

From the Rabbi's Desk
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What My Son, the Inexperienced Rabbi, Taught Me

D'var Torah for Yizkor

5787



One of the wonderful perks of having a son who happens to be a rabbi is that you can talk “rabbi stuff” with him. Had he been a dentist, or a veterinarian, or a gastroenterologist, our conversations about “how was your day at work” would have been much shorter.

So, after trying to convince Ilan, unsuccessfully, that the rabbinate was a rewarding but challenging vocation, and that perhaps he might wish to explore other vocations, I must admit that having a son for a colleague is not only exciting, but pretty useful.

A couple of weeks before Rosh Hashanah Ilan called me excited with some ideas for classes and divrei Torah. He wanted my feedback. Instead, he got a father (an older rabbi) who “borrowed” some of his ideas. Having a child who gives you nachas is wonderful (Baruch HaShem this is the case with our three children), but having a son who, in addition, shares ideas for classes and divrei Torah is more than what I ever dreamt.

As I mentioned, Ilan had excellent ideas for what he wanted to say on Rosh Hashanah, an idea for Kol Nidrei night, but was struggling with Yizkor. Ilan told me for the first time about an experience he had when he was taking his Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) training. When the participants introduced themselves on the first day of class, an older classmate challenged him, asserting that he didn’t have enough life experience with loss, marriage, or parenting, to help congregants in need. At that time Ilan was 24 or 25 years old, and he had not yet been married or engaged.

Ilan remarked that the classmate who challenged him was an obnoxious one, and yet Ilan saw her point: How can I relate to people's loss, he asked, if -thank God- I didn't experience any significant one? How can I advise a couple about getting married or parenting if I lack experience?

I listened to Ilan and to put him in a good mood, I told him the story about the new young rabbi with absolutely no experience who is feeling overwhelmed and decides to visit the senior rabbi for some guidance.

"Rabbi," the young man says, "I need your help. People keep coming to me asking about love, marriage, and relationship advice, but I have absolutely no experience. I don't know what to tell them!"

The senior rabbi suggests to the young rabbi to pay a visit to Moishe, an elderly man who has been happily married for over 60 years.

During the visit, the rabbi notices that Moishe keeps holding his wife's hand and affectionately calling her "*Sweetheart*," "*Darling*," "*Honey*," and "*My Love*."

Deeply moved, the young rabbi pulls Moishe aside and said:

"Moishe, I am so incredibly inspired by you; you've been married for half a century, and you still call your wife by all those beautiful, romantic pet names. Please, tell me—what is your secret to keeping the romance alive?"

Moishe looks around nervously, leans in close to the rabbi, and whispers:

"To be completely honest with you, Rabbi... I forgot her name!"

Ilan laughed at the story but wasn't sure how the story was supposed to help him feel better about his own lack of experience.

I then reminded Ilan that every old and experienced rabbi was at one time, young and inexperienced. I also told him that the people who hired him are well aware of his age and lack of experience. Nobody hires a 27-year-old and expects him to have the life experience of a 60-year-old.

And yet, the question of Ilan's classmate still occupied my thoughts. What should he tell his new congregants on his first Yizkor d'var Torah?

I decided it was time to pay back the ideas that Ilan had shared with me for Rosh Hashana and shared with Ilan the following insight, an insight I wish to share with you as well; an insight that somehow defined my personal rabbinical vocation throughout the years, including my last twenty years as your rabbi, at Hillcrest Jewish Center.

This is what I said to Ilan:

Dear Ilan; as a rabbi you will help some congregants, but not all of them. Some congregants might not be interested in your help or might believe you are not equipped to help them. If this is the case, take it graciously and love them the same. You cannot impose your desire to help on your congregants; it is up to them to accept your help or not, or even to seek your help or advice.

But here, Ilan, comes the most important piece of wisdom from your old and experienced father: you will find out, sooner rather than later, that most of the difficult situations that your congregants will share with you, nobody can fix. Not a young rabbi, and not an experienced one. Members will share with you that their spouse left them, that a drunk driver killed their child, God forbid, that their parents are struggling with Alzheimer, that they were just given a terrifying medical report. You will listen to stories of pain, despair, and hopelessness and you won't be able to fix the situation for them.

Know Ilan that you don't have to. All you need is to be fully present with them. Just be there. Take their pain, their grief, their loss, and hold them tight, from a place of love, care and empathy. Most congregants don't need the rabbi's advice; many don't even want it. All they need and want is for their rabbi to care, and I know you, Ilan, and I know you will.

This, Ilan could have been a good reply to your classmate's comment on your lack of experience.

But there is something more, Ilan, something I was giving some thought to since you approached the subject with me.

The truth is, Ilan, that you will learn more from your congregants about grief, pain, relationships, and parenting than what they will learn from you. This is what a community is: the experience is in the room, and you learn from each other; congregants from clergy, clergy from congregants, and congregants from each other. Indeed, you can learn a lot from the 60 years of marriage between Moishe and Sadie, but also from a mother who is sitting by her child's bed in a hospital, or from a member of your shul who is going through a challenging divorce.

Your congregants, Ilan, will model happy marriages and unhappy ones, good parenting skills and poor ones. Tell your congregants, Ilan, that you look forward to learning from them, that you are always learning from them. It is a big privilege for them, but also a big responsibility.

Ilan; right now, you don't have too much life experience to model for them. It will come with time. For now, make sure to model patience and forgiveness, kindness and compassion.

Yes, I know, they still may want to hear what their rabbi has to say before Yizkor, they may want to know if there is a particular Jewish way to honor their parents who walk the earth no longer.

Tell them what your father is telling you and your sisters; tell them that there is no better way to honor our living or deceased parents than living lives of integrity; lives filled with kindness and compassion, meaning and purpose. Honoring the memory of our parents is not (only) about lighting candles and reciting prayers once a year, but about living a life of goodness every single day. Tell them also to grow in Torah and mitzvot; to learn more, to practice more. Explain to them that it took countless generations to keep Judaism alive for them, and that they are obligated to those previous generations to keep Judaism alive for the future generations.

Finally, make sure to give a blessing to your congregants. This is the one I plan to give mine;

God of kindness, compassion and integrity, help us honoring our loved ones who walk the earth no longer by living good lives, lives of purpose and meaning.

May the sanctity of these holy days remain with us for days, weeks and months to come, so we can carry into this coming year the worthy intentions that filled our hearts today.

May we be good role models for our children, for our friends, and for everybody we encounter in our lives, so the future generations will remember us for a blessing, the same way we remember our loved ones today for a blessing.

לְשָׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּחְתַּמּוּ

May you and all your loved ones be written and sealed in the book of life, and may your life be one of joy, health, abundance, and peace.