

Parenting in the 21st century - Parshat Vayeishev 5777 – Shaare Tefilla

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Dr. Jenny S. Radesky, a developmental pediatrician at the Boston Medical Center, studied parent-child interaction at fast food restaurants. She found that over 70 percent of the adults used their phones during the meal. According to another recent study, this seems to reach beyond the local fast food meal. A majority of children asked, 54 percent, think their parents check their devices too often. And about a third of children report feeling "unimportant" when their parents get distracted by their phones. This phenomenon is not limited to the parent-child relationship; I doubt there are many of us who have not heard the familiar bid for attention pull us away from checking our email when we are not quite sure we remember pulling out our phone to begin with. It might be a child, grandchild, spouse or friend, we know this feeling.

But the most interesting part of the survey by common sense media (of 1800 parents and teens) last year¹, is that when parents were asked if they were good role models for their children in terms of screen time, media and technology 78% of parents felt that they were good role models for their children. This is despite the fact that the same survey found that teens spend about nine hours each day on average on devices or other screens and that the average for parents was exactly the same! If you have a child 8 to 12, a tween, don't worry they only spend about six hours on average.

As an educator I often think about what separates the extraordinary teens from the rest. Not those who have learned how to get the grade or get accepted to the college of their choice but those who are the type of Jews and people which we aspire to raise as families and as a nation. From what I have seen much of the answer lies in our ability to role model for our children.

By the time we get to parshas Vayigash, in two weeks, both Yosef and Yehudah are powerful forces who have clearly distinguished themselves from the other brothers. Not just as leaders of the Jewish people but also as parent role models. Yosef's children are Menashe and Efraim, who we bless our boys to emulate every Friday night. Yehuda is the patriarch of Nachshon ben Amindav, who the midrash tells us jumped into the yam suf when no one else was able to do so, the Davidic kingship and eventually moshiach.

If we examine our parsha carefully I think we can see the seeds of their leadership being sown. We begin with a relatively pedestrian childhood, fighting amongst the siblings with some ganging up on others and Yosef telling on his brothers while being seen as the favorite child. It sounds like a familiar scene in many homes with multiple children. And while our children usually do not sell each other into slavery, at times this too does not seem so far fetched.

But suddenly, in the midst of the narrative of Yosef being sold down to Mitzrayim we have the parsha of Yehuda and Tamar interjected into the story line. This seem an odd place to have the story, despite the fact that that they happened concurrently. The Ibn Ezra believes that

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/06/health/parents-screen-use-attitudes-tweens-teens/>

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this incident actually precedes the selling of Yosef, making its placement here even more puzzling. The meforshim struggle with this question and draw numerous parallels between the story of Yosef and Potifar's wife as compared to the story of Yehudah and Tamar.

In addition to the other parallels there seems to be a parallel in the fact that these are two fulcrum experiences in the respective arcs of their lives. The Torah highlights how they deal with their respective situations, seeming to hold them out as the barometer and predictor of their future as leaders.

The Torah uses a peculiar language when Yehuda sets out on his own, *Vayeired Yehudah Me'eis Achav*, Yehudah goes down from his brothers. Rashi quotes chazal that the brothers lowered Yehudah in stature² as their leader in the aftermath of the sale. Perhaps, Yehudah feels that he needs to distance himself from the other brothers for a time. He begins his own family but then is faced with the consequences of his actions, the Seforno (18:1) suggests that he loses two sons just as he caused his father to lose Yosef. As things progress and Tamar is being taken out to be killed she courageously keeps silent and sends Yehudah a message that only he will understand. Yehudah has a decision to make; will he risk tremendous embarrassment by making known what has occurred or will he keep silent at Tamar's expense. Yehudah makes the moral choice of character and utters the immortal words, '*tzidkha mimeni*' – 'she is more righteous than me.' Yehudah confesses to his mistake and in doing so makes the choice which allows him to continue on the path towards leadership and kingship amongst the brothers.

Yosef is the next to be removed from the collective of brothers. Here the Hand of Hashem is clearly present in the movement down to Egypt and his experiences there. Yosef rises to a respected position in Potifar's house but is immediately met with a moral test of his own. The wife of his employer tries to seduce him, and she almost succeeds. The Gemara (Sotah 36b) tells us that at the final moments before he succumbs Yosef is able to recall the visage of his father and is able to extricate himself from the situation. Yosef's own appreciation of his father as a role model is what helps him to do what is right even when it is difficult. Yosef makes the difficult moral decision at his own expense; he will languish in prison for the next three years. He may not know it, but his trip to the jail is truly his stepping stone to his own leadership in Egypt and was no doubt an example for his sons as they grew up in a land which was antithetical to many of the values their family held dear.

The actions of these two brothers make an indelible impression not just on them as individuals but also for their children and future generations. One of the greatest pleasures of working with teens is hearing from them three, five and ten years down the line as they mature fully into the next generation of leaders of the Jewish people. I often get to hear from our young graduates. Recently, I heard from one of our graduates who had recently lost his grandfather.

² See Ibn Ezra that it is just a word used for the direction he was traveling (he argues that this took place before Mechiras Yosef) but see Ohr HaChayom who says that the drasha is from *me'iet echav* so Rashi is still correct.

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One of his memories of his grandfather was one Motzi Shabbat. Towards the end of his life his grandfather experienced memory loss and 20 minutes after completing Havdalah he once again took out the spices and candle to say Havdalah. His wife explained to him that he had already made Havdalah and that this wasn't necessary but he couldn't be dissuaded and he made Havdalah again. Fifteen minutes later the same scene repeated itself. This graduate said that one might feel bad for his grandfather based on this story but that was not his takeaway at all. Instead he felt this was an example of his grandfather's steadfastness and commitment to mitzvot. If there was any question about his fulfillment of a mitzvah then he was unable to rest; he needed to make sure he fulfilled it to the last letter.

The survey shows a common truth that we tend to overestimate how successful we are at role modeling. Like Yosef and Yehuda, we need not be perfect by any stretch but our children are quick to notice our level of commitment and if we are growth oriented in our Judaism. If we are able to show them examples of steadfast commitment to mitzvot and a desire to grow in our Judaism, chances are they will follow our lead.