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## Tell Your Children

Every Passover, in keeping with the theme of Divine intervention and redemption, my family has a custom at our seder table for each person to tell of instances where his or her own life was saved from danger.

One year, among our guests was a mother and her teenage daughter. The mother told a fascinating, dramatic story that had taken place during her youth. As impressed as we all were by the story, her daughter was even more impressed - because **this was the first time she had heard** this bit of family history! Noting the daughter's reaction, many of us at the table began to marvel about all the great stories that frequently go unshared between parents and their children.

The subject of **sharing experiences with one's children** is a prominent theme in this week's Torah portion, Ha'azinu. Much of the parsha is

written as a "song" that describes the future recalcitrance toward God. Prophesizing that the Jewish people will forget God and His commandments, Moses describes the various afflictions that may come about. In the future, the Jewish people will push God's protective shelter away from them - and then wonder where God has gone! Finally in the midst of their suffering, the people will return to their connection with God.

The purpose of these verses, though, is not simply to prophesize about the future. Rather it is to serve "as a witness" to prevent the Jewish people from future misdeeds. Paradoxically, it is meant to **prevent the very events that it is predicting will happen!** The hope is that if we take to heart the warnings in the Torah, the dreaded consequences it predicts will not occur. It is primary to Jewish belief that prophecies of punishment can be nullified if people change their ways.

To help facilitate its transmission, this section - in addition to being read annually as one of the weekly Torah portions - was sung each week in the Temple by the Levites.

But the efficacy of this message obviously depends upon it being passed down accurately through the generations. In the view of certain commentators, it is a **special mitzvah for parents to share experiences with their children**. This is how we strengthen our connection to them and give them the best opportunities to learn about life. The Torah itself says: "Ask your father and he will relate it to you and your elders and they will tell you" (Deut. 32:7). Ultimately it is through the experiences of one's parents that one can come to better know oneself ... and the ways of God.



## Ideals and Reality - Two Strands of One Thread

As we near the closing section of the Torah, *Parashat Ha'azinu* begins, 'Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth' (*Deut. 32:1*). According to Rashi, when issuing warnings to Israel, Moses needs two witnesses, just like for any other warning in Jewish Law, and he appoints the heavens and the earth, as they will continue to bear testimony forever. Using a similar phrase, Isaiah, one of the later prophets, calls on the same two witnesses when exhorting the Jewish people, 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth...' (*Isaiah 1:2*).

*Midrash Tanchuma* picks up on a subtle difference between these two almost identical verses: Moses uses the term 'Give ear [*ha'azinu*],' listen, when addressing the heavens, and 'Hear [*tishma*],' when addressing the earth. Isaiah reverses the verbs, saying 'Hear' to the heavens, and 'Give ear' to the earth (*Tanchuma, Ha'azinu 32:2*).

Rabbi Akiva explains that Moses is comfortable dwelling in the heavens. He ascends twice to receive Torah directly from God. The Torah refers to him as one who saw God's face. He lives at the time when the Jewish people are at their highest state of spirituality, the giving of

the Torah. Isaiah, by contrast, lives during an epoch of rebellion. His main experiences are those acquired from the physical world, in which he toils day and night.

This midrash teaches that *ha'azinu* is a term of closeness and familiarity, as listening is an active way of receiving someone else's words. *Tishma* (hear) is more distant, a more passive act. Moses has a closer connection to the heavens, and Isaiah has a closer connection to the earth. When living a life of Torah, one must strive for a balance between these two spheres. Both Moses and Isaiah exemplify this, addressing both entities despite each being more familiar with one of them.

Perhaps the greatest Talmudic paradigm for this tug between the ideal and the more blurred reality is the ongoing debate between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel.

When greeting a bride, the House of Shammai will directly let her know if she has presented herself well. The House of Shammai upholds truth as an absolute value, regardless of the impact it has on a person's feelings, and this represents a life of unqualified ideals. The House of Hillel employs a softer, more real-world approach. Hillel teaches ways that the truth can be shaded in order to minimise embarrassment (BT, Tractate *Ketubbot* 17b).

When a man approaches the House of Shammai and asks to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one leg, the House of Shammai is appalled by the question, for to learn even a part of the Torah takes years of hard work. The House of Hillel, however, recognises the opportunity at hand. Not everyone has the valour to devote extensive periods of time to study Torah. All people, however, deserve to

learn whatever Torah they have time for. The House of Hillel seizes the moment and teaches that individual one of the fundamental tenets of the Torah – do not do unto others as you would not want done to yourself, the rest is commentary, go and learn (BT, Tractate *Shabbat* 31a).

The Mishna in Tractate *Avot* teaches that one should ‘Raise many disciples’ in the realm of Torah (Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 1:1). The House of Shammai believes that due to the greatness of the Torah, disciples should be worthy, and thus only people of great integrity, humility and wisdom are included in this statement. The House of Hillel, however, acknowledges that reality is not always black and white (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* 2:9). Hillel’s view is that Torah should be accessible to every Jew.

Though a contemporary person may be shocked by the opinions of the House of Shammai, the Talmud nevertheless always includes this opinion when presenting debates of Jewish law and thought. The House of Shammai reminds us of the ideal towards which we should strive and warns us to take caution against allowing standards to degenerate.

According to tradition, when the Messiah comes halachic rulings will be made according to the House of Shammai, because at that time the world will be on a higher level (Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, *Kovetz Shiurim*, part 2, p. 112). Rabbi Maurice Lamm states, ‘It will not be a new world, a qualitatively different world; rather, it will be this world brought to perfection.’

Though each individual’s personality may have a natural leaning towards either idealism or realism, we must each attempt to maintain

equilibrium. Some act upon a ‘Shammai’ approach, ignoring the nuances of reality. However, in order to live in reality, some situations dictate concessions, departures from the ideal. Nevertheless, it is crucial to make sure that yesterday’s concessions do not become tomorrow’s standards.

The aim is to strike a balance between ideals and reality and to live a full and fulfilling life in the real world, while at the same time always maintaining the focus on Torah and Godly pursuits.



## Staying Afloat

This week's portion says that the Jewish people "became fat and kicked out" - i.e. rebelled against God.

It is symptomatic of human nature that when things go well for us, we lose perspective on God. There may be no atheists in a fox hole, but there are plenty on luxury yachts. Or to employ a different metaphor, bear markets are almost invariably better for us spiritually than bull markets. Material success and spirituality are a very difficult combination. And that's a shame, because there is no technical reason why the two can't go together.

Even for the greatest of people, we find that success has so often been their downfall. Look

at someone like my namesake, King Shaul. He was the most humble and pious of all men - until he became king. Or Korach, who the Oral Tradition explains had potential to be greater than Moses; he was undone by his wealth. Even King Solomon, the wisest of all men, struggled to maintain perspective on his success.

And look at the Jewish people throughout history. The times we have flourished spiritually have been times of persecution - be it the great Rabbis of the Roman era, the incredible creativity that came from Medieval Jewry in Western Europe, or during the pogroms and expulsions of Eastern Europe. On the other hand, times of wealth and success for the Jewish people have been times during which we have assimilated - be it the Golden Age in Spain, Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, or even our own generation.

Why does success lead us to "kick out"? Because the more we achieve, the less we feel the need for God in our lives. If I have a big house to keep me warm, food in the fridge to feed my family, money in the bank for my security, and good doctors and hospitals to keep me healthy, so where is the need for God? It's just so easy to send Him trudging off to the join the ranks of the unemployed - ready to be swiftly recalled when the banking system fails or a child is sick and the doctors say there's nothing they can do.

God wants to be a part of our lives, so there are really only two ways this can go. Either we strive to remember the source of our success when it happens - and strive really hard, because it's so unnatural for us to see God as its source. Or, if we only call God back when there is a

crisis, then maybe there will need to be more crises. And that's exactly what the Torah says next: "I shall gather evil against them, I shall use up all my arrows on them, etc..."

So what's the solution? If we want our success to be lasting, we need only to be grateful. Gratitude protects what we have. The more we enjoy, the more we appreciate, the more we are thankful, the more likely we are to hold onto the blessings we've been granted. In other words, if you invite God onto your luxury yacht, it's far more likely to stay afloat.

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