

Late June 2010

Dear friends,

As I do every year, the month of July will be a break from my appearing in your mailbox. Michael and I are going back east to visit with family and I want to be in the moment with my "birth" family rather than trying to poke at you on a spiritual/religious basis. We go back every other year, and for a while, things didn't change very dramatically. Now I have seven great-nieces and nephews as well as several bonus "greats" and they change in the blink of an eye. I am once again struck by how quickly time passes and how precious it is for us all.

We are taught to honor our parents but we are not instructed to honor our children. Most of the biblical commandments surrounding children have to do with modifying their behavior. Children are treated in ancient texts with ancient values. Stoning, banishment, and many other rules are designed to guide parents in how to almost literally whip their children into shape. Children were basically small workers who helped with planting and caring for animals and other kinds of household tasks. We forget that there were no real schools - no play dates - and life as a child was all about getting ready to live life as adults. Children were "mated" at a young age. Children obeyed their parents. Children were critical to the social and economic lives of our ancestors and the longing for children is repeated again and again in our stories.

Although we are told that Isaac was beloved, we also know that his father was capable of banishing his first born son, Ishmael, without much self-searching. Jacob clearly loved and spoiled Joseph - but his other children were clearly working for the good of the family and felt abandoned by Jacob. Hannah longed for a child and as soon as Samuel was weaned, she gave him to Eli, the priest, to raise. Moses, as well, is given up in order to save his life. The childhood stage of life, which is so critical in contemporary thought, is noticeably lacking in our written history.

Children don't become truly significant, from my perspective, until the Chasidim of Central Europe began to rethink how to teach our values. I am not saying that ancient Judaism was cruel to children - but without

historical context we can't understand how we have changed over the centuries. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, began to bring children into his stories as a way to make them more relevant to the world around him. A child's behavior became the behavior of innocence. Whether it is the story of a child who doesn't know the words to a prayer or another child who walks into the woods each day to find God - children dominate the lessons of the Chasids of central Europe. It makes perfect sense to me. Almost every great lesson I've learned over the years has come from my interactions with children, whether my own, my extended family, or my students.

This is not to say that my learning has been childish. What I mean is that children have not yet put up the walls to wonderment that so many adults build too quickly and so they are freshly arrived at all the big questions and some of the big answers. This to me was a big part of the genius of the great Chasidic folk tales - the understanding that having a child for a teacher is both simple and powerful. I wish I could visit myself as a child and listen to what I was talking/thinking about. I wish that I could recover all those "first times" that children have. I know that when our children were small we would frequently have those moments - the blessing of seeing things through a child's eye. Today my children are adults and have begun the process of sophistication that dulls the wonderment. They humor me when I try to freeze a moment that feels spectacular - but I don't know if they really feel it. I accept the gift they give of knowing something is important to me.

So our tradition evolved. The children began to have formal learning so their roles in the family became different. The obligations of children to the family changed as well. The young people became sources of pride and love and essential to the good of the entire family simply because they were the children. Children worked - but they also studied.

And now we have a child-centered world. The many years that have passed since the stories of our ancestors were codified into history changed how we look at our children, how we protect our children and how we even love our children. However, in the process of changing the roles of our children, I think we have shortchanged them spiritually. Whenever I talk to a child about faith or God or prayer - they always have

something important to say. The truth from the mouth of a three year old is of course different than truth to a ten year old - but that is how we learn from our children. We have the great gift of watching them struggle with the big why's that come up year after year until we get too old and cynical to ask the questions.

Why are we here? How did we begin? Is our history true? Why does God let bad things happen? Is there a God? Why should I pray when I don't feel like there's anything to pray about? Is this true? (I love that one...) Why are there so many different religions when there is only one God? Why do we learn Hebrew when we live in America? Why do I have to go to services when they're so boring?

So from the mouths of children, as they say, while I am off gallivanting around the east coast, either ask those childhood questions of yourselves and see if you have the answers - or sit down with a child you like a lot and ask them about their questions.

Have a wonderful July and I'll be back in your inboxes in August...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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