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PARENTING IN PERSPECTIVE

Timeless Wisdom, Modern Applications

Maggid Books

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Part I

Chapter One

Putting the Child at the Center

Tell the Steins that they do not put their children at the center of their lives and you are not likely to get a kind response. Their anger or incredulity would be quite understandable. Consider for a moment the fortune they spend each year on day school and summer camp, not to mention the clothing, phones, assorted toys, and the recent bat mitzva. Ninety percent of the family budget is spent on the children. The family schedule follows a similar pattern. Carpool runs occupy each morning and afternoon, and Sundays are spent shuttling between soccer games, play practice, and tutoring sessions. Dr. Stein loves taking the kids out to watch the local NBA or MLB teams play, and the whole family vacations together at least once a year.

The Steins will tell you their children are most certainly the center of their lives. And the evidence would seem to support them. If you were to compare their schedule to the Abram

family's, you would not find any glaring differences. So what are the Steins missing?

PERCEPTION

The truth is that spending a lot of time or money on something may not be the most meaningful indicator of what is at the “center” of one’s life. At least not in a way that is helpful in raising children. Take the middle-aged man down the block who recently purchased a sports car. He has likely spent the majority of this year’s salary on the car. He drives the car to work, he drives it around the block, and when he is not driving it, he is washing and waxing it in his driveway. By the barometers of time and money, the car may well be said to be the center of his life.

Putting aside the question of misplaced priorities for a moment, this example illustrates that the investment of time, money, and even energy is not a helpful indicator as we attempt to understand what it means to put our children at the center. Few parents would want to see their efforts at childrearing compared to the obsession of a midlife crisis. Yet if we are not careful, our devotion to our children may have more in common with the sports car than we would care to admit.

What can caring parents possibly have in common with our sports car driver? Perception.

All that we pour into our children will fall flat if we make the mistake of seeing them as passive *objects* at the center of our lives. To place children at the center in a meaningful way, we must view them not as objects in our lives but as the *subjects* of their own.

The driver may care deeply about the sports car, but we would not expect him to think about whether sheltering it in the garage will stunt its long-term development. We certainly would not expect him to allow the car to make its own choices about how fast to drive or what route to take. Yet this is exactly what we must

do with our children. We must see them as independent individuals who are the central actors in their own lives. Lives which we are privileged to support, inspire, and sustain as their parents, but lives which, in the final analysis, are fundamentally independent.

ANSWERS

How can we treat our children as independent individuals?

One helpful way to start is by considering how we answer their questions. Especially the tough ones. For example, what did the Steins answer seven years ago when Rachel, then age five, looked up from a puzzle she was working on and asked, “Why is there a moon?”

Debbie Stein took the question very seriously. Thinking back to her own childhood education, she remembered a rabbinic teaching about the first days of Creation. Smiling at her preschooler, she led her over to the living room sofa, where the two sat down together. “Let me tell you a story,” she began. “When God created the world, He made two large lights, the sun and the moon. They were both beautiful and equally bright. The sun was quite happy, but the moon became upset. The moon complained to God, ‘Both the sun and I can’t be the same size. How will people know who is in charge? How will they know which of us is more important?’ ‘You’re right,’ responded God, and quickly shrank the moon to a much smaller size because of its jealousy.” Debbie finished and looked at Rachel, who seemed to have enjoyed the story and was eager to go back to finishing her puzzle.

Mrs. Stein walked away from this gratifying mother-daughter moment certain that she had just scored an A in parenting. Most of us would feel similarly. Debbie does indeed deserve credit for setting aside time and attention for her daughter, and for sharing a beautiful story from our tradition. Yet there may be another side to this experience. While Debbie had transmitted a

teaching, she had also subtly conveyed that she was the source of knowledge, that she had the answers, and that Rachel's job was to sit nicely and listen to her mom's explanations. Mrs. Stein believed she had helped Rachel learn something new, yet in her attempt to teach, she may have actually undercut her child's independence.

QUESTIONS

The Italian educator Carlina Rinaldi suggests a strikingly simple alternative: "When your child asks, 'Why is there a moon?' don't reply with a scientific answer. Ask him, 'What do you think?'"¹ To many of us, this answer sounds like a cop-out, a creative way of avoiding the question if we ourselves do not know the answer. But imagine what would happen if Debbie had taken Rinaldi's approach:

Five-year-old Rachel looked up from her puzzle to ask, "Why is there a moon?" Debbie took the question very seriously. She turned to Rachel and asked, "What do you think?" Rachel kept working on her puzzle, but Mrs. Stein could see the wheels begin to turn. She let Rachel continue to play. A moment later, Rachel looked up and said, "Maybe God did not want us to be scared at night. Just like you put a nightlight in my room." Rachel kept working on the puzzle, rattling off more questions for her mom as she did. Each time Debbie let Rachel make the first suggestion and lead the discussion.

Taking Rinaldi's approach, Mrs. Stein would not have taught her daughter the rabbinic lesson mentioned above. But Rachel would have learned something much more important. She would have learned that her own thoughts mattered, that she was her mother's partner in exploring the world, and that she had a role to play in her own growth process.

1. Quoted in Louise Boyd Cadwell, *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 65.

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When we respond to our children in this way, we are teaching them a different vital lesson from the story of Creation. The Bible describes human beings as created in the image of God and imbued with the unique capacity for independent thought and free moral choice. When we value our children's thoughts, we teach them that they are fundamentally capable of independent thought and free choice – whether they are five or fifteen – at their own developmental level. More important, we demonstrate to them that we *know* they are capable of independent thought.

To be fair, we must admit that any parent of a five-year-old faces at least a hundred questions a day. It is neither possible nor appropriate to respond like Rinaldi to all of these questions. But those of us who find Rinaldi's approach surprising may want to reexamine *how* we are placing our children at the center of our lives.

We devote an astounding amount of our time, attention, and life's resources to our children, and we deserve credit for doing so. Yet some of us still refer to our children as prized or most precious "possessions," and even those of us who recoil at the phrase may find that it is all too accurate a description of how we see our kids.

DOWN THE LINE

If the questions of a five-year-old do not strike us as particularly difficult, consider how Debbie will respond a few years down the line when teenage Rachel asks why bad things happen to good people, or why God cares what we do or don't do on Shabbat.

Even if Debbie is well equipped to share Judaic or philosophical perspectives on such complex issues, launching into these responses will reveal once again that she sees Rachel as a passive recipient of her adult knowledge, as a dependent object. Anyone who has tried to persuade a teenager to do the day's homework, drive safely, or listen to any form of rule knows exactly how teenage Rachel will respond to her mother's explanations.

On the other hand, if year after year Debbie routinely responds to questions by inviting Rachel herself into the process, demonstrating that Rachel is a full partner in her own growth, she will establish a very different dynamic. Rachel will learn that she plays an active role in making sense of the world. She will be perturbed by the question of why bad things happen to good people, but she will understand that it is her own responsibility to work through this question together with her parents.

For her part, Debbie will not feel the need to answer Rachel's questions. She knows that simply answering the question would be selling her daughter short. Rachel is not a passive vessel to be filled. Rachel is an active participant, an independent partner whose growth and exploration Debbie must support and guide.

BUT WILL HE BE A DOCTOR?

Learning how to respond to our children's questions is a vital ingredient in our attempt to truly place them at the center. But it is far from the only ingredient. In order to treat our children as independent entities, we must examine what lies at the heart of all our parenting decisions.

Consider the following conversation, so typical of what is heard in a principal's office:

Dr. Stein: I wanted to come see you right away. My wife and I are very concerned about our son's grades in AP Biology.

Principal: I certainly understand. I know that Adam's teacher has been concerned as well. AP Biology is a significantly more challenging class than Adam's previous science courses.

Dr. Stein: I know. Adam has to understand how important this is. I think we need to push him a bit harder. I was just

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like him at that age, but I learned to buckle down and I got through it. Adam can definitely do the same. He knows that he needs AP Bio on his transcript if he wants to get into a top university.

Principal: I think Adam is capable as well. It does seem that his interests are more in the areas of English and social studies. He is currently taking an AP English Lit and AP History course. Dropping AP Bio may help Adam succeed in those courses.

Dr. Stein: I just don't think so. Adam may not realize it now, but I see that he is going to be just like me. In the end he'll realize that Bio is the more important course for his future. If he does need to drop an AP, it will need to be English or History.

Dr. Stein is simply worrying about his son's future. He believes that the most promising career paths his son may choose will be better served by AP Bio than by a humanities course. He may even know that Adam's talents lie more in the sciences than in literature. But there may be something else at play here as well.

It is the same factor that is at play in most Little League games. We instinctively recoil as the overbearing parent next to us shouts "encouragement" (not usually of a positive sort) at their child, particularly after a strikeout or an error in the infield. Yet we know that we feel the same pull. When our child is up at bat, our stomachs are in knots, more nervous than if we were at the plate ourselves. We want our child to get that hit more than he himself wants it.

Or for those less athletically inclined, it may have been when our nine-year-old got herself dressed on Sunday morning and was ready to go off to play at her friend's. As she was about to run out the door, we could not help but ask, "Is that what you are going to wear?" Of course, the pink polka dot dress, green-striped sweater,

and yellow rain boots were exactly what she planned to wear. And as she stepped out the door, we vowed that this would be the last time before her bat mitzva that she chooses her own clothes.

OVERLAPPING IDENTITIES

There is a common feature at the heart of all of these typical parental reactions. Well-meaning parents are concerned about their children's success. But mixed in together with that concern is an overlap of identity. Dr. Stein does not see himself as someone who drops AP Bio, that Little League mom would never allow herself to blow the big play, and very few of us could bear being seen in public in the stripy polka dot ensemble.

The visceral reaction we feel to our children's behavior stems more from what that behavior says about *us* than from what it means for our children. We often see our children as extensions of ourselves, and so their actions are a reflection of our own character. This perspective is quite natural. Our children are raised in our homes, learn our values, and may even resemble our physical appearance. In fact, seeing children as extensions of ourselves can greatly increase our feelings of love, caring, empathy, and patience

At the same time, we roll our eyes when we read Dr. Stein's conversation and grimace at the thought of the overbearing Little League or fashion-conscious parent. Watching someone else play the part of parent, we know instinctively that these are flawed reactions.

Why? We understand that the child's aptitude and self-image, not the parent's, should determine the appropriate expectations and guidance for that child. From a distance, and particularly when it pertains to someone else's child, we understand that parental decisions should be based on what the child needs. This is what it means to put the child at the center.

Despite our clarity regarding other people's children, this perspective is difficult to cultivate when it comes to our own families. Doing so requires us to consciously filter out visceral reactions that stem from our own concerns about identity or self-perception. It requires us to examine each decision we make to discern our true motivation. When we do so, our interactions may look more like one of these scenes from the Abram family.

WHOSE BAR MITZVA?

Sara and David Abram were up late again talking. This was becoming an unfortunate part of their routine. Jonny was their second son to begin preparations for his bar mitzva. His older brother Ben had gone through the process beautifully. Ben was not blessed with much of a singing voice, but he had put in the time, learned his Torah reading, prepared to lead the services, and written a short speech. Sara and David remembered the stress and work involved in those months of preparation for their older son, but they also remembered how proud they and Ben felt when it came time for the bar mitzva itself.

Now Jonny was just six weeks into his lessons and he had declared that he was done. He was willing to do *maftir*, a minimal part of the Torah reading, but he refused to learn the rest of the reading, and he absolutely would not lead the services or deliver any sort of speech.

David was angry when he found out. Jonny was a good boy, but this sort of laziness was unacceptable. Jonny was smart and capable, and there was no reason he could not pull this off just as well as his brother. Yet Jonny had never blatantly disobeyed his father before, and his refusal to go to bar mitzva lessons this past Sunday was so surprising that it caused David to hesitate.

Every night since Sunday, the Abrams had been up late trying to figure out what to do.

David: I think we should push him. I know that he can do this. He's just as smart and capable as Ben.

Sara: I'm not sure. Jonny doesn't usually push back like this. I wonder if he's scared of performing in front of a crowd.

David: You might be right. He's never wanted to lead any part of services on Shabbat. When he was little, he didn't even want to go up to the front for a lollipop. But won't he feel good at the end if we push him through this? Jonny won't be happy if he doesn't do what his brother did and what everyone in his class is doing.

Sara: Do you really think Jonny will be unhappy? Or is it really our pride that is at stake here? All those tuition dollars...and all of our guests will think he can't do this. I loved the look on my mom's face when Ben did such an impressive job, but I don't think we can force Jonny to do this for our own sake.

David: I definitely want Jonny to do this so that I won't be embarrassed when it comes time for his bar mitzva. But if it's really supposed to be his bar mitzva, I have to admit it does not seem fair to push him. He never has been someone who likes to perform in public.

Sara: I don't think we should go easy on him, though. Ben grew a lot because of the effort he put into his bar mitzva prep. If Jonny's not going to put the same hours into learning the Torah reading, we need to figure out some other way for him to grow.

David: Jonny's always liked helping Lisa with her homework. I wonder if he could do some tutoring at school. Perhaps we can ask the principal if we can set him up with a younger student who needs help with his Judaic studies. I still want Jonny to learn his Torah portion, but he can learn what it means. He doesn't need to learn how to read it aloud in shul.

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Sara: That sounds great. I bet Jonny could even turn that into some sort of project. He loves working with his laptop. Maybe he could create an online program to help with the tutoring. If it goes well, Jonny may be proud enough that he will want to present that instead of the regular speech on Shabbat morning.

TURNING POINT

Some remarkable patterns emerge from this conversation. Of course, it seems like a great educational experience for Jonny to learn to read the full Torah portion. As a result, it would be easy for Sara and David to convince themselves that they want Jonny to do the full public reading for *his own* benefit. It might well be appropriate for parents to push another child despite the child's reluctance. But it is not right for Jonny, and the Abrams can see that.

How are the Abrams able to see this truth about their son? They truly view Jonny as an independent individual, with his own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. As a result, they are able to separate his needs from their own and uncover what lies behind their initial desire to push him forward. Once they verbalize their own emotional needs to have Jonny put on a good show, they can turn their attention away from their needs to focus on what Jonny himself needs.

What happens once they have made this turn is striking. The Abrams see Jonny as an independent individual. They understand that it would not be right to force him to repeat his brother's bar mitzva pattern. However, this realization does not lead them to simply step back and allow Jonny to make his own choices without their guidance. Quite the opposite.

David and Sara turn away from their original plan and pursue a new idea, this time created with Jonny at the center.

Parenting in Perspective

They understand that forcing Jonny along the wrong path will be counterproductive, but they also know that as an independent individual, Jonny must be challenged and stimulated in order to grow and develop. Only Jonny himself can accomplish this growth. Their task, as his parents, is to inspire, motivate, and enable him to do so.

As we truly begin to put our children at the center, we learn that they are fundamentally independent individuals. We realize that we cannot direct or control them. Rather, we must understand who they are and enable them to grow toward our values. In the following chapters, we will explore what growth means and how we, as parents, can inspire, guide, and support it effectively.