

JUDAISM AND CHILDREN

A KADDISH'L

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"Shlof zhe mir shoyne, Yankele, mayn sheyner" – "sleep now, my lovely son Yankele" begins the Yiddish lullaby (Mordechai Gebirtig, 1877-1942) sung by a harassed mother to her crying baby Yankele. She croons to him sweetly, proudly imagining his future as a young scholar who will bring joy to his father, who will go on to be a businessman, a groom, who will then presumably go on to father his own children.

And yet another reading of this lullaby is not quite so rosy. Alongside all these hopes, the mother gently reproaches her little son for being a child – how can a little boy with all his teeth still be crying for his mother? Lying in a wet nappy, why does he persist in still being helpless, needing her so much?

There is a distinct lack of sentimentality over childhood in this song. As in most Yiddish songs of the period, childhood itself is not remotely romanticised. Children are valued, not childhood.

One popular Yiddish name for a son is a *Kaddish'l* – a little Kaddish. Kaddish is the prayer traditionally recited by an adult son over his dead parent. This way of perceiving the birth of a male child implies that a son is the future secured, duty done by an adult-in-the-making.

There are several references to babies in the Torah, but the period between infancy and maturity does not feature very much. All the foremothers in the Torah are initially barren. Always they long for children, whose arrival heralds celebration and joy. Children signify survival, continuity.

As Rachel cries to her husband Jacob: "Give me children or I die!" In other words, unless I have heirs, I am as good as dead, written out of the story.

A key Torah word describing the life stages of biblical heroes is *Vayigdal* – and



Drawing by Austrian illustrator, Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925)

the child 'grew', which is followed by an independent act which reveals the hero's developed character. The odd glimpses of childhood are not always very complimentary – there is no attempt, for example, to whitewash Joseph's obnoxious show-off behaviour towards his brothers.

But the love of parents for their children is frequently documented. And when children die in the Bible stories they are deeply mourned. Jacob's reunion with his long-lost son Joseph, when he can meet and bless his grandchildren, provides one of the most moving and beautiful narratives in the Book of Genesis. This heals Jacob's previous suffering; the future that was promised will actually take place, the reality of this almost beyond Jacob's fragile grasp..

In the biblical Book of Job, after losing his family and all worldly possessions, Job is finally rewarded with double the numbers of everything he lost – 5,000 oxen are replaced with 10,000 and so on. But he is not given twice the number of children that he lost. "It is a fine trait that the number is the same as before... for us no child lost can be replaced," as one commentary states.

In Talmudic Judaism we see two simultaneous – not necessarily contradictory – strands of thought developing about childhood.

One is that children matter, that rituals are created for them within the calendar. The Talmud includes many fables and stories designed to please and more importantly, to educate the child. Education is paramount. In medieval Germany the education of a male child was formally started at three with great ceremony. The child was escorted to the synagogue and shown a text, or Hebrew letters at least, 'written' in honey for him to repeat and then eat. Hopefully a connection was made between sweetness and learning which would never depart. There were variations of this ceremony all over the medieval Jewish world.

Later, 'Oyfn Pripitchek' one of the best-known songs in the Yiddish repertoire celebrates in wonder the beautiful sight of a warm schoolroom with small children learning their *Alef Bays*, the Hebrew alphabet. The song acknowledges the wonder of this precious moment of innocence; the young child will never understand the glorious sweetness of those sounds.

But this is balanced by a deep-rooted belief that child-rearing is a matter of strict education and discipline. There are several biblical and post-biblical recommendations of admonition: "spare the rod and spoil the child... he that loves him chastens him betimes... Chasten your son while there is hope," (Book of Proverbs).

This is softened by the Talmudic advice: "if you must hit your son, hit him with a shoelace" but a rebellious child was not to be tolerated. Indulgence was frowned upon.

The Chasidic teacher Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810) warned: "Children will be healthy and well-bred if parents do not play with them too much."

And a popular manual of Jewish morality *Lev Tov* (a good heart) written in 1640 by Yitzhak ben Eliakim of Pznana had the following to say on the topic of childrearing:

"Each father and mother must love his children with all his soul and all his might. But they must not reveal their love in the presence of the children because then the children would not fear them and would not obey them. Every man must teach his children to fear him."

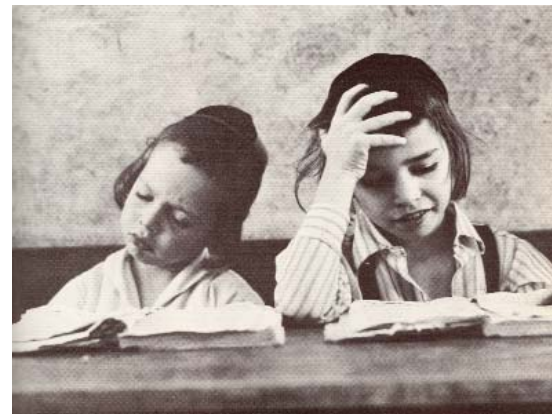
The Passover Seder is a perfect metaphor for both Jewish views of childhood: on the one hand the whole Seder is built around them, 'for' them, to ask questions, to enjoy the magic and novelty of the evening. A child-free Seder can seem

a dull affair. But they also have a role and even a duty: to ask the *Mah Nishtana*, the four questions, and to listen to the answers. And in the section of the Haggadah that discusses the four sons, the father does not hesitate to admonish the Rasha: the ‘wicked’ son who asks what the service means to him, the father, thereby excluding himself – in the strongest possible terms. The father recalls the child sternly to duty, to take his place in the community.

The anxiety of post-biblical Judaism to truncate the period of childhood has practical roots. As Chaim Bermant suggested in *The Walled Garden* (Macmillan 1974): “if Judaism is not fundamentally impatient of childhood, poverty certainly is, and until our own times, the mass of world Jewry was poor.” Daughters had to become young mothers by looking after younger siblings and sons had to help earn the family bread. Together with the relentless emphasis on study, childhood was not a carefree time for very long at all, and this gave rise to a

precocious maturity in children – who were often told they had an *alte neshome*, an old soul. Bermant comments that Judaism was as anxious to shake off childhood as our own age seems to wish to prolong the process. This pattern can obviously be reflected in poor communities everywhere, and especially in immigrant communities where the urgency to earn hurries childhood – a period of non-contributing dependency – along.

Although daughters were surely loved and valued, a baby boy’s arrival took definite precedence. Only males traditionally recited Kaddish prayers. A Kaddish’l, a son who would survive to adulthood – not necessarily to be taken for granted – would remember his duty to his father and pray at his grave. It is a startling and perhaps surprising thought to have at the birth of a new baby: that this baby’s function is to be his father’s mourner. Meanwhile the mother fantasises over her Yankele’s cradle, tenderly berating this baby who insists on clinging to childhood.



Courtesy of the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore

As she runs through all his imagined future life-stages, there’s a frustration at how long it is all going to take him to reach adulthood. The final verse wryly comments on just how many tears it will cost his mother to get Yankele through to the cherished goal of adulthood, where the important business of life, work, study and his own marriage can – finally – begin.

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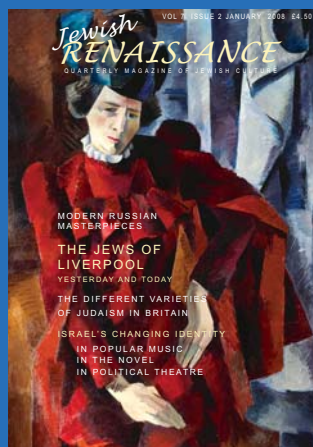
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