

Parenting Through Challenges and Triumphs

Shabbat Shemot 5778

January 5, 2018

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Thank you, Michele and Mickey, and happy anniversary! I have a confession, though: You weren't the first people I asked to read our Torah selection tonight. When I noticed that Robert Block's 18th birthday would fall on a Friday night, I asked him if he would let me sponsor the Oneg Shabbat in his honor, bless him here at Temple, and give him the opportunity to read Torah as he did five years ago today when he became a Bar Mitzvah – in English this time. His response: "Dad, I'm not going to Temple on my birthday."

Yes, parenting presents challenges.

Robert's parents, though, face none of the hardships that confront Moses's. Pharaoh has decreed that every male born to the Israelites be drowned in the Nile. A Levite mother conceives, and a baby boy is born. Torah tells us that the mother "saw that her son was good."ⁱ What does that mean? Isn't every parent filled with love and awe when presented with a newborn? The Medieval commentator Rashi postulates that, as soon as the child is born, "The entire house was filled with light,"ⁱⁱ a sign from God that this baby is special, not merely "good" like every other child in the eyes of the parents. Rashi's grandson, Rashbam, a noteworthy commentator in his own right, vehemently disagrees, calling his grandfather a "liar." Rashbam compares Moses's mother's use of the word "good" to God's pronouncing creation "good" in Genesis 1. Everything had turned out as planned.ⁱⁱⁱ Nothing remarkable in a mother's looking upon her newborn child, calling him good.

Perhaps the Torah hints at an important charge to all parents: We must see our own children as "good." Often, that's easy. The adorable newborn. The baby who speaks in full sentences before he can walk. The kid who hits a homerun, sings a beautiful solo, or brings home straight A's. The child who is kind and respectful to parents, friends, and teachers. Those moments when other people call our offspring "good."

Parents, though, can find themselves in situations that stand in the way of calling our own children "good." Moses's mother is in an unspeakable predicament right from the start. If she does not see her child as "good," she need not fret over his likely horrific fate, a watery grave for her newborn son. What

about all those other Israelite mothers? Do they also try to hide their babies? Do they similarly take grave risks, putting their infants in baskets at the edge of the Nile, hoping that the river will bring life rather than death? We do not know. Torah doesn't tell us.

We do know that many children survived the Nazi Holocaust thanks to their parents' unimaginable sacrifices. This week, we laid Henry Simon to rest, at the end of a long life, stretching into his nineties. When Henry – or Heinz, as he was known then – was twelve years old, his mother put him on a boat to Palestine, never to see him again. Hundreds of Jewish parents turned their children over to the Belgian rescuer, Andre Guelen Herscovici, who would place them in safe houses. In the 1980s, Herscovici told her story to Gay Block and Malka Drucker:

“This was the procedure: a family would make a request to the [Committee for the Defense of the Jews or] CDJ that their child or children be taken to a safe house. It was almost impossible for a family to survive together, but separated, they all had some chance. The CDJ concentrated on finding homes for the children so that the parents would be free to try to survive on their own. On my first visit, I...would explain everything to the parents. I would get information about all the names and the family history so that, after the war, if the child or the parents didn’t survive, there would be some information to identify the family. Twenty-four hours later I would return and take the child. I wrote down in this book the name and age of the child... There are approximately 1,000 names in this book.”^{iv}

Knowing how hundreds of Belgian Jewish children survived, and knowing how Henry Simon outlived Hitler, we may imagine Moses's mother not to be alone, but can envision countless Israelite parents' going to great lengths to try to save their children, even if their stories are not told.

Blessedly, and God willing, most never have to rescue their children from genocide. Instead, we are presented with a myriad of moments, all of them smaller but none of them small, when we must decide whether or not to save our children from accident or injury.

Yes, we all “child proof” our houses. We run and grab the toddler who, despite our vigilance, is headed toward the hot stove. Even when our kids are still babies, the choices can be tougher. As I recall, Dr. Ferber wanted us to train our babies to sleep through the night by simply letting them cry themselves back to sleep.

Our challenges grow right along with our children. The middle schooler calls to say that she left a book or assignment at home. The ninth grader asks you to run out at 10pm to get a poster board for his project not yet started but due the next day. We find ourselves needing to advocate for our children, because of a special need or because they were treated unfairly. Or both. But if we take up their cause, will they learn to do so for themselves?

Perhaps all of these decisions become easier when we see our children as “good.” “Good” may mean that she almost always remembers her things, and this emergency is an exception. Rescue is in order. Alternatively, because we see our child as “good,” we may determine that he would benefit from our pointing out that we’ve already made late night trips to get poster board a dozen times; this time, he will better be “rescued” in the long term by having to suffer short-term consequences.

When Pharaoh’s daughter pulls that baby out of the Nile, she identifies him: “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.”^v How does she know he’s an Israelite? Rashbam helps again, observing that only a desperate parent, whose child is subject to Pharaoh’s genocidal decree, would place a child such a precarious situation.^{vi}

More mysterious is what makes Pharaoh’s daughter decide that this child is worth saving. Perhaps she, too, sees that this baby is “good.” We parents know the very special blessing of those moments when somebody else notices our children’s virtues. A coach. A teacher. A judge of a competition. A college admissions committee. All of us, parents or not, can and should seize moments when we can compliment others about their children. Hopefully, unlike Pharaoh’s daughter and Andre Herscovici, we won’t have to save them.

Earlier this evening, we all had the opportunity to *kvell* over the children who were here for Shabbat Kids Club. I was privileged to ask God’s blessing upon them. Our community shoulders a variety of challenges with respect to all of these young ones: Their meaningful Jewish present, facilitating a desire for a Jewish future, rests primarily upon their parents, but also upon all of us who sustain a congregation, ensure that our Religious School is led with excellence even as enrollment declines, and sustain opportunities for meaningful encounters with larger Jewish peer groups beyond these walls – at Jacobs Camp and elsewhere. Let each and every one of us embrace the opportunity of the next generation, in our own families and in our community. And let us call each one “good.”

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 2:2.

ⁱⁱ Rashi to Exodus 2:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rashbam to Exodus 2:2.

^{iv} Gay Block and Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc.), 1992, pp. 104-5.

^v Exodus 2:6.

^{vi} Rashbam to Exodus 2:6.