

JEWISH MOTHERS  
II. The Tragic Dimension

In our last sermon on Jewish Mothers, we discussed motherhood as the supremely creative act of humankind, and the attendant concepts of kedushah and tum'ah.

Today we shall deal with more contemporary problems, especially with the partial displacement of the classical role of the Jewish Mother by a competing type of matron and, concomitantly, a growing literature subjecting the image of the Jewish Mother, heretofore sacrosanct, to criticism -- sometimes funny, sometimes vulgar, always withering.

I confess to a certain apprehension in proceeding with this sermon, for two reasons.

First, a Rabbi must beware of falling into the trap of platitudes and oversimplification, where he postures as the gallant defender of God, mother, and country, uttering all the conventional cliches about mother-love.

So we shall not be offering a defense of Jewish Mothers, and certainly not an attack. We acknowledge that not every Jewish Mother is the paragon of virtue; she is human -- more human than most humans, and therefore complex, ambiguous, and sometimes unfathomable.

The Torah recognized the varied nature of mothers, acknowledging that sometimes they are even responsible for corrupting

their own children. At the end of this morning's Sidra we read of the episode of the blasphemer, and the Torah, by implication, lays the blame at the feet of his mother. For that reason it takes special pains to mention his mother by name: *אִמּוֹ אֵלִיָּשֶׁבֶת*. *אִמּוֹ אֵלִיָּשֶׁבֶת*.

And of course, there is no end of praise for Jewish Mothers sprinkled throughout the great Jewish literature. I always think, in this respect, of the legend of the great RaMBaN, of whom it is told that shortly before he was exiled from Spain by James I, informed his students that they would know of his death by a sign: on that day there would appear on the tombstone of his mother the image of a lit Menorah. He meant to imply thereby that he would be reunited with his mother, whom he credited with all his enlightenment and education. What a tribute!

But I am even more apprehensive for the second reason: I would not want this sermon to be construed as a book review. Hence, let me make it clear at the very outset: this is not a book review. The only book review from this pulpit is -- the Bible. I did not read that book, the one that is making all the best-seller lists, and after perusing the reviews, I have no intention of reading it. I grant that there may be some insights to be gained by reading novels of this genre. But not all knowledge is a sufficiently great prize to warrant attaining it by wallowing through puddles of smut in the underground of the imagination. Not to have read this book

may impair my credentials with those who judge culture by the best-seller lists. So be it. But it is at least an open question as to whether what it offers is worth the offense to sensitivity and taste and conscience, not to say Halakhah. In such cases, I follow a general principle that I learned many years ago: I wait. Any popular book that cannot survive five or six years, after the sales promotion is over, and all the artificial euphoria and hoopla is ended, is not worth reading in the first place. Until then, there are other priorities on my literary list. For one thing, I have yet to complete my first full cycle of the Talmud...

This sermon is therefore by no means a book review. It is a reaction to a trend in our culture, expressed in books and in humor and in various other media, holding up the Jewish Mother to ridicule. Because it was occasioned, at least partially, by the phenomenal success of this work which, according to the reviews, is an exemplary violation of כבוד אב ואם (respect your father and mother), I can not help but offer this preliminary observation: this broadside against Jewish Mothers came to public attention the same week, or thereabouts, that a Jewish Mother and grand C mother became the Prime Minister of Israel...

The classical Jewish Mother is a type. And even if we dismiss the old attempts to romanticize her beyond recognition, as well as the current efforts to vilify her beyond recognition, she still emerges as a distinct kind. In our days, this stereotype of

the Jewish Mother has competition: a type we may call the emancipated Modern Woman.

We might explain some of the differences as follows: the Jewish Mother is family-oriented, the Modern Woman individualistic. The Jewish Mother is self-effacing, the Modern Woman is self-centered. The Jewish Mother is self-sacrificing, the Modern Woman hedonistic. The Jewish Mother is a homebody, the Modern Woman interested in career and society. The Modern Woman is not undevoted or unloving of her children, but she places clear limits on the imposition she will permit on her time and attention. The Jewish Mother knows of no such limits. She is a radical, and expects to give all she has and is to her children. Sometimes, she is so fanatic, so persistent in providing the right atmosphere for her young children, that she is willing to go to the extraordinary length of celebrating Passover at home instead of at a resort...

Of course, we should not overdo drawing hard, fast lines. The same opposing typology can be set up for Jewish Fathers and Modern Men, or Old-Time Rabbis and Modern Rabbis. As in those cases, it is true for Mothers that it is not impossible to find areas of compatibility and to synthesize them. Modern technology and our society of affluence have released women from the tyranny of the kitchen, and have made it possible for them to be both Jewish Mothers and Modern Women at the same time, to combine family and community. Today, that is the specific task of the young Orthodox woman -- and

many, many have been successful, as witness them in this congregation. But essentially, we do have two different types.

Now, of late, there has been heard the complaint that this passionate, selfless devotion and love of her children by the Jewish Mother is really a subtle disguise for maternal psychological imperialism, whereby she seeks to dominate her husband and manipulate her children. If we dismiss the extravagance and vulgarity in this generalization, we must in all candor agree that there is a grain of truth in the suggestion that the ideal personality of the Jewish Mother is not totally passive and submissive.

The aggressiveness of the Jewish Mother is not of recent vintage. It is rather interesting and remarkable, that she is a consistent type, fairly unvarying through millenia of Jewish history, despite changes in times and climates and countries. Look at the early models of Jewish motherhood. Sarah was a woman who was self-assertive, and her conflicts with her husband concerned her children. Rebecca was very much involved in her children's lives; Maurice Samuel has referred to her as "The Great Manager." Solomon paid a tribute to the Jewish Mother by referring to her as *Ein Kolk*, which we normally translate as "a woman of virtue," but which more accurately means, "a woman of strength." This refers not to her hardness, but to hardiness. But if Sarah and Rebecca overmanaged their children, we do not hear of Isaac or Jacob complaining. Their progeny showed no signs of urgent need of psychiatric attention, no

literary exhibitionism, no exposing of their inner lives to millions of voyeurs. No doubt they preferred their own overanxious, overbearing, overloving Jewish Mothers to the kind of mother who would not have cared too much about them.

There was a reason for Sarah's and Rebecca's overconcern with their children: all the Amale, the mothers of Israel, or Matriarchs, were Shapra, barren; for Providence wished to bring out from them, in even greater measure than natural, their care and love and concern for their children, to provide for the building up of the future House of Israel.

Still, we may grant that there is a danger in overdoing it. Even without the caricature of painting her as either a comical or diabolical creature, it is true that the Jewish Mother's mother-love can sometimes become -- "smother-love."

Therefore, instead of either defending or condemning the Jewish Mother, let us briefly analyze her predicament.

This problem of the relationship of a mother to her children is a universal one, not only a Jewish one, and a profound and troubling one too. Erich Fromm (in his Sane Society), has pointed to the deeply tragic character of mother-love. Her dilemma is this: love normally seeks to hold tight, to grow together. In the love between husband and wife, for instance, they may look forward to an ever-growing closeness in the course of the years. Love tends in the direction of unity, reconciliation, increasing closeness.

With a child, however, something strange happens. The mother loves the child selflessly and passionately. Without this love, the human child, even more than the animal infant, cannot hope to grow and develop. Yet this love is doomed from the outset, because the mother cannot expect to grow constantly closer to the child as time goes on. Indeed, she must learn that just as in the early years her intense, holding-type love helped the child grow, so she must later withhold this particular expression of love so that he can grow up. She must develop in him an independence, to the point where he does not need Mother any more. Mother's very love, which holds tight, must then let go, must help the child grow away in order to grow up, must help him to achieve emotional independence. Now it is extremely difficult to love and to leave, to hold and to let go, to love passionately when you know that in the end you will not have that which you love. If there is not enough mother-love, there is no growth; if there is too much, there is no growing up, and the child can be permanently infantilized.

Judaism is not unaware of this tragic dimension of mother-love. The Rabbis did not speak of it openly, but they certainly were aware of it and pointed to it in beautiful, symbolic manner.

Hannah, the mother of Samuel the Prophet, is one of the most enduring models of Jewish Motherhood. She was barren for many years, as were the earlier Matriarchs, and she vowed that

when the child was born she would dedicate him to the service of the Temple. Her child Samuel was a frail one, and she kept him with her until he was weaned. Then, while still in his very early youth, she had him sent to the Temple at Shiloh in the care of Eli, the High Priest. Then we read: "Moreover his mother made him a  $\int \int \int \int \int$ , a little robe, and brought it to him from year to year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice" (I Samuel 2:19). Once a year, during her festival pilgrimage to the Temple, she would come to see her son and bring him his  $\int \int \int \int \int$ , his little robe. But the Rabbis in the Yalkut tell us that this does not mean that she would bring him a new robe each year; it was not like the mother who knits a sweater for her son away at college. Rather, the Bible means that she made but one robe for him, and she brought it to her son every year, and let him wear/<sup>it</sup>for the duration of the holiday. Then she would take it back with her, and bring it back the year following. And something remarkable happened: although the child grew from year to year, the same little robe seemed to grow with him. It always fit; it never was too tight. And Samuel became attached to this robe, and even after his mother passed away, he would wear it and he instructed that he be buried in this  $\int \int \int \int \int$ , and so it was.

What we have here is an obvious symbol. The  $\int \int \int \int \int$  represents mother's love. The robe which gives warmth and embraces the child, is the symbol of Hannah's love for her Samuel: embracing,



warming, attending. Hannah's greatness, however, was that this little robe did not stunt Samuel's growth. Her <sup>ל</sup>גד grew with her child. Her maternal love was given in such a measure that it conformed to the contours of Samuel's emotional life and needs. As a result, her mother-love never frustrated her child, never smothered him, never infantilized him, even as it never abandoned him. That is why he ultimately asked to be buried in it, because it was permanent and enduring and he wanted it to be with him for all eternity.

Some mothers love not enough. Some overdo it -- not that there is such a thing as too much love, but that it is wrongly expressed. The ideal type of Jewish Mother throughout the ages may occasionally have loved too hard, and held too tight. There were good cultural and sociological reasons for this, such as the difficulty of bringing up a Jewish child in an alien and hostile world. Still, it is better than no love at all, better even than too little love.

But usually, women were granted what the Rabbis called <sup>חכמה</sup> <sup>אלוהית</sup>, a divine wisdom and intuition in doing right by their children.

It is a pity that instead of revering this type, despite her imperfections, she is now being reviled; that instead of acknowledging the inherent potentially tragic dimension of her love, she is held up to ridicule; that instead of a balanced picture, we

have literary cartoons; that instead of appreciating the dilemma of where Mother must draw the line, which requires a judgment for which there is no prescribed conduct, we are witness to buffoonery.

There is an old Yiddish proverb, which may well be universal: God couldn't be everywhere, so He created Mothers. There is a grain of truth in this identity of God's concern and Mother's love for human children.

Indeed, this new trend in the reviling of the Jewish Mother is a form of transgression of the Fifth Commandment, *אל תבזה* אבא ואמא, "Honor thy father and mother." And it is psychologically and religiously allied with the violation of the First Commandment: belief in God, *אני ה' אלהיך*, "I am the Lord thy God."

Observant and loyal Jews do not all have uniformly saintly -- even sane -- mothers. Yet they know that respect is an obligation independent of the merit of the one to be respected, and that not every complaint must necessarily be published.

Those who observe *אני ה' אלהיך* will observe *אל תבזה*. You cannot separate the First and the Fifth Commandments. The test of reverence for and faith in God comes when we do not understand Him. And the test of respect for Mother comes when we do not agree with her, or when we discover that she is less than perfect.

We who are committed to *אני ה' אלהיך*, will reaffirm our commitment to implement *אל תבזה* אבא ואמא, honor of parents, even when the culture and the literature of the times discourages it.

Then, we may feel confident, we will be granted endurance and the fullness of days, so that someday our children will learn to respect us and even to love us, despite the enormous imperfections which we possess. 3<sup>rd</sup>, honor father and mother, 1846

וְאָרְבֵּיבִין יִמֶּיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָּךְ, so that your days be  
lengthened on the earth, so that your influence endure in this  
world, which the Lord thy God giveth to you -- so that your own  
children make your years worth living.