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Being Sinai: Parenting as Giving and Receiving of Torah

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Text and the City | Shavuot 2016

"Few adults, very few, are aware to what extent children watch their parents, constantly on the lookout for some sign of how they should approach the world; how sharp and vibrant their intelligence is in the years leading up to the disaster of puberty, how quick to summarize, to draw broad conclusions. Very few adults realize every child, naturally, instinctively, is a philosopher."

(Michelle Houellebecq in [Public Enemies: Dueling Writers Take on Each Other and the World](#))

Cover of a real 1970s [board game](#)

A few weeks ago, I took a few Bronfman Fellows to visit Rabbi [Dianne Cohler-Esses](#) past BYFI co-director and faculty member, at New York's [Romemu](#). One thing Dianne said during that talk has been buzzing in my brain ever since that conversation. One of the Fellows asked about the role of obligation in the liberal Jewish world. Dianne answered that as an educator, she first of all asks herself where people encounter obligation most powerfully in their own lives. "For me," she said, "the seminal experience of obligation was when my newborn child cried. There it was – an undeniable obligation; a gut surge to be there, constantly,

supportive, loyal. I was needed, and I was obligated. I learned what obligation meant when I became a parent.”

This answer struck me because it felt so true to my own experience, but also because it was an inversion of the way obligation was acquired as a trait in traditional society. A person’s basic experience of obligation was supposed to derive from being a child, not a parent! Josephus puts this succinctly (in a way that probably bridges Jewish and Roman education) as he ventriloquizes what parents should say to their incorrigible children:

As to those young men that despise their parents, and do not pay them honor, but offer them affronts...let their parents admonish them in words... and let them say thus to them: That they [the parents] got married not for the sake of pleasure, nor for the augmentation of their riches... but that **they might have children to take care of them in their old age, and might by them have what they then should want.** ...[And] that God is displeased with those that are insolent towards their parents, because he is himself the Father of the whole race of mankind, and seems to bear part of that dishonor which falls upon those that have the same name, when they do not meet with dire returns from their children.

(Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews vol.4 260)

I’m curious if anyone has tried these lines at home recently... Not only does the idea of giving birth to children so that they’ll take care of us in our old age seem odd (and self-centered?) but many of us grew up on our parents saying that they made sacrifices so that *we* could have the life we want to have.

God, *Avinu Malkenu*, is often referred to as a parent because a Parent is the model of commander and obligator. Loving, caring, compassionate – but also authoritative and powerful. No wonder the 5th commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” is seen as the bridge between obligations between God and human, and between human and human. Our Parents are our Sinai. In their hugs and admonitions, stories and rules, Torah was given. They were preparing us for the greater Sinai that was to come: a relationship with God the Father.

Yet here Dianne was suggesting that Parenthood – not childhood -- is a much more relevant Sinai. Sociologists have been pointing out that if in the past marriage signified the move to full adulthood and economic independence, in today's affluent societies, parenting has increasingly become the "moment" around which big life decisions are made (not marriage, higher education or professional choice.) It determines identity, location of residency, what practices a family will accept (the Obama's decision to stay in DC until their daughter finishes high school seems relevant here, somehow). Perhaps this is what Moses clarified to God at the Golden Calf, when God wanted to destroy the Jewish people: *Sorry, Mr. Creator. Now that you're a parent, you need to act differently. You can't just get up and leave: you're held accountable. True, you obligate us. But we obligate you as well.*

In her brief statement, Rabbi Dianne had opened up a whole new theology: what does it mean to imagine God as standing at the Sinai of the Jewish people and saying: *Naaseh v'Nishma*, I will obey and I will listen.

And yet, as Michelle Houellebecq put it in the quote at the top, we quickly become Sinai to our children too. Perhaps not in the same terms of stark authority and obligation as in the traditional world (although that also applies), but Sinai by way of giving the initial stories, metaphors and frameworks through which the world is understood; we shape the ontology from which our children's world will be shaped.

Parenthood turns us into storytellers, and thus challenges us to figure out what "the story" is, and how much we believe in it. This is worth dwelling upon, because stories are the perfect envelope in which to couch complex truths. Stories are containers for ambiguity, the navigating of which will be a crucial job of our children in this constantly changing world.

In a call this week about parenting among Bronfmanim, many of us were asking how to respond to children's questions when we ourselves don't know "the answer", or face diversity of practice in our own families. I suggested that we might not know what is "true", but that we can definitely say what is "real" to us. And that "real" is a category our children know well. In this way, the Hebrew word *Emet* holds both meanings: true and real. That which parents take seriously

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will be held as true. What they say is always secondary. Being a parent is about receiving a Torah of Obligation, but it is also about giving the Torah on a daily basis. Perhaps that is why teaching Torah to our children has been such an important commandment in our tradition. When the Torah of our family – whatever that may be – is given from parents to children, Sinai happens anew. That's what Shavuot is all about.

Happy receiving – and giving - of the Torah,

Mishael

P.S. I'm attaching some sources on Parenthood as Sinai which you might enjoy studying on Shavuot. In it I included one piece of Jonathan Safran Foer, who gives a sweet example of navigating storytelling, real and true in this in [piece in the NYTimes](#) a few years ago:

Like every child, my 6-year-old is a great lover of stories — Norse myths, Roald Dahl, recounted tales from my own childhood — but none more than those from the Bible. So between the bath and bed, my wife and I often read to him from children's versions of the Old Testament. He loves hearing those stories, because they're the greatest stories ever told. We love telling them for a different reason. We helped him learn to sleep through the night, to use a fork, to read, to ride a bike, to say goodbye to us. But there is no more significant lesson than the one that is never learned but always studied, the noblest collective project of all, borrowed from one generation and lent to the next: how to seek oneself.

A few nights ago, after hearing about the death of Moses for the umpteenth time — how he took his last breaths overlooking a promised land that he would never enter — my son leaned his still wet head against my shoulder.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, closing the book.

He shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

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Without looking up, he asked if Moses was a real person.
“I don’t know,” I told him, “but we’re related to him.”

Continue the conversation. Send Mishael your thoughts: mishael@byfi.org



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