

Pesach Yizkor Drasha (5773/2013): "There's No Place Like Home"

-- adapted from an essay from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton, better known as G.K. Chesterton, who died in 1936, was a prolific and influential English writer. Chesterton is often referred to as the "prince of paradox." *Time* magazine, in a review of a biography of Chesterton, observed of his writing style: "Whenever possible Chesterton made his points with popular sayings, proverbs, allegories—first carefully turning them inside out." I'd like to begin my remarks by sharing with you a story written by G.K. Chesterton.

Two Englishmen became disgusted with their country and decided to leave England, never to return. They went off in a sailboat, searching for exotic lands. They had been at sea a year when they spotted land. They anchored their boat and climbed ashore, and observed that the new place was so beautiful: It appeared to them as if it was Heaven. One of the men said to the other, "We shall make a home here in this beautiful land." Just then, they spotted a man walking along the shore. They called out to him, "Sir, what is the name of this paradise we've found?" The man replied, "Why, you have landed on the fair coast of England." The two men had truly come home again.

Wasn't it Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, who said, 'There's no place like home'? Well, in that movie it was really the suggestion of Glinda, the Good Witch of the South -- but we'll give Dorothy credit for it. In so many ways Dorothy was right: there's no place like home.

Pesach, more than any of our other holidays, is a time we focus on home. It's no coincidence that the Seder, the oldest of Jewish rituals, takes place, as it did in Egypt, in the home. Judaism attaches immense significance to the family. The Book of Genesis is almost completely devoted to families: Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel and Leah, and their children. Those of us blessed with families -- big or small -- may often take them for granted. But Pesach is a time to think about what our families mean to us.

The family is the foundation of our values. It is where we learn responsibilities. Our family is where, openly and unashamed, we expose our weaknesses and vulnerabilities -- and discover support and strength from those who love us unconditionally. Through the bonds our family creates, we learn *chesed*, the duty that flows from love. Above all, our family is where we learn who we are, where we came from, and what our story is.

Why was Abraham chosen to carry the promise of the covenant (later to be given on Mt. Sinai)? The only reason given in the Torah is given in terms of parenthood: "For I have chosen him so that he will instruct his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, doing what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19) Abraham was chosen in order to be a parent. He was also chosen to be an educator. The two concepts, so different in many societies, including our own, are in Judaism inseparable.

Fatherhood and motherhood are two distinct phenomena and Judaism attaches equal importance to both. What are a mother's unique contributions to family life?

The Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim* (known to some as 'rachmanus') derives from *rechem*, meaning 'a womb'. A mother, more than a father, is bound to the child through unconditional love. In the Smason household one recent Erev Shabbos, I noticed that some tables and chairs weren't moved around as they should have been by two unnamed male members of the family. I asked Chani why the tasks hadn't been completed. She told me, "Don't worry, they'll get to it." My typical fatherly response was, "I'll believe it when I see it!" Irrked because I dared to insult 'her boys', there remained a noticeable chill in the air for several hours. I did receive dinner later that evening -- but just barely. Unconditional love is the forte of a mother.

A second unique contribution of the mother is that from her, a child derives its biological identity as part of the Jewish people. Most of you know that whether a child is Jewish depends completely upon the mother. Some offer an explanation for this point of Jewish law based upon the supposition that one always knows who the mother is. That answer, however, is one of the great *bubba maasehs* (myths) in modern Jewish culture

because we certainly do not always know who the mother is. And even if that supposition was true, a hole in the argument would be the fact that tribal affiliation -- whether one is a Kohen, Levi, or Yisrael -- depends upon the father.

The answer is: Being Jewish is a reflection of the essence of the neshama, the soul. And this essence is transmitted through the mother, who is the 'caretaker' of the soul. It is the mother who determines the spiritual destiny of the child. And it is the mother who is entrusted with safeguarding the spiritual balance of the future generation.

Fatherhood by contrast, is a social construct. It belongs to culture rather than nature. There are animals including primates, genetically close to human beings, in which fathers do not even recognize their children after a few months. Fatherhood, like fidelity, is not a constant across cultures. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said that the supreme challenge of any civilization said the anthropologist Margaret Mead is to socialize males and persuade them to invest their energies in the home, the family and children.

Why is the role of the father so important? Because fathers parent differently from mothers and that difference matters greatly for children.

In some measures, the role of the father is more important. The professional journal, *Review of General Psychology*, finds "evidence suggests that the influence of father love on offspring's development is as great as and occasionally greater than the influence of mother love." We can note many ways in which fathers interact differently with their children than do mothers. Fathers play, build confidence in, communicate and discipline in ways different than mothers. And fathers prepare their children for the outside world in a different way than their mothers do.

As noted sociologist David Popenoe explains, "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers – especially biological fathers – bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring." Children are impoverished developmentally when they are deprived of their father's love. And as Jews, fathers link their children to our history.

This was one of Judaism's greatest achievements through the ages. The Hebrew word for male, *zachar*, is closely related to the word for memory, *zachor*. It is the task of fathers to hand on to their children the memories of the past. For we are related to the past not just biologically but also culturally, through the stories we tell and the history we relate. That is what we do on Pesach. Therefore, Pesach, the festival of Jewish memory, is celebrated in the home, the birthplace of memory.

Families are a source of immense strength, but they can also be the source of narrowness, selfishness, and indifference to the world outside. There is a potential conflict between the family and the wider concerns that are needed to build a society of compassion. For that reason a Jewish home must always be open -- to the hungry, the lonely, and visitors. Abraham and Sarah, waiting at their tent to provide food and shelter to passersby, are an enduring symbol of this Jewish value. The Hebrew letter *beit*, whose name also means 'house,' is open at one side, to show that a Jewish home must always be open to the needy. That's why the seder night begins with an invitation, "Let all who are hungry come in and eat." In fact, In all ages, Jews celebrating Pesach sought guests long before the meal began. The invitation, at this point, is simply to remind us that a compassionate society exists only where families share their warmth with others.

So, at times some of us may have been like the two Englishmen in Chesterton's story that I shared with you at the beginning of my remarks: We may have spent some time looking for greener pastures in exotic lands, outside of our homes. But in the end, Dorothy was right: There's no place like home. And that's a lesson of Pesach. On Pesach we *zachor* remember and return to our roots to be spiritually nourished. And at *Yizkor*, we remember those who came before us, and enabled us to have the wonderful lives we are blessed with. May their memories all be a blessing for us, as we remember them at *Yizkor*.