaac. Abraham himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, my son?" And Isaac said "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together (*yachdav-as one*).<sup>1</sup>

You know the rest of the story. Rabbi Brad Artson points out that this is the only time in the Torah that Abraham and Isaac speak to each other, and they are

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:1-8

“discuss[ing] the place of sacrifice in their relationship.” According to midrash, Isaac was 37 years old, “old enough to overpower an old father, and old enough to notice that something wasn’t kosher about this offering.” Abraham’s answer to Isaac’s question about the location of the sheep must have confirmed Isaac’s hunch about who the real sacrifice was to be. Indeed the Zohar, the great mystical work of the 13<sup>th</sup> century notes that:

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 continues:

All the angels wept when they saw Abraham binding Isaac, the upper and lower beings trembled and shook, all on account of Isaac... Rabbi Judah said, ‘Isaac purified himself and in intention offered himself up to God... (120a)

Rabbi Artson notes that for the mystics, “what makes Isaac the hero is his willingness to become a sacrifice for the sake of his father.”

This idea is also found in a well-known midrash about an argument that took place between Ishmael and Isaac about who loved their father more. Ishmael claimed that his love was the greatest because he allowed himself to be circumcised at age 13. Not to be outdone, Isaac replies:

All that you did lend to the Holy Blessing one was three drops of blood. But I am now thirty-seven years old, yet if God desired of me that I be

slaughtered, I would not refuse." At that moment, our tradition teaches that "God tested Abraham."<sup>2</sup>

Framed this way, the narrative we read this morning (problems and all) becomes a story about the sacrifices that children are willing to make on behalf of their parents, and the types of demands that parents often place on their children.

Of course, our tradition is one in which we are taught that parents have responsibilities towards their children. The Talmud, for example, in tractate Kiddushin (29a) teaches that a father is required to circumcise his son, redeem the son from Temple service by giving payment to the priest, teach him Torah, find him a trade, help him marry, and (adds Rabbi Akiva) teach him to swim. Parents are responsible for transmitting values, ensuring that children are on a path towards financial independence, helping children find emotionally meaningful partnerships, and ensuring that their children have survival skills (such as swimming).

Anyone who is a parent knows the countless ways we sacrifice for our children: from sleepless nights that start from the moment our children are born and never really end, to working to provide a stable home, to being there to support and

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 54:4

provide for our children in countless ways often at the expense of our own needs, wants, and desires. Being a parent is hard work.

But as a son and as a parent, I have learned that all members of the family have times when they feel they are being asked to sacrifice for the other members in ways small, medium, and large. As our children grow up, they may start to feel that our requests to them as parents are annoying and frustrating. And as parents it's easy to feel that our children don't really understand or recognize the sacrifices that we make, or have made, on their behalf (*not my children of course!*).

The truth is that the notion of sacrifice, of those things that children give up for parents, and parents give up for children, can be quite complicated. And while this is certainly relevant to my own personal experience, I know quite well from conversations I have had over the years with many of you that, as we age, the issues and challenges are different and varied, but the notion of struggling with these relationships and the sacrifices required remains.

Rabbi Artson explains:

[Children experience the feeling of sacrificing to meet the needs of their parents]...at every stage of [their] 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 our lives, we find ourselves connected to people we did not choose, indebted to people whose decisions we can't control, people we love intensely and dearly, whose approval we crave, whose love we need, whose grasp we both desire and evade. All of us are someone's children.

Those of us who are also parents know this drama from the other side, too: our parental need to be involved in our children's lives, our need for communication and for touch, our need for our own lives and for a measure of independence from our adult children...<sup>3</sup>

None of this is to say that these "sacrifices" are not worth making. I know of no loving, healthy, stable relationship between a parent and a child where one involved party would give up this unique relationship. But it can be hard. It can be challenging. And while deep love, mutual respect, and care are essential, the sacrifices are real.

As people live longer and longer thanks to advances in medicine and modern technology, these issues only get more complicated. 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 a scene from her own family's experience:

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,

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<sup>3</sup> Artson, Passing Life's Tests, 103-110

thousands of miles away. We are talking to toddlers, cheering overwhelmed spouses, canceling 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 logistical 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 in which an adult child is willing to care for a parent (85).

When you add the tremendous financial strain that comes with elder care, a strain that can affect both aging parents and their adult children, to the increased costs of those who are struggling to care for their own young children, teens, or young adults – the sacrifices on all sides simply seem overwhelming at times.

This issue is, in fact, one of the challenges I hear about most frequently from members of our community. Fortunately, our Jewish tradition has something to contribute to this conversation. From the fifth commandment, enjoining us to: *“Honor your father and your mother”* (Exodus 20:12), to the requirement to *“rise before the aged and show deference to our elders”* (Leviticus 19:32), there is no shortage of Jewish texts that advise us on our responsibility towards our parents and our elders.

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.<sup>4</sup>

While most of us are probably familiar with the Torah's requirement that we show “kavod,” honor and respect, to our parents, it's interesting that the Torah also tells us that we are to “revere” our parents. What's the difference between honoring our parents and revering them? Rabbi Friedman explains that reverence requires us 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.<sup>5</sup>

So honoring refers to our obligation to care for our parents' material and concrete needs, but reverence is about ensuring that our parents age with dignity.

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<sup>4</sup> Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 88

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 87

So by combining *kavod and yirah*, honor and reverence, we are taught to ensure that our parents' basic needs are fulfilled AND we are required to care for them in a way that is kind, genuine, caring, and considerate of their wishes and desires. Sacrificing for our parents begrudgingly doesn't quite cut it.

For those of us regularly dealing with the needs of older parents, we may often wonder if there are limits to our obligations. According to the sources, the answer is yes. This is particularly true if our relationship with our life partners comes into play. Our rabbis teach that honoring our parents must not endanger our marital harmony, and we must 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 marriages and our own children actually come first.*

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. Maimonides taught:

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 the [parent's] extreme madness, let [the child] leave and go away, deputing others to care for them properly.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 93, Mishneh Torah, Mamrim, 6:10



So this reminds us that getting help, and ensuring that you are able to care for yourself as you attempt to care for your parents, are also Jewish obligations. No one should feel guilty for self-care that is often needed when managing these complicated relationships.

Elderly parents, for their part, are encouraged, whenever possible, to avoid making things hard on their adult children: 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).<sup>7</sup>

Mutual respect, compassion, understanding, and care – in both directions – is what is called for here.

This is often much easier said than done. And it assumes relationships that are stable, loving, and healthy. It is important to pause here and note that Judaism recognizes the real pain in some parent-child relationships, and if the relationship is abusive or harmful, the expectations of the child are altered.

Rabbi Friedman suggests that, in those circumstances, a child should at least avoid doing anything to actively hurt or dishonor a parent, even if they do not have the same obligation to care for and make sacrifices for their parents in the traditional manner.

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<sup>7</sup> Friedman, Jewish Visions For Aging, 91, Mishneh Torah, Mamrim 6:8-9

Where does all of this leave us?

First, 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 have adult children who are caring for us. Some of us have children or parents who are local and others have children or 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. How do we actively honor and revere our parents? How do we ensure that our parents' dignity is maintained as they age and how are we ensuring their basic needs are met? What sacrifices have we made for these people who have sacrificed so much for us to become the adults who we are today, and what additional 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?

And then there are the considerations in the reverse. If you are the parent of adult children, how do you continue to sacrifice for them, even at this stage of your lives? In what ways might you unintentionally get in the way of their ability to genuinely care for you? In what ways does the strange "role-reversal,"

sometimes forced upon us, coupled with fear and a yearning for independence, challenge your relationship with your adult children? How might you work to keep an open heart and an open mind when it comes to their efforts and what might you do to ensure that we remain a blessing and not a burden to our children?

None of this is easy.

And then there are those in our community whose children are not involved in their lives, or who do not have children. 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? How might we provide a space for those who are elderly to process and navigate some of the new dynamics and relationships that come with aging? And how might our synagogue community be a support for adult children, who are juggling caring for parents and children at the same time? We all know that religion and houses of worship sometimes get a bad rap these days; but how many other spaces are there for us to come together in such a beautiful and holy multi-generational setting? Shouldn't we use this to our advantage? If you are interested in helping us create programs around any of the issues that I have mentioned this morning, please email me or call after the holidays. I would love to bring this issue out into the open, beyond the closed doors and pastoral

conversations that happen in my study. We are all in this sacred journey of privilege and sacrifice together.

As most of you know, this past summer I spent a month at Jewish summer camp (what else is new?!). But what you may not know is that I also ducked out of camp for some time to head to California for some precious days with my father, his wife, and other family members who are not getting any younger. While I was excited to be able to make the trip, I was not sure what I was going to find considering some of my father's recent health challenges and the fact that he is not getting any younger. But the time we spent together was probably the most important part of my entire summer. We didn't do much when I visited, but we didn't have to. From walking the aisles of Costco, to sitting at his kitchen table talking; from helping him in and out of the car, to listening to stories from my childhood and his; to speaking with him about the blessings and challenges of raising four children; it was wonderful to just be together. My parents divorced when I was very young and my father was not a full-time parent until life forced him into that role with the death of my mother. And while it took a village to ensure that I turned out relatively "well adjusted," it was my father who dramatically changed his lifestyle, cutting back his practice to make sure he had the time to raise me. We joke that we raised each-other, but the truth is that he provided for me, cared for me, supported me, tried to expand my horizons about the richness and beauty of our world and its inhabitants, and

ensured that I was well cared for and received a quality education. Wasn't all of this his responsibility as a parent? Of course. But it shouldn't be considered a given. Not everyone is as lucky as I was, despite the challenges that were thrown my way as a young child.

And it is now my responsibility, and privilege, as his son, to do my best to honor the sacrifices that he made for me all those years ago. Living across the country from him I admit it is not always easy. But to the extent that I am able, from our regular facetime calls, to multiple visits each year, I am making an effort to be there for my dad, his wife, and my siblings as he ages. This responsibility is as sacred as it is complicated.

One thing that I know for certain as a congregational rabbi is this: time is our most precious gift. And it is running out, every moment of every day. So when we are called to sacrifice for one another, as parents, and as children, the question is whether we will have the spiritual and emotional strength to answer like Abraham and Isaac; to say "Hineni," here I am, ready to honestly, thoughtfully, and lovingly show up for one another?

With open hearts, showing compassion, love, and patience, for ourselves and for one another, let us never forget that this is one of our most sacred tasks in life. Even when it takes sacrifice, even when it is complicated. May we all be up to

the challenge, and may our hearts be open to receiving the blessings that might accompany us as we walk this path together. Shanah Tovah.