

Our Fathers' Trauma & Resilience • Shabbat *Toldot*

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I.

1. "How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations." *On Being* interview with Dr. Rachel Yehuda, Professor of Psychiatry & Neuroscience, Director of Traumatic Stress Studies, Mt. Sinai School of Medicine

There are two ways to influence the next generation — at least. One way is to directly transmit something that you have, and you transmit it in the form that you have it... There's another kind of change that involves giving your child — either at conception or in utero or post-conception — a set of circumstances, and the child is forced to make an adaptation to those circumstances...

We established a clinic for Holocaust survivors, and what we found was that our phone did ring, but it was mostly children of Holocaust survivors who called us. And what we began to see quite clearly was that offspring were reporting that they had been affected by the Holocaust in many different kinds of ways, but in a very coherent and cohesive pattern.

They talked about feeling traumatized by witnessing the symptoms of their parents. And they talked about the expectations — being traumatized by some of the expectations that the Holocaust had placed on them, such as that they are the reason their parents survived; and, therefore, there was a whole set of things that they would now have to accomplish so that all the people that died would — they could give their lives meaning. They had difficulty in any kind of a separation circumstance — divorce; those kinds of things. And they described, essentially, this problem in separating from their parents.

At the time we started to treat Holocaust survivor offspring, most of them were in their late 30s or 40s or 50s, and their mindset was to describe themselves based on who their parents were. And most people at that age are someone's parent or someone's spouse... very few people at that age are describing themselves in terms of who their parents were...

It turned out that Holocaust offspring were three times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, if they were exposed to a traumatic event, than demographically similar Jewish persons whose parents did not survive the Holocaust. That was real.

We also found — and this really was very surprising to us, that Holocaust offspring had the same neuroendocrine or hormonal abnormalities that we were viewing in Holocaust survivors and persons with post-traumatic stress disorder. And later on, we refined that even more, so that we realized that the specific risk for certain things, like post-traumatic stress disorder, was associated with having a mother that had post-traumatic stress disorder...

Part of why it's such an overwhelming trauma is because it happened on such a large scale. But what we have to realize is that individuals who are traumatized, maybe in a very private way, are devastated by the things that happened to them, they're just not as public. They may not be as prolonged, they may not be as great, but for somebody to be pregnant and in the World Trade Center while those buildings are coming down — that's your own personal Holocaust. And I think we can understand people a lot better if we take the time to understand the impact that these events have on them personally.

II.

2. Genesis 25:22-23

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גֵימִים [גוֹיִם] בְּבֶטְנְךָ וְשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעַיֶךְ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֵאמֹם מְלֹאִם יֵאָמְרָן וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?" She went to inquire of the Eternal, and the Eternal answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."

3. Rashi on Genesis 25:22 (11th – 12th C., France)

"וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ / *and the children struggled*" – They struggled with one another and quarreled as to how they should divide the two worlds as their inheritance.

4. *Kedushat Levi* on *Toldot*, R' Levi Yitzvhak of Berditchev (1740–1809, Ukraine)

"אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי / *If so, why do I exist?*" – According to another opinion offered, Rebecca knew that the source of holiness is the One known as אנוכי (*Anochi*), and when she exclaimed למה זה אני (Why do I exist?), she expressed her confusion how she could be the receptacle of a son who clearly strived for holiness if she was not worthy. On the other hand, if she were worthy, why did she experience such a difficult pregnancy? God put her mind at rest, telling her that her difficulties did not mean that she was not worthy, but that the other son who would be unworthy was the one that caused her present problems.

III.

5. Genesis 27:33

וַיִּחַרַד יִצְחָק חֲרָדָה גְדוּלָה עַד־מָאד וַיֹּאמֶר מִי־אֵלּוּא הוּא הַצֹּדֵד־צִיד וַיִּבֵּא לִי וְאֶכַל מִכֹּל בְּטָרִם תְּבוּא וְאַבְרָהָם גַּם־בָּרוּךְ יְהִי:

Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate from all of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!"

6. Chizkuni on Genesis 27:33 (13th C., France)

"וַיִּחַרַד יִצְחָק / *Isaac became frightened*" – According to Rashi, he had a vision of Gehinom opening up beneath him. He had this vision as soon as he wanted to curse Jacob for having deceived him.

7. *Da'at Z'keinim* on Genesis 27:33 (13th C., Franco-German)

"וַיִּחַרַד יִצְחָק חֲרָדָה גְדוּלָה עַד מָאד / *Isaac was overcome by an exceedingly strong trembling;*" Isaac actually experienced two separate fits of trembling; the first time had been when he lay bound on the altar of Moriah, expecting to have his throat slit. The second time occurred here.

8. Rabbeinu Bachya on Genesis 27:33 (13th – 14th C., Spain)

[Midrash] concentrates on the words ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדולה, “Isaac experienced a great trembling,” explaining that the Torah repeats the word חרד to show that this was already the second time Isaac had trembled. The first time was on the altar on Mount Moriah. The reason why the Torah added the words עד מאד in this instance was to tell us that this trembling was of a more far reaching nature than the one he experienced when he thought he was going to be a sacrifice.

9. *Fear and Trembling*, Soren Kierkegaard (19th C., Denmark)

Abraham said to himself, “I will not hide from Isaac where this course will take him.” He stood still, he laid his hand upon Isaac’s head in blessing, and Isaac kneeled to receive it. And Abraham’s face epitomized fatherliness; his gaze was gentle, his words encouraging. But Isaac was unable to understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he clasped Abraham’s knees, he fell at his feet pleading, he begged for his young life, for the fair hope of his future: he called to mind the joy in Abraham’s house, he called to mind the sorrow and loneliness. Then Abraham lifted the boy up and walked on with him by his side, and his talk was full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. He climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac could not understand him.

Then Abraham turned away from him for a moment, and when Isaac again saw Abraham’s face again it was changed: his glance was wild, his whole being was sheer terror. He seized Isaac by the throat, threw him to the ground, and said, “Stupid boy, do you think that I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you suppose that this is God’s bidding? No, it is my desire.” Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his terror, “Oh, God in heaven, have mercy on me. God of Abraham, have mercy on me. If I have no father on earth, You be my father!”

But Abraham said softly to himself, “Oh, Lord in heaven, I thank You: it is better for him to believe that I am a monster, than that he should lose faith in You.

10. Kedushat Levi on *Chayei Sarah*

It is known in kabbalistic circles that a righteous person, a צדיק, is also referred to as בן, “son.” When the Jewish people conduct themselves in the manner desired by God, the Torah quotes God as referring to them as בניים, “sons, children.” (Deuteronomy 14:1) What distinguishes a righteous person from normal people is that he does not suffer from an insatiable appetite for the comforts and allures that this world has to offer, but is content with what he has been granted by his Creator. This is another way of describing him as possessing כל, everything. He does not feel that he lacks anything.

This is especially true of the type of righteous people who spend their days asking God to dispense His largesse to others whom they perceive to be in need. Their concern for others instead of their asking God for more for themselves, stamps them as having been blessed בכל, “with everything.” Moreover, it is to be assumed that people who concern themselves with the needs of their peers all the time, are clearly content that God has already given them all that they require for themselves.

It is appropriate for every good Jew to emulate Abraham’s example in this respect, and this is why the same expression, i.e. מכל in the case of Isaac (Genesis 27:33), and כל in the case of Yaakov, (Genesis 33:11) has been used by the Torah to document that if Abraham was the “father” of this attitude, his children, i.e. descendants, have emulated him... his descendants had cultivated this virtue of his, of being concerned first and foremost with the needs of others.

IV.

11. Genesis 26:18

וַיִּשָׁב יִצְחָק וַיַּחְפְּרָה אֶת־בְּאֵרֵת הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר הִקְפְּרוּ בְיַמֵּי אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיו וַיִּסְתְּמֵמוּם פְּלִשְׁתִּים אַחֲרָי מֵוַת אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶן שְׁמוֹת כַּשְׁמֹת אֲשֶׁר־
קָרָא לָהֶן אֲבִיו:

Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; and he gave them the same names that his father had given them.

12. Radak on Genesis 26:18 (12th – 13th C., Provence)

“כשמות / *with names*” – with the same names in order to maintain unbroken continuity of ownership.

13. Rashbam on Genesis 26:18 (11th – 12th C., France)

“אשר קרא להן אביו / *that his father had given them*” – in order to prevent anyone in the future to challenge the ownership of the wells.

14. Chizkuni on Genesis 26:18

“כשמות אשר קרא להן אביו / *with the same names that his father had given them.*” – [Isaac] wished to draw attention to the fact that the success of these wells had been and continued to be due to the merit of his father. In order to prove that this was so, when he left the vicinity of Avimelech's capital and settled where Avraham had lived for a while and demonstrated that the success depended not on the quality of the earth and the skill of its farmers, but on the goodwill enjoyed by them in the heavenly spheres.

15. Me'or Einayim 6:5:3, Azariah ben Moses dei Rossi (16th C., Italy)

But after Abraham's death, these springs of wisdom were stopped up, because they *were stopped by the Philistines* (Gen. 26:18) – who are the aspect of evil which is set in a person – who had overpowered the world; and the element of Earth had overpowered [the others] and in proportion the spiritual and intellectual powers weakened.

But when Isaac, his son, came and held to his father's path, he taught this awareness to the people of his generation as well – to return and dig to the aspect of a well of living water through many types of intelligences and great and concealed counsels – until *Isaac dug again the wells of water* (Gen. 26:18).

16. "How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations." *On Being* Interview with Dr. Rachel Yehuda

In the Jewish religion, we do memorialize trauma. We have many days — we even have a Holocaust Remembrance Day. We have fast days that commemorate the destruction of the Temple. We have — on an individual level, we memorialize the date of death of loved ones. We say yizkor, which is a memorial service.

But what's very interesting about that is that these days occur on a specified time on the calendar. They start at a certain time, they end at a certain time, and then, so too, the effects end. So you set aside a certain part of your life to remember and acknowledge, but it doesn't own you. When you're able to put something in a context, you carry it with you. But you carry it with you in a way that promotes more reflection, in a way that gives you more of a context, in a way that shows you where you've come from, in a way that honors your past, but not in a way that overtakes your past and makes a future predetermined or impossible.

So I think that that — we have to be very careful about how we talk about generational effects. A lot of people want to say generational "scars," but they're merely effects. You cannot run from your past, but maybe you would run farther if you carried your past with you, as long as you can control it, and I think that that is really what we want to understand — we want to understand what it means to have a greater repertoire of behavior.

We have a concept about being optimized to your environment. So let's say, for some reason, your parents transmitted to you biologic changes that are very appropriate to starvation, but you don't live in a culture where food is not plentiful — you're just not optimized

But I think that if we develop an awareness of what the biologic changes from stress and trauma are meant to do, then I think we can develop a better way of explaining to ourselves what our true capabilities and potentials are.