

We are not all parents, but we are all of us children and to that extent we participate in the fundamental relationship of human consciousness and therefore, of course, of Jewish consciousness: the parent-child relationship. Is it any wonder that on Rosh Hashanah we read two stories revolving around this relationship? The details need not detain us for the moment, but whether it is the relationship between Ishmael and his complicated parental situation or Isaac and his very complicated father-son relationship, it is clear that the Torah finds within the sinew of these relationships the very truth of life, the very “place” or *makom* of the Divine in the world. It makes sense, for it is a place that, by definition, every human being must experience either as a child or as a parent or as both.

In the important work “Totality and Infinity” by the French-Jewish philosopher of whom many of you have heard me speak and know that I have written about and taught, Emmanuel Levinas, there is a brief but profound chapter entitled: “Filiality And Fraternity.” Allow me to quote a few random lines:

The I breaks free from itself in paternity without thereby ceasing to be an I, for the I *is* its son.

The converse of paternity, filiality, the father-son relationship, designates a relation of rupture and a recourse at the same time.

As rupture, repudiation of the father, commencement, filiality at each moment accomplishes and repeats the paradox of created freedom.

The father does not simply cause the son. *To be* one’s son means to be I in one’s son, to be substantially in him, yet without being maintained there in identity.

Philosophy and Scripture both make it clear that there is much in the parent-child, child-parent relationship from the perspective of meaning. How comfortable it would be for me to take either of these twin roads and travel it. With or without you along for the ride, as has happened in the past, I could explore the theological or philosophical implications of

the simple family saga narrative. But the amazing thing about these scriptural narratives is precisely that they are our narratives. Their purpose is not so much to instruct us in the meaning of someone else's family narrative, but to urge us to look to our own to find the tests that God puts before each of us. Abraham's test is interesting the way a good book or movie is interesting. Exploring Abraham's test, critiquing it, unpacking it, explicating it, generating an ocean of ink and a volcano of sound around it helps preclude our ever getting to bestow as much seriousness and attention to our own narrative. As I said yesterday, I will forgo the luxury of erudition and eloquence. Armed with the seriousness of the subject as confirmed by Scripture and Philosophy, I will look not at Abraham's narrative but my own.

How does one react to the fact that one's child chooses to marry someone who is not Jewish? How does a Rabbi react to the fact that his son chooses to marry someone who is not Jewish? More to the point, how have I reacted to the fact that my son chose to marry someone who is not Jewish? Before I answer that question let me just make certain that we know what we are talking about. Nothing that I am going to say is in any way intended to minimize the potentially disastrous impact that wholesale intermarriage may have upon the survival of the American Jewish community. I emphasize the word potentially because beside and before I had to deal with this in my own life I had enough experience with it in our community to know that the simple verities regarding intermarriage are not sufficient to describe the current complexity of the historical moment. Yes, Jews are marrying non-Jews at a record pace, but the evidence of what that means is far from clear. In many cases it has resulted in a stronger connection between the Jewish partner and his or her tradition; in many cases it has resulted in a greater effort to educate the children than we find in Jewish-Jewish in-marriages. We don't know how this will shape our community, but I think we know enough to know that it isn't as simple as it was perhaps a century ago, if it was even simple then. And yes, on the other side of the argument, many of those Jewish-Non-Jewish marriages do result in a loss of Jewish identity. However, the loss of Jewish identity evidenced among Jewish-Jewish marriages is no small problem. In other words, there is much yet to explore on this topic; many debates to be had; much creative work potentially available to a creative Jewish community; and even, perhaps, some potential rejoicing amid a new Jewish renaissance

to go along with the standard sense of mourning that this topic carries. But this is not a scholarly talk and I am not a sociologist of the American Jewish community. I am a father and my response to my son's decision was, initially, one of great pain.

The pain was layered: the first layer had nothing to do with who Yoshi marries, but with the fact that his sense of Jewish identity and commitment did not include living the kind of Jewish life that would have entirely precluded his making this choice. It wasn't that he was marrying a non-Jew that bothered me but that he was the kind of Jew that could marry a non-Jew. The second layer was the guilt and disappointment that this engendered in me: how had I failed to make this an impossible choice for him? I'd succeeded in instilling in him a love of baseball, but not of Judaism; didn't that reflect that somewhere my own commitments were false? That at some deep level my son could see through my own facades and choose what was really important to me, American culture, and not what I said was important to me, Jewish culture? The third layer was embarrassment: I am a Rabbi, and, if you'll excuse my saying it, a pretty well known, well respected Rabbi; a teacher at two seminaries, author, speaker at major Jewish conferences around the country, blah, blah, blah. How was I going to explain to people that what I taught should be important in their lives, my own son had not been effectively taught. The third level was anger. Anger at my son, myself, his schools and teachers and anyone else I could find to be angry at.

When my son called to tell me that he was engaged, an event I expected and knew very well was coming and had thought I was prepared for I didn't react. I said congratulations (not Mazal Tov) and kept the conversation to a minimum. I didn't spill over with rage; I'm too much of a contemporary parent to do that. But I certainly didn't share his joy at one of the most important moments in his life. Over the next few days I composed a letter to him that made many of the points to him that I just made to you; all the things that I was disappointed about and angry about with the exception of sharing with him the fact of my embarrassment; I hadn't entirely identified that for myself yet, though it was, of course, one of the underlying issues. Thankfully, my son answered my letter with love, with understanding for my "issues" but with a clear and resounding statement about who he is, the extent to which he owes that to me, and the extent to

which he differs from me and the choices I've made in my life. My son gave me a gift that I will always be grateful for even as I struggle to both internalize it and live up to it.

In the light of his letter I began to review the list of my grievances. They were precisely that: my grievances. They were about me, reflections on my self-image either from the internal or external perspective. In my response to my son, my initial response, the only person missing was my son. Faced with a moment when I had the ultimate human/parental responsibility, to bear the burden, in this case, of his joy, I could not move myself aside enough to make room for him and with him the trace of God that is always carried along with the burden of the other person. If I had wanted something to be embarrassed about, now I had it. Fortunately, the teaching itself dispensed with the need to be embarrassed: For even to be embarrassed about my failure to recognize the absolute Other in the face of my son would only be another form of self-absorption. It wasn't about me, it was about him. And because he reminded me that it wasn't about me but about him in this instance, he also taught me the lessons that I had spent my life trying to teach him and others, and apparently succeeded better than in learning them myself. This was truly a gift, a learning moment.

So I looked at him and listened to him and searched for what Levinas calls the ruptures between him and me that make him who he is and who I am not and loved him for them; and I searched for what Levinas calls the recourse between him and me (those structures that are passed from one identity to another to constitute the history of a person and of a people) and I found them; the many ideas about people and life we share and to which I had made a contribution and which made up who he is for which he is sometimes lovingly thankful and at other times unaware of. There will be time for his awareness to continue to grow and that awareness will shape his life and his choices and his commitments. His ruptures and recourse will continue as mine have continued between me and my father; between Abraham's ruptures and recourse with Isaac and Ishmael and vice versa.

I have not come to view marriage between Jews and non-Jews with any less concern. I am aware of the possible cultural differences that will separate his future family and me; differences that may add tension to the already difficult task of building a marriage, etc. But I am certainly aware that this does not have to be the model and that I

see around me everyday different models among the inter-faith couple in our own community. I know enough to know that his Jewish commitments simply can't be reduced simply to this one decision and that there are many other decisions yet to come and that I can play a positive role in his making them. And I know enough about the difficulties involved in building successful marriages in our culture to know that there are many pitfalls regardless of one's partner's faith. I also know there will be more tests for me. That is the greatness of God and the glory of being human: we are never absolved of the responsibilities inherent in every moment to embrace the test of the o/Other. I am thankful that my son has given me the opportunity to do *teshuva*, to engage in a process of self-transformation that has significantly impacted not only my relationship with him, but my relationships with others. I am well aware that *teshuva* is not a one-time phenomenon; I will need to work at it with no less discipline than I've brought to riding my bicycle or praying everyday or maintaining a kosher diet. But it is in these disciplines that the tests come and it is through maintaining the disciplines that we are ready for them when they do. This is a talk about *teshuva*, not about intermarriage.